

# **Bolcom's magnum opus a powerhouse**

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If you've seen composer William Bolcom handling piano duties for a cabaret concert of his songs steeped in the Great American Songbook tradition, you might imagine him a man given to miniatures, one who condenses his artistry into bite-sized pieces.

But you'd have been proved wrong by this weekend's concerts at Orchestra Hall. VocalEssence presented the first Twin Cities performance of Bolcom's magnum opus, "Songs of Innocence and of Experience," a setting of two collections of poetry William Blake penned in the late 18th century. Saturday night's concert proved an awe-inspiring, emotionally draining experience, one in which the visions of Bolcom and Blake combined to cast the brilliance of each in a glowing light.

VocalEssence has taken on some large-scale projects before, but nothing like this, at least in recent memory. An orchestra of Mahler-esque proportions, a small pop and country combo, three choirs and 14 vocal soloists shared the Orchestra Hall stage with three screens, on which were cast projections of Blake's art from his original edition of the poetry collection.

Take all of this and the fact that the work came in at almost three hours, and it may sound exhaustingly over-stimulating. But Bolcom's agility with many genres kept things fresh. He countried up "The Shepherd" and made "The Little Black Boy" a circa-1970 slice of RB. "Earth's Answer" became a Wagnerian force of nature, and "The Little Vagabond" a stroll up Tin Pan Alley. But Bolcom's no stylistic dilettante. His understanding of various forms seems to run quite deep, as does the river of turbulent emotion unleashed in this epic.

While the "Songs of Innocence," the evening's first half, were almost consistently comforting, the "Songs of Experience" take poems built upon the same themes and deliver them in decidedly darker fashion. Among the many soloists, Lisa Drew and Mary Wilson were particularly adept at conveying the radical shifts in mood. But the assembled multitude - all under the direction of Philip Brunelle - handled the demands of this sprawling masterwork expertly.

The concerts were the centerpiece of the three-week "Illuminating Bolcom" festival, which continues with performances of his opera, "Dynamite Tonite," at 7:30 p.m. today (Nautilus Music-Theater, 408 Prince St., St. Paul) and Tuesday (Sateren Auditorium, Augsburg College, Riverside and 22nd avenues south, Minneapolis). Tickets are \$10; call 651-298-9913.

The festival concludes with a performance of a Bolcom work by the Minnesota Orchestra at 11 a.m. Thursday and 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at Orchestra Hall, 1111 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis. Tickets range from \$82.25 to \$20.25; call 612-371-5656.

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