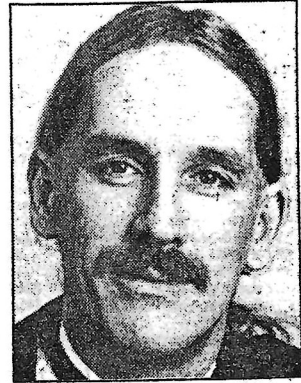


# Vocal writing sings of eloquence, poetry

## A melodic, sensual season finale from New Music Series

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EXAMINER STAFF CRITIC



Robin Sutherland is the Symphony's principal keyboardist.

**A** WEEK AGO, the San Francisco Symphony's New and Unusual Music Series demonstrated why vocal writing has become such an unsavory and even alienating proposition in the final quarter of the 20th century.

Then, at Old First Church last Saturday evening, almost as if to rebut generalizations like the above, the final NUMS concert of the 1988-89 season (and the last concert of Charles Wuorinen's tenure as composer-in-residence and series impresario), the Symphony's forces and their guests told us, in essence, to relax. Given a composer sensitive to poetry and to the inherent eloquence of the human larynx, anything in vocal music is still possible — even beauty.

In a concert titled, "U.S./U.K.: Atlantic Crossings," Wuorinen programmed the Symphony premiere of John Harbison's "Mirabai Songs" and Jonathan Harvey's "Song Offerings." Soprano Carol Webber, who gave the first American performance of the Harvey in 1987, was the soloist in both works, joined by an ensemble of players led by Leif Bjaland.

One could find contrasts, too, in the two remaining works, both for solo piano. The Symphony's principal keyboard player, Robin Sutherland, offered Three Studies for Solo Piano by the 29-year-old Briton, George Benjamin. Wuorinen opened the evening with his own 1987 Bagatelle for Piano, replacing an uncompleted Symphony commission by John Chowning.

**A** POTENT SCORE, "Mirabai Songs" (1982) engages for several reasons. Preeminent among them is the primacy of the word. Mirabai was a legendary poet in 16th century India, who broke with tradition by refusing to follow her husband into death. Instead, she took up the life of an itinerant poet, addressing many of her utterances to the Dark One, Krishna. The verse is a unique melding of sensuality and religious ecstasy; Mirabai blurs the distinction between Krishna and her late spouse.

Harbison set six of the poems as edited by Robert Bly. The composer prepared versions for both voice and piano, and voice and eight-member ensemble from which the piano is conspicuously absent. The latter version, performed Saturday, is a cunning arrangement. Rather than overwhelming the soprano, the instrumental texture (for alto flute, bass clarinet, percussion, harp, violin, viola, cello and bass) swaddles the soloist's timbre, cushioning the voice, irradiating it with a shimmering, exotic sound.

The erotic candor of the verse strikes one as thoroughly modern. Harbison's gift for infusing his settings with emotional nuance, while preserving the integrity of the prosody, keeps one riveted. He lends a kinetic lift to the second song, "All I Was Doing Was Breathing," in which the poet evokes the hedonistic call of a "Dancing Energy." "The Clouds" is bathed in an aura

"he has passed" tapering into infinity. A cello obligato (played Saturday by Diane Farrell) accompanies the singer on her final journey into meditation, "Don't Go, Don't Go."

**A**S THE LIST of its distinguished interpreters shows, "Mirabai Songs" needs the voluptuous resonance of a mezzo-soprano voice for optimal results. The opening poems spotlighted a hollowness in Webber's soprano as it attempted to encompass the lower tessitura. Later, she projected the texts with clarity, but a more focused instrument would have made an even greater impact. Bjaland conducted sturdily; the flattering Old First acoustics did their part.

"Song Offerings" also draws from Indian literature, from Tagore's English translations of the "Gitanjali," which also served John Alden Carpenter so charmingly in an earlier era. Harvey, who is 50 and a lecturer at Sussex University, sets only four of the poems, all of them specifically for a woman narrator.

Even more than in the Harbison, the shape and accents of the verse determine the melodic line; there is little exaggerated dwelling on vowels for obvious dramatic effect. The tessitura leaps and descends. Despite a couple of outbursts, the accompaniment inclines to modesty (the third song features a florid violin outburst). Though her voice spreads under pressure, Webber found "Song Offerings" considerably more congenial.

Sutherland relished the volatile line and intriguing harmonies of the three Benjamin works, "Fantasy on Iambic Rhythm," "Meditation on Haydn's Name" and "Relativity Rag," with its sly deconstruction and shattered syncopations. Wuorinen was a persuasive guide through his Bagatelle, communicating its repeated intervals, chordal cadences and spidery melodic line with crystalline logic.