

48 Volts Interview with Kyra Saltman and Samantha Stein.
Soapbox Music, 9/20/2010.

Soapbox: So that last piece you performed, by Brian Baxter, it was actually written for you guys?

Kyra: Yes, it was. We found him one day in the Roosevelt library and we were like 'Dude, write us a piece!' and he said OK.

Samantha: Yeah, he likes that. Composers want to write for people, and they love projects. Kyra had used the texts in class and we really liked them and didn't want to let them go.

Sbx: Had [Brian Baxter] written for cello and soprano before?

K: I don't think so – he said it was interesting for him.

S: Yes, and it worked out really well.

Sbx: A lot of contemporary composers want [very specific] things from performers – extended techniques, a million notes at once...

S: Well, especially nowadays, extended techniques are so much the focus of modern composition that it's nice to do a recital of current works that work against that.

K: There's so much music written for soprano and string quartet. We sort of get used to the idea that [the accompaniment] has to be really thick to support a soprano – an orchestra for instance. But it just isn't true.

S: Yeah. And a lot of music for continuo and soprano is from the baroque period. *Nothing* we're doing is from the baroque period. With the exception of the Mozart, it was all written in the last twenty years, which is really awesome.

Sbx: So yes, without any extended techniques, [these works] seem to have a fairly 'traditional' sound....

S: Yes, they're 'tonal.'

K: Right, which for voice makes sense. What I'm noticing in most of these pieces is that there's a lot of alternation between making the cello as lyrical as [the soprano], and also [providing a rhythmic base]. And [the cello] is doing *both* a lot of the time!

S: We try to inhabit each other's uses of their instrument. Cello is bass instrument so it often provides the rhythm, but as a singer we're always harped on by teachers and colleagues to pay attention to our rhythm, and it forces you do so when you're with an instrument that's always rhythmic.

K: Yeah and [likewise] my teachers are always saying 'Oh, you should play this like you're a singer!', which is funny since Samantha is always told to 'Sound more like a string player'. What does [sound more like a string player] even mean? [laughing]

Sbx: The cello and voice are very similar in range, correct?

K: Yes. The cello has the range of ALL the voices. Samantha's lowest note is the G on the D string, so she's got one string basically. . . . I actually think it's interesting that in these pieces we cross so much – [the soprano] is often significantly lower than [the cello].

S: That's right. There's a big range vocally. Saying [music] is 'for soprano' is sometimes a loose term, especially with contemporary music. [laughing]

Sbx: So, you two were at Roosevelt together?

S: Yep. We finished our Masters' in 2009, and we met on one of the first days of school.

Sbx: Is this your first concert together?

K: Not at all. Aside from the operas Samantha's done where I've been in the pit (which doesn't quite count), we played Brian Baxter's piece back in February as part of a series run by a composer in town named Eric Malmquist called Singers On New Ground – committed to 21st century art song. He was doing mostly singers with [piano?] and we decided to come in and mix it up and have a cello instead. We also did a piano quartet with soprano, written by Randall West.

S: And we also did a Messiah last winter together.

K: And the Schoenberg Second String Quartet, about a year and a half ago.

S: Yeah it's good, we work well together.

Sbx: Are you two an official group?

K: [laughing] We were arguing a couple weeks ago about whether we could be a group with only two people....

S: [laughing] Of course we are! We just don't have a title....

K: Yeah, and we don't want to be the 'Saltman-Stein Duo', which is about as Jewish as you can possibly be... [laughing]. But yes, it would definitely be fun to keep looking for music for this combination.... It's so... pleasant to work on. At this point in our careers, I'm practicing excerpts eight hours a day, and practicing concertos and string quartets, and Sammi is drilling arias and practicing operas all the time. We feel that music like this is important to our diet.

S: Yes, it's an extremely satisfying experience.

K: Exactly. It gets neglected. And it seems that you shouldn't have to wait to start doing unusual combinations....

S: Well, you have to wait until you're established to get *paid* for doing the things we want to do. With our careers starting, there's the gigs you do to pay the rent, which are enjoyable on some level, then there's the things you're working towards to build and establish your career – the millions of auditions and applications and rejections [laughing] and then there's this stuff – the projects. It's what you *want* to do – the 'hobby' of your career.

Sbx: How is audience receptivity to a program like this? Can you get more people [to come out to a [contemporary program?]

K: I think that from putting on programs like this, most people in Chicago are learning that you start with a very small audience but that if you put on four of them, people will come out and show up to the fifth one.

S: Yes, it's a small but devoted audience.

K: There are a lot of people doing what we're doing right now, and some we're working with, like the Chicago Composer's Orchestra. People are showing up, just not in the numbers you might want.

S: In order to get a large audience you need *a lot* of PR. It comes at a price, and it's very time consuming. I was in an opera with a new company – Verismo Opera Club of Chicago, and we did [La Boheme]. The artistic director's wife is in PR professionally. She did such a good job – we had a wonderful turnout and a lot of press. But we all saw all the effort [she put in]. It was her full-time job for two months. We don't always have that kind of time. [laughing] We have friends who come see our gigs. And our teachers. We're doing [this program] downtown purposely, and purposely on weekdays so that people are just done with class and can come over....We're trying to make [attending] as easy as possible.

K: The other great thing about collaborating with a living composer who lives in the same city as you is that there are two sides – two forces. Brian [Baxter] is recruiting people to come and hear his piece, and so it's a thing for him and also for us, so it helps.

S: We try to help each other out. There's definitely an intimate music community in Chicago. We definitely want it to be larger, but it also feels very good to be part of a small group.

Sbx: And finally, could you give us the details of your program?

The Love Poems of Marichiko by Lori Laitman
Akhmatova Songs by John Tavener,
Dos Canciones des Amor by Brian Baxter
and Batti, Batti from Mozart's Don Giovanni

Monday, September 27th at 7:30 PM in Curtiss Hall, 10th floor
and

Wednesday, September 29th at 7:30 PM in the Salon of Elizabeth Stein Company, suite 810.

Sbx: Salon of the 'Elizabeth Stein Company'? Any relation?

S: [laughing] No, no relation.

Sbx: Who is 'Elizabeth Stein'?

K: She's a violinist, she's in [The League of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (formerly The Women's Association)] and she does a lot of philanthropy and is very supportive of arts groups. She has this beautiful space that she will very graciously allow people to use when they're getting started.

S: And the Fine Arts Building is also a wonderful space. It has four halls. Our old faculty are next door and a lot of our friends are still at Roosevelt, so that helps helps.

K: So we'll see if anyone shows up! [laughing]

S: [laughing] You know, 'Facebook Invites'!

Sbx: Well thank you very much for the interview. We enjoyed your performance, and having you two here. Good luck with your recitals!