



A fitting tribute

The William Bolcom festival put on by VocalEssence could prove to be the classical event of the year.

By Michael Anthony, Star Tribune

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For about 10 days this month, the Twin Cities felt buoyant and charged with life. There was new music everywhere you turned, and it was all by William Bolcom, one of this country's most interesting and valuable composers. Titled "Illuminating Bolcom," it was the biggest presentation of this 68-year-old composer's music that had ever been given -- anywhere. As Bolcom, who was present for the entire event, said in an interview, "Usually, they wait till you're dead to put on this kind of thing."

This was, of course, the work of VocalEssence and its leader, Philip Brunelle, who hatched the idea some years ago of putting on Bolcom's magnum opus, the William Blake songs, "Songs of Innocence and of Experience," and then cajoled other local arts organizations to put on Bolcom programs and to make it a real festival.

Thus, in addition to the two performances of the Blake songs that Brunelle led at Orchestra Hall, with their fascinating multimedia effects, there were evenings of chamber music, organ music, cabaret songs, band music, art songs, even Bolcom's rarely seen early theater piece, "Dynamite Tonite," in a lively concert reading courtesy of Ben Krywosz's Nautilus Music-Theater.

Bolcom's roly-poly figure was seen at every event. He looked gratified and, as the week wore on, a trilled dazed.

Walking on stage at the end of the Saturday-night performance of the Blake Songs, he walked down the long row of soloists, giving each one a kiss. He then turned to the audience, and the ovation was huge, the biggest of the night. Audiences do like his music.

Earlier in the week Bolcom and his wife, revered mezzo Joan Morris, presided at a master class at Minnesota Opera's studio, giving shrewd advice to a quartet of young singers who had prepared arias, mostly by Bolcom, for the occasion: Alison Bates, Hugo Vera, Andrea Coleman and Kyle Albertson.

In an aside, Bolcom named American songwriter Harry Warren as his stylistic guide in writing for voices, notably "I Only Have Eyes For You" as the inspiration for "New York Lights," his admired aria -- almost a hit tune -- from the opera "A View From the Bridge." "The great pop songwriters," he said, "are the founders of the American way of setting English."

He has always favored actors who can sing rather than singers who can act, he said in brief remarks after the Monday-night performance of "Dynamite Tonite," the musical he wrote with the late Arnold Weinstein, his longtime collaborator, in 1963. Weinstein's book, set in a trench during a comic-opera war, drifts a bit, but Bolcom's witty score, with its tangos and Viennese waltzes, keeps the ship afloat. Randy Schmeling, Joel Liestman and J.P. Fitzgibbons were standouts in a fine cast.

A lasting memory: that ominous-looking worm inching up a tree branch and biting off the leaves in "A Sick Rose," one of the 46 Blake poems, a chillingly perfect image. This was the work of Wendall Harrington, who designed the video images that helped make the "Songs" so compelling.

It wasn't just a brilliant fusion of sound and sight -- apparently the most detailed use of the Blake engravings there has ever been in the 20 or so performances this work has had worldwide. There was more: Isn't this the direction that concert performance is going to have to go in the 21st century, toward multimedia of some kind?

Henry Fogel, president of the American Symphony Orchestra League, put forth that idea in a speech at the Composer Institute at Orchestra Hall last December. "We can't ignore that this has become a visual culture," he said.

(Interesting that one of the design ideas for the expansion of Orchestra Hall announced last week is a big video screen, to be used for some concerts.)

To the credit of VocalEssence, "Illuminating Bolcom" was very smoothly run and well organized, although Brunelle ran into one patch of bad luck: On April 22, the power went out at Minnehaha Academy just as an orchestra rehearsal was about to begin, and the rehearsal was cancelled. Fortunately, Brunelle had scheduled more than enough rehearsals for the Blake songs, and the orchestra sounded fine during the performance on the 28th.

A guess: "Illuminating Bolcom" will seem like the event of the year when December rolls around, at least in terms of music. In the days when it was the Plymouth Music Series, VocalEssence put on similar events exploring the music of contemporary composers Rodion Shchedrin and Einojuhani Rautavaara. These, too, were illuminating. Meanwhile, our two major orchestras were putting on their usual heavy doses of Mozart and Beethoven and calling that a festival and wondering where their audience went. "Illuminating Bolcom" didn't seem to lack for an audience.

Michael Anthony • 612-673-4445 • manthony@startribune.com