



Soprano Robyn Driedger-Klassen shines in songs by Vancouver composer Stephen Chatman at the Vancouver International Song Institute's festival.

UBC bustles with The Audible Soul

Singers and environmental activists share the platform

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE

REVIEW | The Vancouver International Song Institute is a unique new enterprise. During an 11-day period that began on Sunday, the University of British Columbia will bustle with lectures, workshops and concerts as VISI assembles scores of singers, pianists, and scholars to explore its central theme, Song: The Audible Soul.

Anyone who labours under the impression that art song is stuffy and formal might want to consider VISI's Monday evening show, when the platform was shared by singers and a quartet of environmental activists all reflecting on *Our Lasting (?) World*. Featured were two major cycles by contemporary American composers. Scott Gendel's settings of Wendell Berry's environmentally correct poems are sentimental — even perhaps naive — but sweet and sincere, lusciously sung by soprano **Martha Guth** with Alison d'Amato at the keyboard. Robert Beaser's music for Anthony Hecht's *Seven Deadly Sins* (performed by baritone Mel Braun and pianist Laura Loewen) is spiky and difficult, but not unrewarding.

VISI concerts kicked off Sunday evening with *Canada Here and Now*, a marathon sampler of songs by Canadian composers. There were first-time missteps: tenor Benjamin Butterfield's incomprehensible decision to program

banalities by a Victoria amateur, and John Greer's slick, uninspired folksong arrangements. But there was also a wealth of great home-grown repertoire.

Mezzo Lynne McMurtry and Alison d'Amato presented four of Rodney Sharman's *Cabaret Songs*. Although Sharman's sly post-modern wit has its dark side, his outrageous new-music-meets-country-and-western saga of a transvestite trucker (*Crossing Over*) is a sure-fire hit.

Baritone Tyler Duncan and Erika Switzer offered three songs by young Vancouver composer Bruce Sled: a pair of elegant neo-Edwardian miniatures and the enchanting *A boat, a boat, haste to the ferry*, which juxtaposes minimalism with Sled's innate and individualistic feeling for line. Leslie Uyeda's ambitious *The First Woman* (with words by Lorna Crozier) received a striking premiere by soprano Heather Pawsey and VISI artistic director Rena Sharon.

Soprano Robyn Driedger-Klassen and Terence Dawson essayed Stephen Chatman's *Five Songs* on texts by Miriam Waddington. Old pro Chatman is incapable of turning out a less than refined product, and the Waddington cycle sees him at the top of his craft. *Someone who used to have someone* evokes an old-fashioned ballad without pandering to cheap nostalgia. The final *Quiet* is a wonder: not a single note too many, and every gesture assured and magical.

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