

Composer-Performer Kati Agócs Intermingles Sacred And Secular In First Recording

Keith Powers January 21, 2016



Composer-performer Kati Agócs. (Courtesy Kate Lemmon Photography/NEC)

Kati Agócs can best be described with hyphens. Plenty of them. As in Canadian-Hungarian, composer-performer, sacred-secular. Poly-interested perhaps as well, across the arts. And every hyphen is

relevant to her music.

Which seemingly is everywhere. Like the just-out CD release of her works on BMOP/sound, [“The Debrecen Passion.”](#) Like the Hub New Music appraisal of her chamber music, [Sunday, Jan. 24 at Jordan Hall.](#) And, further afield, the two concerts featuring her work in Toronto in April, including the premiere of her first string quartet.

Agócs was raised in Ontario, by an expatriate Hungarian father and American mother. She lives in the Boston area now, and has taught composition at New England Conservatory since 2008. Training at Juilliard — a masters and doctorate in composition, largely under the direction of Milton Babbitt — was preceded by undergraduate studies at Sarah Lawrence, and followed by composition fellowships at the Aspen Festival and at Tanglewood. She also studied in Budapest for a year as a Fulbright Fellow. She refers to Babbitt as a mentor, as well as composers like John Harbison and Joan Tower.

“The Debrecen Passion” includes five pieces that the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, under conductor Gil Rose, and along with the estimable Lorelei Ensemble, have recorded over the past few years. The release marks a milestone.

“For a composer, the first recording is a game changer,” she says. “It’s important that the work get represented, and working with these artists — Lorelei is absolutely fearless, they just jump in and do whatever they’re asked of, with ease. And Gil and BMOP — I love the sense of an orchestra sounding like a chamber group, that’s my ideal in a way. And everyone in BMOP is so great at getting that sound.”

The intense vocal setting of “The Debrecen Passion” gives this CD its title, and serves as the recording’s centerpiece. Based largely on the poetry of Hungarian Szilárd Borbély (1964-2014), it also intermingles a Hebrew kabbalistic prayer, a medieval Georgian hymn and a Marian lamentation.

The work might be thought of as an oratorio — a story told through the intermingling of sacred and secular texts. Searching for a narrative, and in that narrative a meaning, would be a project. Listening is not.

About 23 minutes long, “The Debrecen Passion” blends the voices into instruments, and the instrumentalists into the voices. Lorelei sings sections of starkly beautiful solo sections, duos and trios, but also vocalizes wordless melismas and dissonant pitches that challenge the mood. The orchestra performs many solos — flute, trumpet, snare drums and violin among them — but also chants some of the text alongside the singers.

In the simplest way, everyone is a musician, serving the cause. Even if the texts were not in Hungarian, Latin or Georgian, textural clarity is not the object. Starkly simple and direct solo sections give way quickly to vocal overlaps and dense sonic textures — the meaning obscured in service of the musical goals.

Integrity in this case means that the accessibility of the lyrics is secondary to the sound-world. The feeling is religious, deeply spiritual; but it's the sound that tells you this, not the words.

“All good music has spiritual or mystical characteristics,” she says. “I want to be writing in that tradition, large-scale works. Messiaen is important to me, and the Ligeti ‘Requiem.’ I’m definitely coming from a Christian tradition — I was a church singer for years — and that influences the sound. I find it beautiful. And I’m also interested in other religions, and how they express themselves.

“I do hear tonally, but I’m not always writing tonally,” she says. “I’m always aware of the harmonic implications — large-scale harmony, and local harmony, implications that the ear can follow.”

This recording alternates vocal settings with instrumental. The two purely instrumental works are more straightforward: “Requiem Fragments,” an older (2008) work, has the flavor of a tone poem, strongly oriented toward the winds, horns and percussion. “... Like a treasure hidden in a field,” is, as Agócs says, the most abstract. The title is taken from Matthew 13:44, the enigmatic parable of a man who finds a treasure (the kingdom of heaven) buried on land he does not own, and hides it away until he can gather the means to acquire it.

The other two vocal settings are simpler than “Debrecen,” but no less compelling. “By the Streams of Babylon” sets Psalm 137 in Latin. Sung by the composer, with fellow composer/soprano Lisa Bielawa, above a staccato instrumental accompaniment, the text follows scales upward and downward in a manner that evokes Philip Glass — rich text above simple (although not in this case minimalist) instrumentation. A delightful rising horn triplet serves as a outro cadence.

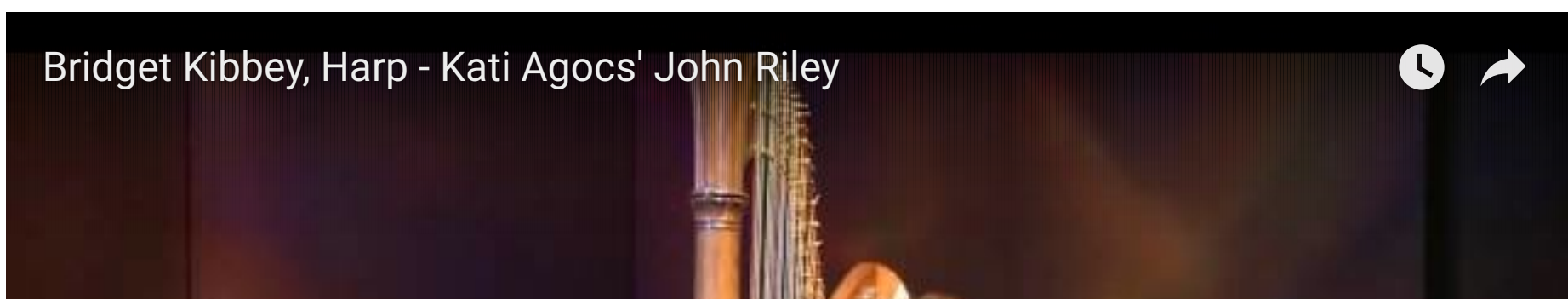
☰ Kati Agócs By the Streams of Babylon (Kati Agócs and Lisa Bielawa) ⌚ ↗

“Vessel,” a polytextural motet (Agócs’ words), layers three texts simultaneously: Latin (a poem by Catullus), Hebrew (text by Yehuda Halevi) and English (e. e. cummings). “Each text has its own rhythmic metabolism and intervallic palette,” the composer writes in her own program note. The precise articulation of the texts becomes lost in an interwoven texture.

“That may be the most central challenge,” she says. “I’m creating a sound-world, and I don’t mind if people don’t know what each thing means. I don’t think I can recreate the meaning and create the music I want to at the same time.”



The premiere on the upcoming Hub New Music program — “Hyacinth Curl,” for voices and percussion — may be a first step toward addressing that. “It’s short, it’s in English, and there’s not a lot of instruments creating textures around it,” she says. This text comes from a Farsi poem, a ghazal — “but it’s my paraphrase of the translation, so for the first time, really, I’m writing my own lyrics.”





The April concerts in Toronto explore Agócs' first string quartet, "Talisman," with the Cecilia String Quartet, and her earlier orchestral work "Perpetual Summer," to be performed by the Toronto Symphony under Thomas Søndergård.

The string quartet also marks a departure — Agócs' first foray into that venerable combination of instruments. "I feel like, in a quartet, the composer is the most exposed," she says. "But there's a real sense of possibility. Joan Tower said to me that's it's very collaborative — the four players are like composers themselves. They have to figure out early in the process how they're going to express things. It's a dynamic way of working."

Agócs hopes it leads to a set of quartets — "I would love to have two more, and have it add up to a cycle," she says. "Now that I've worked on this album, I love having works that resonate together, that make a statement."

Kati Agócs' "The Debrecen Passion" is available at [BMOP/sound](#). Hub New Music performs "Strength in Fragility: Chamber Music of Kati Agócs" on Sunday, Jan. 24 at 8 p.m. at Jordan Hall. The program is free. For information [here](#).

Keith Powers, former music critic at the Boston Herald, now freelances for a number of newspapers and magazines. Follow him on Twitter at [@PowersKeith](#).



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