

ARTS

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

No holding back for Lyne Fortin

University program, Dubeau also impress

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Cancellations can yield happy endings. Yesterday the non-availability of French contralto Nathalie Stutzman created an opportunity for local opera favourite Lyne Fortin to show us her potential as a recitalist for the Ladies' Morning Musical Club.

Rather than scale down her voice and temperament for Pollock Hall, Fortin gave full vent to her voice and her feelings. From the start of Joaquin Nin's *Cantos Populares Españoles* we felt transported, à la opera, into another world. *Canto Andaluz* reached a magnificent climax, and expressive gestures in *Polo*, partly a vocalise, filled in nicely for the missing words.

This might not sound like the ideal artist for Hugo Wolf's introspective realm, but five items from the *Spanisches Liederbuch* were pretty close to ideal, their delicate grades of joy and sadness all smartly defined and truly projected. Strauss's *Mädchenblumen* Op. 22 traded in flower rhetoric and a female type far removed from the lusty operatic norm, yet the songs were completely convincing. *Wasserrose* was a model of the half-spoken, half-sung rhetoric we equate with German lieder.

The wonderful thing was that we were never obliged to convince ourselves of the expressive value of strained and raspy tones. Fortin's voice was full and lustrous. High notes held no terrors for her, and Kurt Weill's *Je ne t'aime pas* started with some low notes that would not have disgraced Stutzman herself. And in Delibes's *Les filles de Cadix*

Mark Wells as Seneca proved exceptional: ringing, flexible and remarkably smooth in sonority from top to bottom. This singer had a natural way with a phrase and played the old philosopher with great firmness and dignity. Baritone David-Olivier Chénard was also sympathetic as Otho, Poppea's jilted lover.

Director Marie-Nathalie Lacoursière drew stage performances of high professionalism from the students, most wearing simple but effective Roman costumes accented by face paint. Caroline Guilbault's set was simple. Projected images of columns and giant eyes (apparently a motif) were a little fuzzy for our high-definition age. Surtitles were in French and English.

Harpsichordist Alexander Weimann led the music (essentially a sequence of recitatives and arias) from the harpsichord – thus playing his own instrument only sparingly. There were plenty of others, including sackbuts and wooden cornets (all optional, since no authority for instrumentation survives).

Wheezy and ill-tuned at the start, the wind fanfares improved as the performance progressed. Are baroque students adopting a laissez-faire approach to their art? (The McGill baroque strings also had their sour moments last November in *Dido and Aeneas*.) Despite the growing popularity of counter-tenors, there was only one high flyer in this production, and in a comic role. All the same, this was an effective staging of Monteverdi's prototypical examination of politics and Eros.

rors for her, and Kurt Weill's *Je ne t'aime pas* started with some low notes that would not have disgraced Stutzman herself. And in Delibes's *Les filles de Cadix*, the soprano showed how expressive a hand planted firmly on a hip can be.

As the careful reader will have noticed, Fortin sang in Spanish, German and French, with equal virtuosity to my ears. Some English might have been nice as a conclusion, rather than Fernando Obradors's *Canciones Clásicas Españolas*. We had already had a full helping of the lusty Spanish persona. But the fourth song, *Confiado* Jilguerillo, was interesting as an exhibition of coloratura. Fortin certainly still has her Violetta chops.

She was aided in all this by a suitably colourful and positive accompanist, Esther Gonthier, also from the opera world.

With more than 20 characters, Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* of 1642 is popular on campus for giving the entire vocal student body something to do, especially if two casts alternate. The Université de Montréal opera program proved equal to its demands, or at least most of them, this weekend in Salle Claude Champagne.

I heard the Saturday crew. Female principals were strong, particularly Kristin Hoff as Octavia, Emperor Nero's estranged wife. Her vivid voice communicated both pathos and thirst for revenge. Kyra Folk-Farber, another soprano, was effective as the manipulative new empress of the title, as was mezzo-soprano Josée Bernard as Nero (a role presumably first sung by a castrato).

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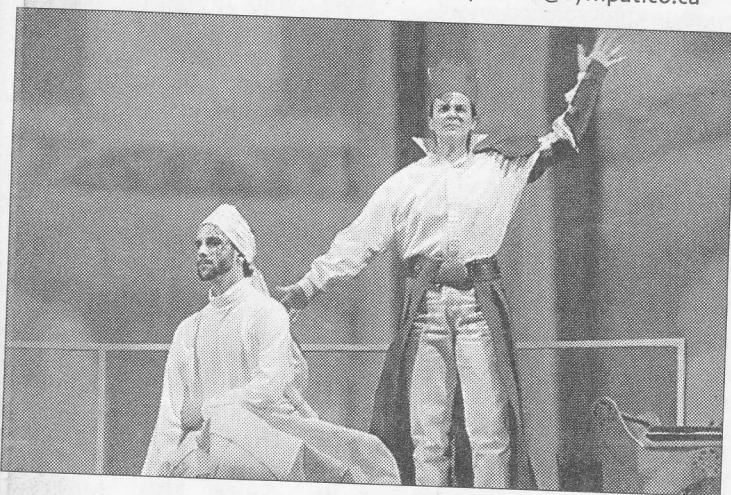
Well known for her multimedia initiatives, violinist **Angèle Dubeau** was the subject of a surprisingly restrained 30th-anniversary celebration Friday night in Place des Arts. There was no *mise en scène*, only a piano in the middle of the vast Salle Wilfrid Pelletier stage, and this stage was disfigured by tape and scratches. Lighting was banal and even the audio pickup was so-so, turning host François Dompierre's commentary into a boomy mumble.

Happily, Dubeau played with feeling and warmth, whether on her own (the prelude from Enesco's Op. 9) or with others (duets by Glière and Handel-Halvorsen with cellist Yuli Turovsky, Schubert's *Sonatina* No. 3 and Brahms's *Sonatenatz* with pianist Anton Kuerti). Her tone has mellowed over the years, but not her communicative instincts.

There was some pleasant jazz after the break with pianist Oliver Jones, but the main point of interest was the premiere of *Les Quatre Saisons pour La Pietà*, a quartet of Vivaldi tributes written for Dubeau and her chamber orchestra by Simon Leclerc, Jose Evangelista, Linda Bouchard and Serge Arcuri. They were original and effective numbers. Bouchard's *Autumn* was only passingly tonal and Arcuri managed to rework *Winter* with both respect and imagination.

The main problem – an unusual one for contemporary music – was their brevity. The premiere seemed over in a flash. Perhaps Dubeau should negotiate a longer and more developed edition.

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Mark Wells and Josée Bernard in Université de Montréal's production of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* by Monteverdi.