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After a Drowning, Musical Bones Wash Ashore

'collected stories' at Zankel Hall Explores a Tragic Tale

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER APRIL 27, 2014

Tragic love stories, whether real or fictional, have provided fodder for poets, playwrights and composers for millenniums. An installment of the composer David Lang's "collected stories" series at Zankel Hall on Thursday evening highlighted a particularly gruesome story of love gone awry, with a Celtic folk song about sibling rivalry.

In the ballade "Two Sisters," the jealous older sibling, in love with the same man as her sister, drowns the girl in the ocean. When the skeleton washes up on shore, the bones are made into a musical instrument.

Several works in the program were inspired by the story, but it was the performance of a piece without text that best relayed the drama of the narrative. In Julia Wolfe's "Cruel Sister," a tone poem played with sizzling energy by Ensemble Signal and conducted by Brad Lubman, the grim fable is conveyed with a range of effects, beginning with ominous repeated patterns in the lower strings, which establish a foreboding mood that grows quickly more sinister. Cacophonous outbursts, eerie violin lines that unfold over a double bass drone, frantic pizzicati and an underlying urgency hint at an unpleasant outcome. The various strumming and plucking effects toward the end of the piece evoked the harp (the musical incarnation of the dead sister) that figures prominently at the conclusion.

In comparison, the monochromatic rendition of the ballade "Cruel Sister" by the Irish Sean-nos vocalist Iarla O Lionaird, programmed before

Signal's performance, seemed bland, despite the tartness of the words. The program, curated by Mr. Lang — the holder this season of the Richard and Barbara Debs Composer's Chair at Carnegie Hall — also featured Nico Muhly's "The Only Tune," inspired by the same subject albeit with slight tweaks. (The sister drowns in a mill pond and is resurrected as a fiddle instead of a harp.)

Mr. Muhly, on keyboard, performed his version with the folk singer and instrumentalist Sam Amidon and the violist Nadia Sirota. Mr. Amidon's unemotive voice crooned the deconstructed lyrics — featuring "oh the dreadful wind and rain" as a recurring motif — over simple banjo melodies, electronics and Mr. Muhly's chords, with Ms. Sirota providing additional support. There were strikingly cacophonous moments, but the work often sounded facile.

To open the event, Mr. Lang recruited Uncluded, a duo featuring the singer-songwriter Kimya Dawson and Aesop Rock, a hip-hop artist. In the program book, Mr. Lang wrote that Ms. Dawson's songs, even the ones not specifically about love or sadness, fit the theme of the evening because they made him "feel open to the possibility that something painful might happen and that I might have to feel it. And that is painful enough."

With James Lynch on electric guitar, the duo offered a range of heartfelt, vulnerable songs — including the quirky "Delicate Cycle" — that meshed Aesop Rock's (not always intelligible) rapping and Ms. Dawson's feathery voice.

The "collected stories" series runs through Tuesday at Zankel Hall; 212-247-7800; carnegiehall.org.

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