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Centaur releases a fascinating 'project within a project'

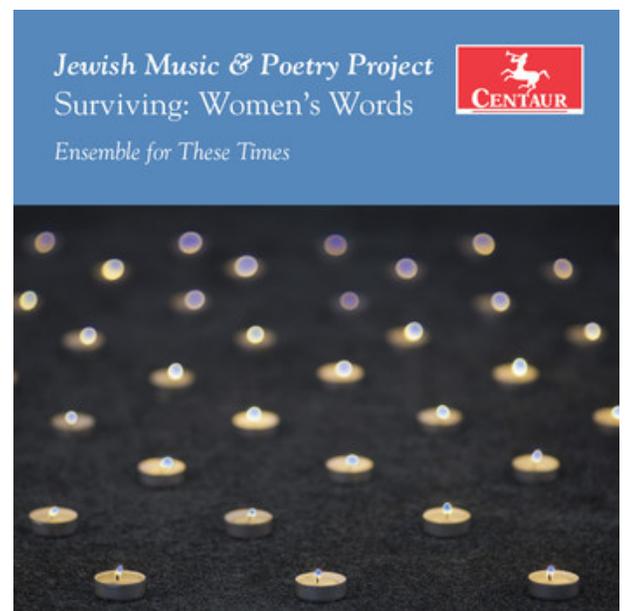
April 21, 2016

5:17 PM MST

The Jewish Music & Poetry Project (JMPP) is a repertoire-building project for the new music chamber group Ensemble for These Times. The group was formed during the 2007-2008 season by soprano Nanette McGuinness with instrumental support from pianist Dale Tsang and cellist Adaiha MacAdam-Somer. The other key figure in this "origins" story is composer David Garner, whose music McGuinness took an interest in performing. **Recently** Laura Gaynon replaced MacAdam-Somer as the group's cellist.

The JMPP repertoire is concerned significantly with the impact of the Holocaust on the [art song](#) repertoire through both the poems written during and after that tragic period of Jewish history and the composers who selected those poems for song settings. These include composers from the time of the Holocaust, not only those who escaped that horror, such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Alexander Zemlinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg, but also those who died in the concentration camps, such as Pavel Haas, who was sent to the Auschwitz gas chamber. In addition, many contemporary composers have been commissioned to set Holocaust-based texts, such as John Adams and David Conte.

Garner's contribution, however, involved the composition of a quartet of song cycles, each written by a Jewish woman, who had survived the Holocaust. This became a project unto itself entitled

*courtesy of Naxos of America*

Surviving: Women's Words. At the beginning of this month, Centaur released an **album** of the results of this project based on recording sessions that took place in the Caroline H. Hume Concert Hall of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) in June of 2015 (when MacAdam-Somer was still the JMPP cellist).

Garner's song cycles were composed over a period of four years, beginning in 2012 with *Chanson für Morgen* (song for tomorrow), eight settings of texts by the Polish-German poet Mascha Kaléko for soprano and piano. This was followed in 2013 by *Phönix* (phoenix), six songs for soprano and piano with texts by Ukrainian-Romanian poet Rose Ausländer. The remaining two cycles were composed to include the cello in the ensemble. *Song is a Monument* was composed in 2014 for five poems by Polish-American poet Yala Korwin; and the quartet was completed in 2015 with *Mein blaues Klavier* (my blue piano), setting three short poems by German Else Lasker-Schüller. Korwin's poems are in English, and all of the other texts are in German.

In the interest of "full disclaimer," I should note that I have heard some of this music in concert. *Phönix* was performed at SFCM in **April of 2013** as part of Garner's Faculty Artist Series recital there; and *Mein blaues Klavier* was performed only **a few days before the Centaur release** at Garner's Faculty Artist Series recital for this season (and with Gaynon as the group's new cellist). What has been consistently fascinating about this work has been Garner's ability to capture both the German and the English texts without having to fall back on the many familiar tropes of Yiddishkeit. (Even the decision to add the cello carries a certainly element of "baggage" through association with Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo.") Those tropes have been limited to "Song is a monument," the final song in the 2014 cycle; and, between those tropes and the message of Korwin's poem that has been set, "Song is a monument" serves very well as the final track of the album.

Of particular importance, however, is Garner's skill at getting to the semantic core of each of the poems he has set. While McGuinness brings admirable diction to her execution, this is an album in which the accompanying booklet really matters (as I had anticipated from the attention I gave to the text sheets provided at Garner's two SFCM recitals). At the very least one needs to absorb what the English is saying, and those with even a rudimentary knowledge of German will probably also appreciate the impact of both the choice of specific German words and Garner's approach to setting them. When we then factor in the general absence of Yiddishkeit tropes, we find that this album offers four passionate meditations on the Holocaust experience delivered through a unique and highly compelling pair of voices, those of both composer and singer.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [David Garner presents songs in three languages with mixed results](#)
- [Composer David Garner presents art song in four languages at the Conservatory](#)



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