



There were accolades and flowers for William Bolcom Sunday at Merkin Hall in a concert celebrating the composer's 80th birthday this month with a world premiere.

William Bolcom's emotionally direct, often witty music has won him many admirers over the last half-century, and they were out in force Sunday night at Merkin Concert Hall for a chamber-music concert to celebrate the composer's upcoming eightieth birthday.

At about 50 minutes from opening bars to final cheers and flowers for the composer, the program consisting of a world premiere plus favorites from his catalogue didn't delay the post-concert party long. Nevertheless, it managed to suggest the wide range of styles and expression Bolcom has brought to the table, from the somber musings of *Dark Dreams that Will Not Disappear*, the world-premiere piece for viola and piano, to the racy stories and seductive strains of this composer's trademark cabaret songs.

The premiere of *Dark Dreams*, commissioned and sensitively performed by violist Jacob Adams and pianist Angela Drăghicescu, led off the concert with music aimed, the composer wrote in a program note, to provide "a little solace" for the present "dark times."

Adams's brooding viola and Drăghicescu's deep dissonances and frenetic gestures summed up the emotional state of many people these days. The piece's gradual progress through tender and impassioned moods to a high pianissimo conclusion seemed to encourage listeners to stay emotionally engaged and cast their eyes upward, whatever the news cycle holds.

That upward trajectory continued with the three-song cycle *Let Evening Come* for soprano, viola and piano, setting poems about death by Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson and Jane Kenyon that dealt, respectively, with the shock of loss, the sensation of grief, and the possibility of beauty and resolution in death.

Commissioned in 1993 as a cycle for singers Tatiana Troyanos and Benita Valente, the piece took its present form and subject following Troyanos's untimely death from cancer later that year. On Sunday another singer of Greek heritage, Canadian soprano Linda Tsatsanis, performed the piece with a consistently silky tone in all registers and clear English diction (the latter especially helpful, as printed song texts weren't provided).

Angelou's poem on the loss of African-American arts giants such as Alvin Ailey and James Baldwin was set to clanging piano chords and rising spiritual-style viola lines, vividly rendered by Drăghicescu and violist Elias Goldstein, as the singer declaimed the text in melodious leaps. Tsatsanis smoothly phrased Dickinson's subtle musings to a tinkling, pizzicato accompaniment, and a subtly dissonant riff à la Thelonious Monk guided the final song to its gentle conclusion.

Having come to terms with life's dark side, the program could relax and live a little in three delicious selections from the cabaret songs that Bolcom composed with lyricist Arnold Weinstein over a 30-year span beginning in the 1960s. The sweet-toned Tsatsanis played the disingenuous ingénue as the title character in "Amor," walking through town with a wiggle that distracted the police officer, the ice-cream man, and the judge from their work.

She waxed wistful in the smoky ballad "Waitin,'" and sketched a shadowy portrait of "Black Max," the suave and mysterious figure who seems to always show up where the action is. Pianist Drăghicescu slid neatly in underneath the soprano's star turn with a jiggly syncopation, a sigh, or a Brecht-Weill riff as the occasion demanded.

The program closed on a whimsical note with *Fairy Tales*, a 1998 collection of four miniatures for viola, cello and double bass inspired by ancient stories told to children. Although the pieces lasted only a minute or two each, just enough time to suggest a mood or a moral, Bolcom made resourceful use of his oddly low-pitched ensemble, and violist Goldstein, cellist Dennis Parker, and particularly bassist Yung-chiao Wei responded with a wonderfully imaginative performance.