

## **Mistakes of the Heart**

presented by Opera Breve

Sunday, July 29, 7:00pm

Christ Church Cathedral

by Colin MacDonald

Vancouver is a city of hidden wonders, and that is especially true for the many arts groups that are known only to select admirers. One of these treasures is Opera Breve, a small company dedicated to performing rarely heard one-act chamber operas. Since 1998 the group has been performing in locations from Hotel Vancouver to O'Doul's Restaurant to the Four Corners Community Savings bank, and it marked a new residency at Christ Church Cathedral with a performance of art songs by four Vancouver composers.

The multi-faceted experience of love has been the theme of songwriting for centuries, and it still held the focus in these contemporary works. The concert was structured as a unified piece more akin to a chamber opera, with dramatic readings by actors John Juliani and Kendra Fanconi to link each of the short songs, forcing the audience to hold its applause until the very end of the performance.

Although the company was touting the acoustic resonance of the cathedral, they had to mic the singers and actors so they could be heard above the traffic noises of Burrard street. This was a problem in Jocelyn Morlock's *Train*, when tenor James McLennan positioned himself too close to a mic which was verging on feedback. McLennan has a powerful voice, but his natural tone was distorted by the amplification, giving it a tinny brightness. This unfortunate effect was almost overcome by the strength of Morlock's music, performed by Donna Falconer on piano, with careful details of shifting texture and pacing

supporting Alan Ashton's text of longing and isolation.

Leslie Uyeda exhibited a broad stylistic command in her *Song Cycle*, setting the text of seven poems by Brenda Brooks. Bright, singsong melodies contrasted with pensive, impressionist chromaticism, and tense and angular atonality, colouring words that focused on loss and separation. Opera Breve co-founder Mari Hahn found a better placement before the mic, and sang with confidence across her range. Her voice had a velvety darkness that added depth to its tone, which was a pleasure to hear in the naturally bright soprano register.

Ramona Luengen set French poetry to rather conservative music in *Cinq Chansons*, with pretty and very safe writing failing to grasp the insistence and drama of words by Baudelaire and Hugo. McLennan's blurred diction obscured the natural beauty of the language, and a lack of melodic variation between the movements left the work feeling uniformly superficial.

Pianist and composer Grace McNab performed her own words and music with the company in *Three Songs*, adding a viola part played by Beth Schaufele to round out the ensemble. A highly chromatic harmonic language gave a restless expressionist character to words of surrender and desire, dense jazz harmonies supporting a fluid vocal line. A compelling sense of darkness and complexity imbued this vision of love.

With original programming and support of local talent, Opera Breve is a welcome addition to Vancouver's music community, sure to find a loyal audience based on the strength of their performances.