

Christopher Cerrone & Friends

NEW YORK CITY

NYFOS Next | National Sawdust

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ON DECEMBER 8, New York Festival of Song's NYFOS Next series migrated to Brooklyn's National Sawdust, with an evening of music curated by native son Christopher Cerrone. It was the perfect setting for the program, which Cerrone described as united by three themes: contemporary poetry, fragments of music and text, and, in some instances, first performances of pieces too early in their development to properly be termed premieres. The result was an evening that felt like the cutting edge of experimental art song. In a word, it felt very "next." *Mouthpiece I* and *Mouthpiece IV* by Erin Gee explored the possible sounds the singing instrument can make, with whistles, fricatives, rolled Rs, hums, percussive mouth sounds, and simple repeated intervallic patterns. The impression was that of a person singing to the accompaniment of her own beatboxing, and soprano Justine Aronson masterfully executed these fascinating pieces, which rely as much on breath as voice. Aronson was equally compelling in Scott Wollschleger's "Fragment on Fragments," a setting of an untranslatable Estonian folk tune. The accompanying instruments are also called upon to venture beyond their limits, with clarinet flutter-tongue, muted bass strings, and a bowed marimba. Even more fascinating was Katherine Balch's hyper-syncoated "Vidi l'angelo nel marmo," a deconstruction of Michelangelo's famous description of discovering the sculpted figure hidden within the stone. Among other tricks, Balch redistributed the phonemes as in a cryptic crossword puzzle clue, forming new words from the last syllable of one word and the first syllable of the next. The pure beauty of Aronson's flexible soprano was on full display in Cerrone's "Apocatastasis," which pianist Timo Andres described quite accurately as the lovechild of Morton Feldman and Puccini. Here and in Balch's piece, Aronson had an opportunity to unspool shimmering sound that was both expressive and direct.

Theo Bleckmann was no less impressive, bringing a blithe, jazzy baritone to Andres's *Mirror Songs*, atmospheric settings of three poems by Andrea Cohen. In the second, "first thought, best thought," Bleckmann created a mood of childlike wonder singing a melody that slid into an effortless falsetto, while the repeated phrase, "The job of the blossom is to bloom" built and itself bloomed in full voice, creating a contrasting persona of an insistent but supportive mentor. Ted Hearne's settings of three poems by Dorothea Lasky had a shifting indie pop vibe. Aronson voiced the quiet anxiety of obsessive thinking in "I am sick of feeling," spurred on by NYFOS Associate Artistic Director Michael Barrett's left hand ostinato. Bleckmann took on the soothing, suggestive "Why go in cars," and the singers joined for "You are not dead," demonstrating their expertise in using a microphone to enhance their expressivity, rather than simply as a projection aid. Cerrone's *The Naomi Songs* allowed Bleckmann the opportunity to demonstrate one of his specialties: sampling himself on a multi-track while singing, thus layering his voice on top of itself in real time. This was more than a stunt; it was a powerful aural depiction of the introspective ecstasy of poet Bill Knott's words. —*Joanne Sydney Lessner*