

Review/**Music**

# 20th-Century Vocal Works

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By **BERNARD HOLLAND**

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There was a pervasive sweetness to Thursday's 20th-century program by the Gregg Smith Singers. The title of this Brooklyn Philharmonic series at Cooper Union is *Meet the Moderns*, and what a gracious meeting it was.

Indeed, if the metaphor of a protracted dinner might be used, post-war music seemed, for the moment at least, to have come to the end of some fiery and bitterly spiced courses and was just arriving at dessert. Little of the music cloyed, however: William Hawley's two antiphonal Motets were a little heavy with late Romantic harmony, but his manipulation of four vocal quartets placed around the hall — each with wide spacing between individual singers — was the work of a clever hedonist. Mr. Smith's two somewhat similar pieces — "Music When Soft Voices Die" and "If Music Be the Food of Love" — were, I'm afraid, more interesting to think about than to listen to. The canonic and echo effects are clever but almost in the parlor-game mode. Antiphonal choirs singing from a distance almost always cause ensemble problems, but Mr. Smith kept his excellent chamber group very much together.

The new piece here was Louise Talma's "Infanta Marina" to poetry by Wallace Stevens. Its five sections are models of understated communication. The piano accompaniments are

thin in texture and wonderfully clear. Miss Talma's melodic sense gives a gentle tension to her lines of poetry. She has, indeed, understood the power of simplicity.

Ned Rorem's "In Time of Pestilence" preserved the basically gentle and welcoming tone of the evening. The first verse's baritonal pedal point is reversed at the end, with sustained tones in the women's voices. Morton Feldman's "Rothko Chapel" is a long series of exchanges between singers in unison or chordal phrases against delicate little solos from Katherine Greene's viola and the mallet percussion instruments of Joseph Passaro.

Elliott Carter was represented by a Robert Herrick setting, "To Music." It is an early piece from 1937. For those put off by Mr. Carter's later dourness of expression, it offers an interesting window to his powerful gifts. "To Music" might just as well have been entitled "To Language," for the great breadth and variety of mood, color and tempo are carefully calibrated to Herrick's ardent lines.

Another antiphonal piece was Morton Gould's "Tolling," and there were Ives songs at the end. Rosalind Rees's frail but expressive soprano was featured throughout the evening. Sam Hutcheson was the baritone in the Ives, and Paul Suits played the various piano parts.