

The Boston Musical Intelligen

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

IN: REVIEWS

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GuitarFest 10 Ends Dramatically

by BRIAN SCHUTH



Ralf Yusuf Gawlick

In the tenth year of the Boston GuitarFest, New England Conservatory's Eliot Fisk, quite possibly the finest classical guitarist in the world, presided over a week of guitar concerts, clinics and competitions originated by. Saturday night featured Fisk as a performer, but it was not merely a star turn: instead, for most of the evening Fisk shared the stage with other players, and the highlight of the evening was the presentation of a recent work for guitar and voice.

That work was *Kollwitz-Konnex (...im Frieden seiner Hände)*, Boston College composer Ralf Gawlick's Op. 19, for guitar and voice. Soprano Anne Harley joined Fisk for this huge and formidable work, more than 45 minutes in length. The piece is weighted down with artistic ambition: it is inspired by self-portraits by the German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945), is sung to texts from Kollwitz' diary, and the all but one of the movements carries a quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as a kind of motto. The self-portraits were ranged behind the performers on the stage, an intimidating set of nine images, only one of which (the earliest and first) shows the artist smiling. The texts are frequently sorrowful or conflicted: for example, Kollwitz describes her artistic aim as a need to "express the sorrow of the people that never comes to an end that is now mountains high." Later, a

quotation from *Wilhelm Meister*, "*saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden*" ("seed for planting should not be milled") appears in two different places as a condemnation of war—the first time in specific reference to her son Peter, who died in World War I. The magic of the work is the way it bears its burden, justifies it, and creates a deeply moving emotional journey almost without one noticing it.

The energy of the music is drawn from the opposition of textures in the two parts: the vocal line consists almost exclusively of long note values, allowing each word of the text to sound clearly as if in a recitation, while the guitar creates a parallel sound world that fully exploits the instrument as well as Fisk's incredible virtuosity (the work was written for, and in collaboration with, Fisk). Gawlick's guitar writing is finely attuned to the fast decay of the instrument's sound, allowing the part to be at times almost unimaginably dense without obscuring the soprano. This does not prevent him from using the full spectrum of attack,



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timbre and tone available to the instrument. The musical language is a collage of tonality; most movements end with something recognizable as a cadence, though at any given moment one may not be able to predict where the music is going next. Far from being weighed down by the extra-musical elements, the work makes them an intimate part of the experience. For the most part, Gawlick avoids word-painting or italicizing the text—he allows the words (sung in German) to convey their meaning as text, while the music creates a separate, but linked reality. In fact, at times music, text or the assigned self-portrait appear to be at odds. The second text, “*An deiner Liebe hat es mir nie gefehlt...*” (“Your love for me has never been absent”) is letter of appreciation and loved to her husband Karl, accompanied by music of anxiety and agitation, save for a calm central moment. The reproduction of the portrait that inspired it, “*Selbstbildness am Tisch*”, depicts Kollwitz with an unhappy face of a mask at a table, lit from an overhead lamp, the overall impression that of a suicidal Vermeer. Over the length of the work, though, a constant personality begins to form, and a grammar of emotional change emerges. Fisk’s playing was assured, powerful and balanced, and was a tour-de-force of technique. It’s a testament to the interpretive powers of Harley that despite the fireworks beside her, she remained the heart and soul of the work. Her voice was both commanding and sensitive, her interpretation alert and intelligent and rooted in the text. Twice during the piece the guitar plays by itself: without the voice, the sense of tension in the work abates, and the solos function as resting and re-gathering moments for the listener. Only once does the soprano sing by herself, but when the voice appears alone it is the emotional center of the work. It is the penultimate movement, a meditation on death (“this insatiable desire for death is still here... dying is just like turning over...”) it is a hypnotic spinning out of words and notes that is part lament, part keening, part call for prayer, part almost Wagnerian apotheosis. When the guitar joins at the very end to begin the lost section, it is as if an old friend has finally appeared to accompany the subject on a final sojourn. *Kollwitz-Konnex* is a rare thing, a work of high aesthetic, literary, artistic and intellectual ambition that also has a profound emotional heart.

The evening opened with a rather lighter modern work, *Conversation Piece* by Kurt Schwertsik, who began his career at the height of Darmstadt but whose encounter with John Cage and the like over the years resulted in a return to tonality. Written in four movements for guitar and marimba (played with subtlety and finesse by Ayami Okamura), it cannily combines the sharp attacks and bright timbre of the guitar with the smooth and mellow sounds of the marimba. The first movement was the most engaging as it ingeniously and surreptitiously changed metric groupings while the players slowly diverged from their shared material. The remaining three movements were snapshots: one powerful and mildly violent; one brief and lyrical; and the last a clear “finale”, with many brief and brilliant ideas tossed about.

After that, Fisk took the stage alone to play his transcription of Bach’s sixth cello suite. It was an idiosyncratic and forceful performance, from the very first attack of the Prelude, which he sounded almost before the introductory applause ended. The movement alludes to hunting horns, and this was a full-bore pursuit. The Allemande, heavily ornamented by Bach, was all decorative encrustation requiring one to search for what was being adorned. The Sarabande was an essay in the tonal colors available to the guitar; the Gavottes buried the lead voice in dense, luxurious texture; and the Gigue was another chase, with Fisk propelling the music headlong every time a run went into the bass. The entire evening was a triumphant demonstration of Fisk’s restless intellect and his astonishing musicianship, as well as of his generosity. Each work was received with hollers and vigorous applause by the GuitarFest partisans, the Kollwitz earning a prolonged standing ovation for the performers and composer.

See related interview [HERE](#).

Brian Schuth graduated from Harvard with a Philosophy degree, so in lieu of a normal career he has been a clarinetist, theater director and software engineer. He currently resides in Boston after spending the last 15 years in Eastport, Maine.

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