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Virginia Woolf's Words, a Singer's Voice

By Zachary Woolfe, May 3, 2011

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"At intervals some emotion broke in." This astringent line, about Thomas Hardy's funeral, is from the diary of Virginia Woolf, and also from Dominick Argento's classic 1974 song cycle, "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf."

When the line was sung by the young mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano on Monday evening at Merkin Concert Hall, no observation could have seemed further from the truth. Emotion — not over-the-top sentiment, but true, sincere emotion — suffused every moment of her eloquent, impassioned New York debut recital.

She met with elegance and confidence all the challenges of a varied program, presented under the auspices of Young Concert Artists. Her voice was full and even but with a tantalizing flinty core. She summoned a radiant calm for "Alto Giove" from Nicola Porpora's 1735 opera, "Polifemo," accompanied by her husband, the pianist Christopher Cano.

In Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer" she captured the potent mixture of rage and sadness at the end of "I Have a Gleaming Knife" and soared with ease into the final section of "The Two Blue Eyes of My Beloved." She brought to the cycle's complex, multipart songs a sense of structure and scale, a way of guiding you through their architecture.

With long, flowing red hair and an open face that registers the slightest shift of feeling, Ms. Johnson Cano, who comes from St. Louis and is in the Metropolitan Opera's young artists program, conjures a vision of the heartland, even the frontier. When she sat on a low stool next to the excellent harpist Gwyneth Wentink for Ravel's "Five Popular Greek Melodies," she had the intimate, conversational quality of singing by the fireside.

Ms. Johnson Cano is effortlessly likable, but in both her voice and her manner there is also a hint of something steely, even intimidating. She has the qualities Joan Didion ascribed to people with self-respect: "a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; they display what was once called character." Character — individuality, a taste for risk — is the attribute some find lacking in young American singers, but Ms. Johnson Cano has it: an honesty and assurance so impressive that you want to call it bravery.

Hers is better than a good voice; it's an interesting one. It's not a perfect voice, at least not yet. She can lose control at the top of her range, where her tone sometimes becomes whitened and pressured.

But in the Virginia Woolf cycle she was extraordinary, rising to the lyrical heights of "Fancy (February 1927)" and "Parents (December 1940)." In 1919 Woolf wrote that her goal for her diary was "something so elastic that it will embrace anything." Ms. Johnson Cano sang with hope and a premonition of melancholy. Those words are also the perfect description of this singer's own prodigious, exciting talent.

Michelle V. Agins



Jennifer Johnson Cano The mezzo-soprano, accompanied by Christopher Cano on piano, at Merkin Hall.