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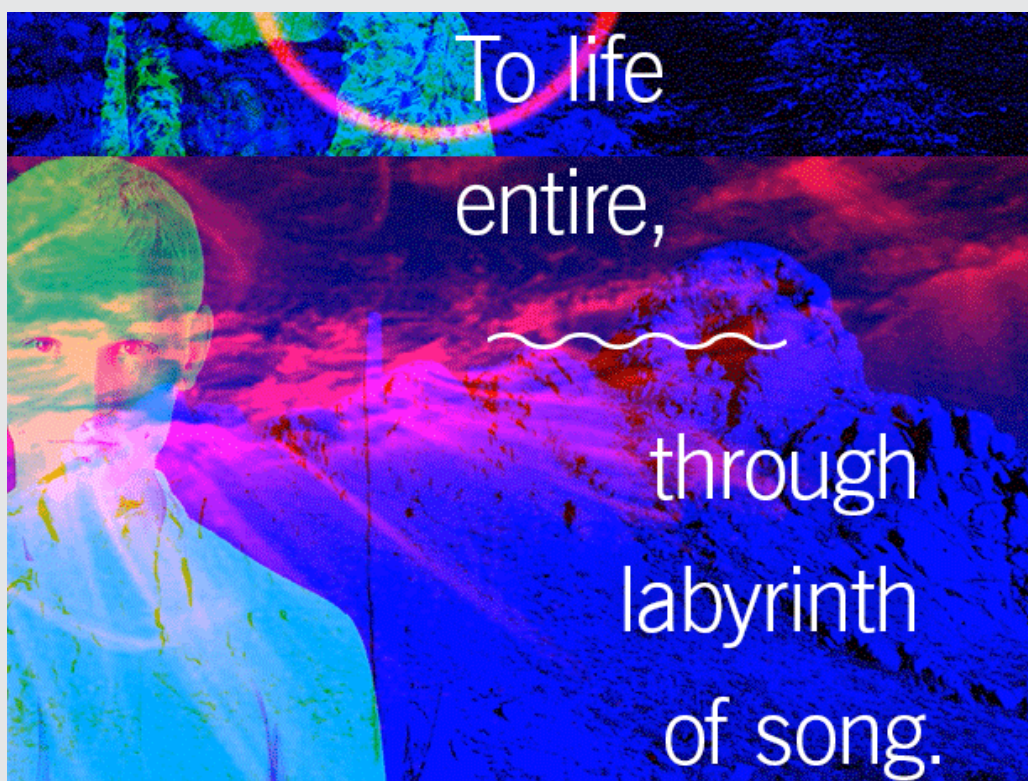
BAM's *Epiphany*--Concert or Art Installation?

November 6, 2015 | By Daniel Stephen Johnson, *MusicalAmerica.com*

NEW YORK -- Like strange angels, or some other form of beatific extraterrestrial life, the choristers of the Young People's Chorus of New York looked on silently, clad in dark, robe-like garments and lighting the way with luminescent white orbs. They smiled warmly as visitors, wearing 3-D glasses, wandered through the space behind the stage set at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's versatile Fishman Space. Huge projection screens became the walls of a corridor of flashing, multicolored imagery by video artist Ali Hossaini.

Epiphany: The Cycle of Life, conceived by Hossaini and stage director Michael McQuilken for a premiere at BAM's Next Wave festival November 4th, was as much an installation piece as a concert of new music, and viewers were allowed a prefatory ramble through it before taking their seats for an hour-long performance of choral music by three artists: Netsayi, a vocalist in the popular style, and two American classical composers, Paola Prestini and Sarah Kirkland Snider.

Prestini and Snider are both key figures in New York's new-music scene at the moment, thanks in large part to their openness to collaborations like these. Both are at the head of record labels and concert-presenting organizations, with Snider having co-founded the cross-genre New Amsterdam Records and New Amsterdam Presents, and Prestini helming the interdisciplinary VisionIntoArt foundation, VIA Records, and the new National Sawdust performance space. Netsayi, a Zimbabwean singer now living in London, would seem to be the odd woman out—which, given the bridge-building aesthetic of her fellow composers—would make a collaboration among the three of them more, not less, likely.



Netsayi's introductory *Passage*, a delicate ostinato of interlocking rhythms, played in the background as audience members ambled to their seats. The three large projection screens listeners had seen from behind just moments ago, surrounded a field of shredded cork—like sawdust, but not as messy—scattered with old, worn suitcases, painted white. Observers were welcome to skip the theater seats and find a spot on the soft- cork floor instead.

The first full section, Prestini's *Epiphany*, was scored—like the other two thirds of the program—for the YPC, a string quartet from the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, and three percussionists whose backgrounds mirrored the

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transatlantic trio of composers: David Cossin of the Bang on a Can All Stars, the meteoric young talent Ian Rosenbaum, and from Senegal, Ibrahima "Thiokho" Diagne. A requiem of sorts, the through-composed score set a new text by Niloufar Talebi, and offered a few moments of real delight, thanks in part to the terrific performance of those Young People, under the baton of their Artistic Director Francisco J. Nuñez.

The youthful sopranos contributed a solid, lovely, and well-blended sound even past the top of the treble clef, and the choir as a whole easily achieved the range of unusual vocal effects—moments of nasal tone, breathing as percussion—that the piece demanded, performing from memory and executing continuous stage movement. At one point, the singers opened the suitcases to activate portable sound playback devices and to reveal small gifts that they then handed to listeners: e.g., a tiny toy giraffe, or a slip of paper with a handwritten message.

Netsayi's *Intermezzo* of three songs, with music and lyrics by the singer, gave the chorus a chance to perform in a more vernacular style, which they managed to do—shaping notes and phrases idiomatically—without losing their immaculate blend. A showcase for the charismatic singer as well as for the magnificent drumming of Cossin and Diagne, Netsayi's heavily syncopated set exemplified what the three composers had in common: a love of lyricism and for the complex rhythms of sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora. The choreography this time involved the onstage audience members, who seemed delighted to dance along with the chorus.

Two-dimensional for the first two sections, the video component of the evening went 3-D again for Snider's contribution, via a process ("ChromaDepth") that uses prisms in the glasses' plastic lenses to create the illusion of depth without having to project a blurry image onscreen. Snider has a pop songwriter's knack for clear, bold emotional signifiers, and as a result, her piece—which set a text by Nathaniel Bellows to hazily imitative musical lines—was the most affecting of the three.

This was not a show for cynics. The sound of young voices already evokes a long tradition of kitsch art, and the idealism of the production hardly leaned away from it. Hossaini's video, whose imagery juxtaposed imagery of human faces, the microscopic world, outer space, the animal kingdom, and so on, was pitched towards an ecstatic sense of wonder at the natural world. Even the reliance on technology was utopian—and all the adventurous inversions of concert ritual that went into the staging only served to highlight the essentially unadventurous character of the composers' musical language. Still, *Epiphany: The Cycle of Life* was a successful experiment, and a showcase for lovely and refined music-making by composers and performers alike. The program runs until November 7th.

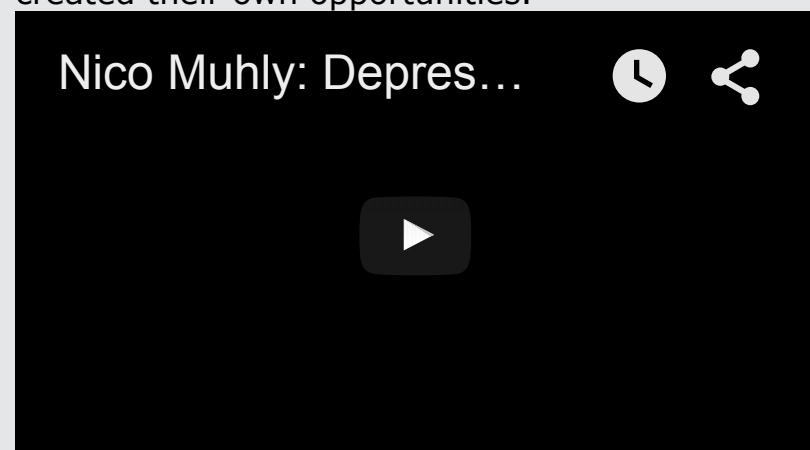


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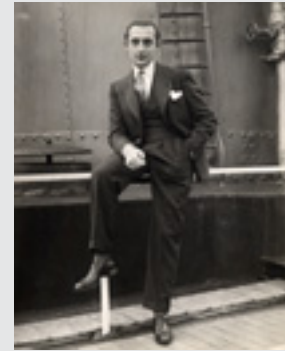
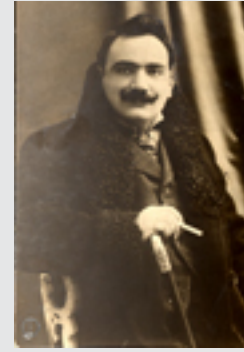
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