

Careless Love

Three songs on poems by A. E. Stallings

For baritone voice with clarinet/bass clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello and piano

Richard Festinger's *Careless Love*, an SFCMP commission, is his first piece for solo male voice. Having decided on a vocal work, the composer felt the baritone voice was the best fit for setting these A.E. Stallings texts, and his somewhat unusual ensemble -- clarinet/bass clarinet, horn, piano, and string trio -- follows the voice into that generally lower register. The collection of timbres is just different enough from the standard "Pierrot" group (featuring flute but no horn) to suggest intriguingly different possibilities.

Festinger (b.1948) was born in Newton, Massachusetts, but grew up in the Bay Area, where he has been based for most of his career. He attended the Berklee College of Music as a jazz guitarist and began his career in that realm. He earned a bachelor's degree from San Francisco State University and went on to study composition at the University of California, Berkeley, where he worked with Andrew Imbrie. His music often exhibits the gestural punch and physical virtuosity of jazz (that energy probably both a cause and an effect of his compositional personality), but he also has a fascination for traditional techniques of counterpoint. Both sides of the conversation meld in *Careless Love*.

Since 1990, Festinger has served on the faculty of San Francisco State University, where he also directs the Morrison Artists Series. He was a co-founder of the Earplay new music group in the mid-1980s. He has received commissions from the Fromm, Jerome, and Barlow foundations, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and many others; in 2014 he received a Koussevitzky Foundation commission for his substantial String Quartet No. 3, composed for the Afiara Quartet. Other recent works include *The Moon Is Hiding*, an E.E. Cummings setting for soprano and cello to be premiered next month by Noe Valley Chamber Music, and *Cummings Settings*, commissioned by Lucy Shelton and the Resonant Bodies Festival. His music is featured in three portrait recordings, on the CRI, Bridge, and Naxos labels. Upcoming projects include a piece for the Dutch reed quintet Calefax and a work for the San Francisco-based ClimateMusic Project. Festinger has written one previous piece for SFCMP: *Smokin' with Cocuswood* for oboe, string quartet, and piano, premiered in 1993.

Richard Festinger was drawn toward these poems of Alicia Stallings (b.1968) for their wit and humanity as well as for their use of formalist techniques, as he details below. The piece is in three movements, with the first two ("Fibs" and "Olives") of the four poems set together. The charming title *Careless Love* is the composer's, suggested by Stallings's "Accident" as well as the old familiar blues song (though there's no musical allusion to the song here). The baritone setting is natural in its prosody, while the ensemble writing, frequently highlighting individual instruments in soloistic fashion. Note, too, that the ensemble as a whole establishes a substantial presence above and beyond the immediate context of the poetry setting.

Of his *Careless Love*, the composer writes:

"A year or so ago, for a period of a few weeks, I read an enormous amount of poetry, looking for texts I might want to set to music, reading which gradually coalesced around themes having to do with the darker side of love, from the melancholy to the disastrous. As one might imagine, there are a great many poems on such themes-themes we all know from personal experience, a subject matter as universally human as any that exists. As I sifted through poems, I had to eliminate many that I would have loved to set, by poets as diverse as Robert Herrick, W.B. Yeats, and Jill Essbaum. But when I first read A.E. Stallings' *Another Lullaby for Insomniacs* and *Accident Waiting to Happen*" I knew immediately that I had to set them, so the cycle *Careless Love* came to focus on her poetry, so remarkable for its intelligence, humor, irony and elegance.

"The music flows from the poems: from their emotional climate and from the prosody of the language. In the first movement, the 'Fib' is a neo-formalism in which the number of syllables in each successive line of poetry is taken from successive terms in the Fibonacci series, an arithmetic expression of the Golden Mean; so the music needed to be structured along similar lines, in its phrase lengths and proportions. *Another Lullaby for Insomniacs* is a Pantoum, a poetic form where the 2nd and 4th lines of each stanza become the first and second lines of the next, finally turning back on itself at the end. To duplicate this structure musically would have been too much – the repetitions in the text suffice – so another musical form is superimposed, a binary form that also articulates the poem's stanzaic structure with interjections focused on the different colors of the instrumental ensemble. The setting of *Accident Waiting to Happen* takes its musical inspiration from the fifth line of the poem – 'I'm bright and unstable' – and simply strives to capture the breathless and ever-tightening tumultuous rush of the poem." -RF

Program note by Robert Kirzinger