

MUSIC REVIEW

In the caves of Qumran, with electronics

By Jeremy Eichler | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 07, 2013

WALTHAM — The presence of a portion of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Boston’s own Museum of Science has heightened local interest in these fascinating texts, the stories behind their discovery, and the windows they open onto the communal and spiritual life of an ancient sect known as the Essenes. In their day, the scroll texts were most likely chanted out loud, writes the Brandeis scholar Marc Brettler in a program note for Saturday’s Dinosaur Annex concert, though he conceded we don’t have any idea how that chanting might have sounded.

At a guess, probably not much like the modern electro-acoustic soundscapes created by Eric Chasalow for his new work, “Where It Finds Nothing But the Wind,” a setting of selections from the scroll texts that received its premiere on Saturday’s concert. Chasalow, a Brandeis-based composer, freely admits he came to the Scrolls with no previous knowledge about their origins or content. His work also makes no claim to any informed guesswork about the sound world of ancient liturgical



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The program featured soprano Tony Arnold (above) and composer Eric Chasalow’s fantasy on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

traditions. Brettler, who assisted Chasalow on his project, pointed out in a preconcert lecture that even the pronunciation of the texts themselves is speculative since they predate the creation of the system of vowels that inform the speaking of Hebrew and Aramaic today.

So what we have in Chasalow’s new work is a purely contemporary fantasy on these texts, scored for soprano, percussion, guitar, flute, and electronics. The texts used here were culled by Chasalow from across the different scrolls, and include biblical passages, texts from the Qumran Psalms scroll, and even an extraordinary passage from the Book of Enoch that describes “the sons of the sky” siring a race of evil giants with the “daughters of men.” Chasalow’s musical response is an ever-shifting kaleidoscope that moves seamlessly from tonal music to abstract electronic noise and back. His vocal writing, both here and in earlier work called “Furies” also represented on this program, can be lustrous and richly expressive — especially as delivered by the riveting and pure-voiced soprano Tony Arnold, who has a broader gift for conveying the poetry and nuance behind outwardly daunting contemporary scores.

More generally, one challenge for Chasalow in this newest work is to somehow convince a listener he has moved beyond what might seem a purely subjective or even arbitrary modern response to distant texts. Not every section was equally convincing in this regard, but the most persuasive moments were those in which he engaged most overtly with the spiritual dimensions of his chosen scroll texts, imagining, at times through music of spare beauty and desolation, the fears, prayers, and yearnings of an ancient community — its sense of fragility and awe in the face of, as one text describes, “the cycle of the years and the times of eternity.”

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In addition to Arnold and Chasalow (electronics), the performers included Sue- Ellen Hershman-Tcherepnin (flute), Jonathan Hess (percussion), and Daniel Lippel (guitar). The program also featured Jonathan Harvey’s “The Riot,” a witty, virtuosic, and vividly

Dinosaur Annex

Slosberg Music Center, Brandeis University,,

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kinetic score from 1993, and Kaija Saariaho's "Cendres," a rather forbidding work from 1998. Donald Berman (piano), Joshua Gordon (cello), and Diane Heffner (clarinet) completed the roster of excellent performers fielded by Dinosaur Annex, whose season continues with its annual young composers concert on Jan. 31.

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