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Soprano Susan Narucki enchants in evening of Kurtág's song miniatures

- Christian Hertzog, San Diego Union Tribune

There is a prejudice in our society towards the grand gesture in the arts, a cultural bias that a great work must be large scale. A big canvas is better than a miniature, a novel more impressive than a short-short story, a symphony more profound than a bagatelle. One can easily find examples of art, literature or music on a small scale to dispute that assumption, yet it's deeply embedded in our psyches.

Less can be more, however.

Take the music of György Kurtág. The Hungarian composer, who just turned 92, forged a profound musical language constructed with chains of brief movements. UC San Diego professor and Grammy-nominated soprano Susan Naruckigave a concert of his vocal works on Wednesday evening at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, an ideal space in which to experience Kurtág's intimate sounds and silences. In 90 minutes — including intermission — we heard 53 songs, none longer than three minutes, some as short as 10 seconds.

She sang five compositions from Kurtág's mid-career with her supple, expressive voice. I can't vouch for her Hungarian or Russian diction, but knowing that she has been coached by Kurtág and his favored soprano Adrienne Csengery, I can assume that she projected these aphoristic texts like an expert. The emotions she conveyed — nostalgia, love, pain, whimsy, confusion, irritation — were all readily apparent through her singing, with minimal movement onstage.

The most challenging work on her program, for both Narucki and the audience, was "Attila József Fragments," 20 enigmatic songs for unaccompanied soprano. The brief texts deal with fear of death, a poet's wonder at the world and the difficulties and triumphs in creating poetry.

In her program notes, Narucki wrote that Kurtág told her "the fragments should be presented as if you are switching between two channels of a radio station. But what you need to remember ... is that both of the channels are always playing."

This listener experienced a distance between the Hungarian texts and the English translations that were projected behind Narucki. However, without any instrumental support, she sharply rendered the rapidly juxtaposed emotions of each song.

The instrumentation for the rest of the program was sparse, incorporating two staples of Hungarian folk music — the violin and the cimbalom (a hammered dulcimer). If you heard Boulez's "Repons" at UCSD last year, you may have seen international cimbalom go-to player Nicholas Tolle. He masterfully accompanied Narucki in "Remembrances of a Winter Evening, Op. 8" and "Het Dal, Op. 22." New York new music stalwart Curtis Macomber joined Narucki on violin for the Op. 8 and "S.K. Remembrance Noise, Op. 12," contributing with aplomb.

All three musicians appeared together for the final work — and concert highlight: "Scenes From a Novel, Op. 19." With its narrative arc of love and abandonment, it was the most traditionally structured song cycle of the evening; Kurtág's musical language, contrasting hurdy-gurdy waltzes and gentle diatonic oscillations with insistent chromatic ostinatos, was the most wide-ranging.

Contrabassist Kathryn Schulmeister, a UCSD grad student, joined these new music veterans, fitting right in as if she'd played with them for years.

With their gripping and enchanting performance, they made a case for "Scenes from a Novel" as a late 20th-century miniaturist masterpiece, proof that good things — no, great things — can come in small packages.

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