

OPERA NEWS

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Composer Portraits: Kati Agócs

NEW YORK CITY

Miller Theatre at Columbia University

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S MILLER THEATRE made a welcome return to concert life with the first concert of its Composer Portraits series for the 2021/22 season (12/9). The featured composer was Kati Agócs, and the highlight of the program was the world premiere of *Voices of the Immaculate*, co-commissioned by the Miller Theatre. The instrumental ensemble was Third Sound, the highly regarded contemporary music group.

Kati Agócs is a prolific composer who has received numerous commissions and awards. Born in Canada, Agócs came to the United States and studied at Juilliard. The first work on the concert, *Immutable Dreams* (2007), is a relatively early work that shows the influence of her primary composition teacher, Milton Babbitt. That said, already there are signs of where her stylistic path would later lead. Written in three movements, the work pays homage to Arnold Schoenberg and his monumental *Pierrot Lunaire*; to the piano music of Györgi Ligeti; and to Agócs's friend, jazz pianist and mathematician Bruce McKinnon (no relation to this reviewer). The work is quite colorful and highly chromatic. Special praise goes to pianist Mika Sasaki, who managed the difficulties of the middle movement—a major piano feature—with great aplomb.

Voices of the Immaculate (2021) is a seven-movement chamber cantata for mezzo-soprano and the ensemble. It addresses the uncomfortable issue of sexual abuse involving the clergy. For texts, Agócs took fragments from the *Book of Revelations* and from the written testimonies of unnamed survivors of clerical sexual abuse, some from recent times, others from a half century or more ago. It was important to Agócs that the texts employed came from various regions, ethnic groups and genders, which demonstrates how widespread this abuse problem has been. The work was written with mezzo Lucy Dhegrae in mind, and in the discussion that occurred between the performances of *Immutable Dreams* and *Voices of the Immaculate* we learned that the composer and the singer engaged in close, albeit quarantined, collaboration throughout the process.

The composition is much more sophisticated and eclectic than *Immutable Dreams*. The musical language remains advanced, with much chromaticism and with extended performance techniques, but Agócs's stylistic palette included scat singing and even folklike ballad references. Great effort was employed to keep the instrumental texture light enough for complete verbal clarity, yet also to allow each of the Third Sound players to have solo moments. Among those instrumental solos, the most gripping was an intense one by cellist Michael Nicolas in the movement, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." The survivor texts covered such topics as guilt, the impulse to remain silent about the abuse, the loss of

innocence and of faith, and the sense of personal isolation. The settings were neither overtly dramatic nor emotionally overdrawn—a wise choice on Agócs' part, as the subdued vagueness closely mirrors what we know about the reluctance most survivors have in publicly discussing their experiences. It was noteworthy that despite the tragic nature of the topic, Agócs was able to find ways of including moments of hope, redemption and even renewal of faith.

Lucy Dhegrae has a marvelous voice and a terrific mastery of vocal techniques. Most of all, I admired her warm, vulnerable beauty of tone in the more lyrical moments of the piece. She moved about the stage with dramatic command. *Voices of the Immaculate* was presented in a semi-staged format, sensitively lit by Tricia Toliver. Third Sound, utilizing the now conventional instrumental makeup from Schoenberg's *Pierrot*—flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano—played with an astonishing level of ensemble cohesiveness. This is not easy music, yet the players of Third Sound managed to sound as if they were one multi-faceted instrument. —*Arlo McKinnon*