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Sounds Heard: David Lang's the little match girl passion

By Molly Sheridan

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"I wanted to tell a story," writes David Lang, introducing the new recording (just out on Harmonia Mundi) of his 2008 Pulitzer-Prize winner the little match girl passion. Such a simple and powerful desire; such a simple and powerful story to tell.

Reading just the poetry of the libretto Lang crafted out of the classic Danish folk tale by Hans Christian Andersen is chilling. Like the original, it's a double prism of horror and beauty: a small child is freezing to death in the street-side snow, yet she is also wrapped in a warm fantasy of Christmas lights and the presence of a beloved departed grandmother.

Deepening this tale further, Lang has chiseled another facet into the story by adding some stripped-down aspects of St. Matthew's Passion to the text and formatting of the piece, adding new shades of meaning to the match girl's suffering and tragic death.

The pairing is astonishing—a story we think we know well opens up to reveal a new visage and musically it sets up perhaps the most moving section of this 35-minute work, "have mercy, my god." Here, as elsewhere, Lang is delicate with the pacing and tone of the performance. There's plenty of emotion already embedded inside the words, and the score—for four voices, each doubling on a few percussion instruments—respectfully and effectively makes few moves to manipulate the listener much further. Uniquely fitted harmonies and rhythmic constructions flesh out the lines of text without whipping it up to false sentiment. To open the work, Lang meditates over the sounds of words in repetition: "come," "help me," "daughter." Knowing the path ahead, it's piercing enough. Later, long passages of text spill out, with the vocalists overrunning each other as the girl shivers, sheltering herself in her fantasies of roast goose and dried plums.

Theatre of Voices, under the direction of Paul Hillier, recorded the piece for this disc in addition to giving the work its 2007 premiere at Carnegie's Zankel Hall. The crystalline, pitch perfect performances captured here resonate in the memory long after the final notes fade. It's addictive. Expect this disc to go onto heavy rotation on your music player of choice.

Four shorter vocal works performed by Ars Nova Copenhagen round out the disc. Though smaller in scope, they mirror Lang's pure approach to match girl: the story of creation told in a list of nouns (evening morning day); the story of love in a list of metaphors (for love is strong (after the song of songs)). The performances are warm and the recording rings. Here again, Lang's strategy of text stripped down to the bare essentials makes the (often religious) underpinnings of the works more universal yet renders their message exponentially more potent. In all cases, plain-speaking human voices stretch out a hand to listeners and the music pulls them—deeply, completely, without gratuitous fanfare—through these collected moments of incredible pain and amazing beauty.