

# Arts/Entertainment

## Mohawk Trail concert features Wilbur poems set to music by local composers

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CHARLEMONT — Continuing the commemoration of its 25th anniversary, Mohawk Trail Concerts presented a special evening featuring seven songs — composed especially for the occasion by local composers — set to the poetry of Richard Wilbur. Wilbur, one of the world's most respected contemporary poets, lives in Cummington. We therefore had the honor of his being present to read and introduce each of his poems.

Titled "An Evening of Words & Music," the program began with three 19th-century songs in German, two by Spohr and one by Schubert. They were performed by Marni Nixon, soprano; Paul Gallo, clarinet, and Spencer Carroll, piano.

Any of you who has seen the films "West Side Story," "The King & I" or "My Fair Lady" has heard Nixon's singing; what you saw on screen, however, was an actress lip-synching to it.

Setting the precedent for the evening, she read the song text translations aloud. The Spohr songs seemed like those of Carl Maria von Weber, having a similar effervescent. In the Schubert, Nixon's intensity of tone struck me as being in conflict with the plaintive mood set by Gallo's clarinet.

It is, of course, difficult to comment on new works when you've heard them only once. The seven Wilbur songs, however, were given swift passage into the listeners' consciousness through the readings and introductions by the poet himself. He took us into his confidence, as it were, affording us an intimate connection to his art and his life.

Being appointed the country's poet laureate for a year, he assured us, did not keep him from protesting Reagan Administration policy in "A Fable." A rattlesnake, who would use his poison bite only "as a last resort," is confronted by a

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peasant who — scared by the snake's hiss — hurls a "preemptive stone"; the moral is that:

Security, alas, can give a threatening impression;

Too much defense-initiative can prompt aggression.

The setting by University of Massachusetts bassist Salvatore Macchia for baritone, cello (Adriana Contino) and piano was clever, evocative and deftly dramatized by baritone Jan Opalach.

"Boy at the Window," Wilbur explained to us, was written after making a snowman with his son, then 5 or 6. The boy wanted to bring the snowman inside for dinner, but having been told this was not possible, he stands at the window weeping.

In the poem, the snowman — moved by the boy's innocent compassion — sheds a tear of his own. Opalach and Carroll gave this short piece an enchanting performance, the music by Smith College professor Donald Wheelock. The final cadence in the piano was bewitching, as though rendered by the ghost of jazz pianist Bill Evans.

The first half of the program concluded with the third Wilbur song, "Exeunt," set by Robert Stern, who currently teaches at UMass. "Piecemeal the summer dies" begins the text, which Stern gives an "old movie" sentimentality — employing the combination of baritone, soprano, clarinet, cello and piano. Stern's particular command as a composer became clear as the piece ends, where the music's nostalgic flavor proved to be a compositional device, which itself then dries up and dies — as "A cricket like a dwindled hearse crawls from the dry grass."

Karen Tarlow, who teaches at

UMass and Smith, chose to set the poem "He Was." Wilbur told us he wrote it about the head gardener of the farm in New Jersey where he grew up. Tarlow used an "impressionistic" musical vocabulary, in her setting for soprano and piano, bringing to mind the many garden paintings by Monet.

Wilbur does not recall the man ever speaking, but he extends the meaning of "voice" to include the fruits of the late gardener's labors: "The found voice of his buried hands rose in the sparrowy air."

When Frederick Tillis came on stage with his soprano saxophone, I realized I had just seen him performing two nights before with jazz-great Billy Taylor at UMass' Bright Moments Festival. The "For K.R. on Her Sixtieth Birthday" seemed reminiscent of Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into the Good Night" — with its refrain: "Blow out the candles of your cake. They will not leave you in the dark."

Tillis played solos after Wilbur read each of the three stanzas. Although he had sheets of music spread before him, Tillis seemed to be improvising his lines — first in the (Mideastern feeling) harmonic minor scale, then in the (somewhat Medieval sounding) Phrygian mode and, after the third stanza, he introduced chromatism (as one might in jazz).

He later explained to me that he originally wrote the song for an ensemble, and was in fact selecting different instruments' lines from the score in front of him.

Artistic director Arnold Black explained that in the next song, by Amherst professor Lewis Spratlan, we would hear a musical realization

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of the letters in Richard Wilbur's name in the main motif: "Who cooks for you?" The latter, Wilbur next informed us, is what the owl is thought to be saying when it hoots.

The instrumentation for "The Barred Owl" was violin (Leszek Barnet), flute (Susan Palma), bass clarinet, cello and piano with baritone. The composer made extensive use of the glissando (sliding), ethereal harmonics and scratchy on-the-bridge tremelo effects offered by the string instruments. Sustained major seconds (a major second is the interval "Chopsticks" begins with) place us out in "The warping night air." A child is awakened by the owl's hoot and assured by her parents there is nothing to fear; and so she goes back to sleep.

Not listening for the sound of stealthy flight

Or dreaming of some small thing in a claw

Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw.

Spratlan was at the height of his witty and macabre form, leaving us with an instrumental version of the "Who cooks for you" motif echoing off into the distance.

The set concluded with a setting of "The Writer" by Smith College's Ronald Perera. Perhaps the most personal of the seven poems, Wilbur wrote it about his daughter writing a story as a teen-ager. He chose seafaring metaphors: "commotion of typewriter keys like a chain hauled over a gunwale" and "the stuff of her life is great cargo ... I wish her a lucky passage."

Perera used insistent repeating notes to emulate the typing and low rich chords that suggested the sea. The poem then flashes back to an earlier memory of a starling trapped in that same room, watching its struggle to find the open window before pulverizing itself to death. Wilbur clearly roots for his daughter just as he rooted for the bird, but also must let nature run its course and not intervene unnecessarily. Perera rendered the "dazed starling" with a scattering of trills and celebrated the ecstasy of its liberation by sending the soprano to the top of her range.

The program concluded with an aria and duet from cantatas by J.S. Bach. Carroll switched to the harpsichord. Opalach read translations of the text in a mellifluous metered speaking voice. Palma gave an impressive rendering of the hyperactive flute part; though in the second piece her vibrato seemed unsuited to the period. Contino gave the continuo part, though simply doubling the harpsichordist's left hand, a lively treatment. (Black announced earlier that she had flown in from Germany expressly to play in this concert).

The two singers treated their lines quite differently. Opalach appeared calm and centered, while Nixon seemed jittery. It was an uplifting ending to an unforgettable evening.