

Wednesday, December 03, 2008

World AIDS Day inspires songs of consolation, hope and remembrance

By [John Von Rhein](#)

Monday was World AIDS Day, and to mark the event Chicago Opera Vanguard presented "The Chicago AIDS Quilt Songbook" at the Court Theatre in Hyde Park. The concert of art songs, most of them newly commissioned for the occasion, was a benefit for Seasons of Concern, the Chicago theater community's fundraising effort to support people living with the AIDS virus.

Eric Reda, Opera Vanguard's artistic director, conceived the idea of commissioning songs from a wide spectrum of artists based in Chicago or associated with the city, representing styles ranging from classical to cabaret, as performed by local artists. His model for the first-ever event was the "AIDS Quilt Songbook," created in 1992 by the late baritone William Parker.

There were a couple of clunkers, and parts of the concert sounded underrehearsed. A few singers did not have the technique to do justice to their material. Even so, more than half the songs were good enough to make one want to hear them again, and the performers' obvious commitment carried them over the rough patches.

Several composers, including Joshua Stephen Kartes, Josh Schmidt, Patricia Morehead and former Chicagoan Augusta Read Thomas, kept their music minimal and let the texts speak for themselves.

Other composers found beauty in metaphor, such as Lawrence Axelrod with his "Quilt Duets," a triptych on texts by Mark Doty, Jim Rondone and others, affectingly sung by soprano Julia Bentley and baritone Jeffrey Strauss, with Axelrod at the piano.

Songs of humor and hope kept the mood from turning too dour. Stephen Rader made a campy delight of George Howe's cabaret number "You're So Gay." Jennifer R. Connolly savored the wit of Jon Steinhagen's "Good To See You're Alive." Reda's own mordant "Atrippla!" put a smiley face on a lengthy catalog of the side effects of an AIDS drug.

The prize of the evening was Robert Steel's "Home Movies," a touching music theater piece in which singer Rebecca Prescott explored childhood memories in duet with a prerecorded collage of dreamlike vocal and instrumental sounds.

Among the hefty roster of performers, James Morehead supplied more than half of the accompaniments and did so capably despite having to wrestle with an ill-tuned piano.

jvonrhein@tribune.com