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Lively party kicks off 10-day Bolcom festival

The composer and his wife did some of his cabaret songs. Then other singers took their turns and shined.

By [Michael Anthony](#), Star Tribune

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One could do worse than kick off a music festival with a party, which is what "Cabaret with the Composer," the first of many tributes to William Bolcom that will stretch into next week, felt like Saturday night at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. That is, not many concerts conclude with the audience singing along to a country-western lament titled "Tears at the Happy Hour." Illuminating Bolcom, as VocalEssence, the festival's organizer, has called it, will offer generous samplings this week of nearly five decades of the 68-year-old American composer's creative work, culminating in two performances next weekend at Orchestra Hall of Bolcom's monumental oratorio on poems by William Blake, "Songs of Innocence and of Experience."

Bolcom's four volumes of cabaret songs hold a special place, however, especially for singers, for whom they've become frequent audition pieces, largely because to do them right a singer has to be able to act as well. Their roots can surely be traced back to the Viennese cabarets of the early 20th century. Even so, the Bolcom songs are unique in their wide range of styles and moods. They're quirrier than Broadway theater songs. The texts, by the late Arnold Weinstein, Bolcom's longtime collaborator, are more like a sketch or a poem or a short story than a standard song lyric. As Weinstein wrote in his notes to the 2003 live recording of the songs, they "record a sigh or a laugh, often both at the same time."

And since they were nearly all composed for Bolcom's wife, the revered mezzo-soprano Joan Morris, who sang a few of them Saturday night, with Bolcom himself at the piano, it was interesting to hear what the other performers -- six of the area's best singers -- would bring to them. Seated onstage at two tables as if in a nightclub, with Bolcom's piano in the center, they brought a lot, as it turned out.

Janis Hardy, for instance, unearthed the icy venom in "At the Last Lousy Moments of Love," while, at the other end of the emotional spectrum, James Bohn evoked the sweet tenderness in Bolcom's lovely, Ellington-like "Blue." Maria Jette underlined the bittersweet tale of a drag queen in "George," Christina Baldwin found the humor in the morning-after blues in "Toothbrush Time," and Dieter Bierbrauer saw the slick bravado in "Lady Luck." And Bradley Greenwald, among many bright moments, got just the right tone of exasperation in "The Actor," a character who "dies for a living."

Morris returned to the stage at the end and sang what has been the standard encore for many years in her concerts with her husband, the hilarious "Lime Jello Marshmallow Cottage Cheese Surprise," the cast having brought onstage a dessert that actually looked like the title of the

song. As a final encore Bolcom played his lovely "Graceful Ghost Rag." Now that's the way to end a party.

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