

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

Richard Wernick: String Quartet No. 5; Alberto Ginastera: String Quartet No. 3; John Harbison: 'The Rewaking'

Benita Valente, soprano; Juilliard String Quartet. Bridge 9192; CD.

IF you doubt that the major labels have surrendered to the independents the adventure of recording great musicians in contemporary works, here is proof: The Juilliard String Quartet, for decades a mainstay of the CBS (later Sony) roster turns up on Bridge with three durable scores for quartet and voice. The ensemble and the soprano Benita Valente, who sings here, gave the premieres of all three, and they perform them with the authority and nuance of long acquaintance.

The earliest, Ginastera's 1973 String Quartet No. 3, shows this Argentine composer in what he called his neo-expressionist style, his enchantment with his country's folk music well behind him. His string writing is abstract, densely chromatic and tactile, yet texts have a way of nudging the shape of a vocal line and Ginastera's settings of Spanish poets, including García Lorca, take on an Iberian lilt.

John Harbison's setting of Willam Carlos Williams poetry in "The Rewaking" (1991) creates an atmosphere of disquieting beauty by darting freely from Dvorakian Romanticism to contemporary angularity. Between those extremes is old-fashioned tone painting: Williams's "Woodthrush" and "To a Woodpecker" are flecked with string lines based on bird calls, and the title song uses violent figuration to describe a storm. The vocal settings, though chromatic, are islands of calm.

Richard Wernick's String Quartet No. 5 (1995), a memorial to the assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, frames two angry, passionate quartet movements with pained settings of short, searing poems by the Zionist poet Hannah Senesh, in English translations from the Hebrew.

Ms. Valente's vibrato is wider now than it was, but she conveys these texts with an irresistible directness, a quality matched by the Juilliard players' probing renderings. ALLAN KOZINN

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