



KITKA

Women's
Vocal
Ensemble

Exquisite Harmonies from Eastern Europe and Beyond

San Francisco Chronicle

Meredith Monk and Kitka review: ravishing

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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Because so much of her music is created to be performed by herself or her ensemble, Meredith Monk is a composer with a distinctive sound - not only a stylistic fingerprint, but also a recognizable sonority. One of the many delights of Sunday's ravishing concert in Kanbar Hall at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center was the chance to hear that music in new tonal garb.

The occasion was a collaboration between Monk and Kitka, the Bay Area's eight-member women's vocal ensemble best known for its electrifying treatment of traditional Balkan music. The combination was both illuminating and slightly startling, like hearing a full program by an unusual cover band.



Photo: Thomas Pacha

What Kitka brought to this music, in a program that ranged across nearly 40 years' worth of repertoire, was a new and striking physicality of sound. Monk's wordless extended vocal techniques - a collection of whoops, croons, clicks and arcane trills - are rooted in the body, but there's also something abstractly formal about them in performance.

The singers of Kitka brought the guttural earthiness of their practice into the mix, with wonderful results. The ripe harmonies of the selections from "Quarry" emerged as evocative as ever, but now there were surface irregularities to complicate and enrich the textures.

The duet "Hocket" (from "Facing North") sounded less austere and more urgent as performed by Caitlin Tabancay Austin and Leslie Bonnett than when Monk performs it with one of her regular collaborators.

Monk was on hand as well, bringing her brand of puckish vigor to a number of solo selections (both unaccompanied and with piano), and joining the ensemble for music from her landmark 1991 opera "Atlas." To hear the wit and inventiveness of the excerpt "Choosing Companions" was to be struck again by sorrow that the piece has never been revived.

The evening ended on a note of glorious melancholy, with "Mieke's Melody #5," a heartbreakingly lovely choral excerpt from "Impermanence." It was done with just the right blend of vocal heft and luminous weightlessness.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Meredith-Monk-and-Kitka-review-ravishing-2371535.php>



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express
milwaukee.com

Exotic Mysteries

Classical Review, May 12, 2009

By Rick Walters

Two Early Music Now concerts this season diverted into folk music, a broader definition of what comprises "early music." And why not? Last fall Trio Mediaeval presented a program of Nordic folk songs. Music from the opposite end of Europe was featured in a concert Saturday night by Kitka at the Basilica of St. Josaphat.

Kitka, a women's vocal ensemble based in San Francisco, specializes in music from southeastern Europe, particularly from Bulgaria. Music of this Balkan region for women's voices has a distinctive style and sound, at first startling to those unaccustomed to it. A chest voice belt has been cultivated to high art. The sound is both rambunctious and subtle. Kitka's tone is pure, and tuning is impeccable. Its ensemble and phrasing is highly evolved.

There is strange wonder in the stunning arrangements of richly asymmetrical folk music Kitka performed. Slowly emerging harmonies seldom headed into expected territory. The seven-voice ensemble performed primarily in what I assumed to be Bulgarian. Even with brief paraphrases in the program about the meaning of the lyrics for each piece, this music evoked exotic mysteries.

A soloist, Tzvetanka Varimezova, joined the ensemble on several numbers. Her voice is both sweet and forthright. American ears are not accustomed to the agile, complex ornamentation of this style, which at its best organically creates stirring emotion. Periodically Ivan Varimezov played bravura solos on the *gajda*, a Balkan bagpipe, and also accompanied some of the singing. It was immediately clear that the ornamented singing style is closely related to the similar musical lines heard on the *gajda*. Milwaukee Choral Artists, a women's chorus, joined Kitka on a few pieces.

The Basilica's tricky acoustics are flattering to unaccompanied small vocal ensembles such as this. My only complaint about the program was that there was too much of a good thing. The 24 pieces could have been cut down by a few to create a better paced concert. Was I the only one who got confused following along in the program and figuring out which piece was being sung in the second half?



Photo: Thomas Pacha

<http://www.expressmilwaukee.com/article-6521-exotic-mysteries.html>



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Badische Zeitung

Music That Appeases Forest And Water Spirits The women's choir Kitka at the Loerracher Burghof July 22, 2010

Those who listen to their infatuating songs are inevitably lost, drawn down into the depths. Such is the legend of the Rusalky, the female nature spirits from Slavian mythology. Sometimes these mythical beings are being represented as young women with long, flowing hair, sometimes as half anthropomorphic fish women, nymphs, water nixes. According to legend, they live on the bottom of lakes or in the forest, only to emerge at night. In some Slavic regions there are still Rusalka ceremonies today, in order to honor these forest and water spirits, to call upon them, to appease them - and to protect oneself from harm.

Something from the original power of Rusalka songs now came to the "Stimmen" stage in the Burghof. The singers of the American women's choir Kitka appear in their production "The Rusalka Cycle" as modern sirens, who bring back to life the beseeching intensity and hypnotic insistence of the Rusalka rituals. Musically as well, the Rusalka cycle moves between worlds, when the accompanying instrumental trio with Elisabeth Fuegemann on cello, Sebastian Gramss on contrabass, and Peter Kahlenborn on drum set, underlays the sometimes throatily raw, sometimes ecstatic, sometimes plaintive songs with soft bowed instrument sounds and a percussive rhythm framework.

In the scenic presentation by Andre Erlen, the vocal ensemble from San Francisco conjures up the primitive, elemental forces of nature, the in-between-worlds, and the magical powers of femininity, which can sometimes extend into the demonical. The Kitka women let the audience take part in mysterious seeming ritual songs, the symbolism of which is not always easy to decrypt, the sound impact of which, however, carries an element of insisting, conjuring formulas. Sadovska has worked, one can hear that also in this Rusalka cycle, with traditional Eastern European vocal techniques, has let herself be inspired by how the women in the villages used to sing a long time ago: for example the "singing with open throat", a chant that carries far. Vocally, a wide field opens up in these Rusalka songs. The strong-voiced Kitka singers use the spectrum of the human voice enormously changeably: from throaty, dark sounds, ardent, powerful and emotional, from soft whispers,

tender breathing and murmuring, to painfully mourning songs, in which the voices sound completely clear, gentle as the weeping of lost women's souls, as if from the depth, from the bottoms of lakes and forests. Some songs carry an almost sacred, solemn aura. Then again the Rusalka invocations culminate into shrill screaming, an eerie hissing, wailing, screeching, ghostlike laughter and vocal eruptions of ferocious wildness and archaic fury. The singers seem almost witch-like, also transformed externally with loose, open, flowing shocks of hair and long orange, yellow, and red dresses, when they close in to the front of the stage in animal-like movements and break into a crescendo of wild voices.

Daring, luring, wild, beguiling, disturbing. Some scenes of this one-hour-long vocal theater project are charged with mysterious symbolisms and with meanings from cycles of nature, life, death, and the afterworld: women sit in the background and tightly hold on to cushions as if those were children. The singers form a circle, sprinkle themselves with water from a tin bucket, put their head into the bucket as if diving to the bottom of a lake. A wonderfully floating song of sacred intensity sounds and is broken up by a loud clanking. In between, the singers tell of their journey to Ukraine, where in the contaminated region of Chernobyl, the old women still sing their songs. And softly, the Kitka choir lets its strange-mythical Rusalka evocations fade away.



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The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Ensemble gives voice to Eastern Europe

Andrew Gilbert, *Special to the Mercury News*

There's no need to leave town for an exotic holiday musical excursion.

Kitka, the all-female vocal ensemble that specializes in songs from the Balkans, Baltics, Caucasus and other corners of Eastern Europe, presents its magnificent "Wintersongs" program Friday at Santa Cruz's First Congregational Church and Saturday at Le Petit Trianon Theatre.

While the themes running through "Wintersongs" are largely universal, the lush, haunting harmonies, hints of dissonance and unusual time signatures serve as a vivid reminder that we inhabit a big, wondrous world, one in which holiday music needn't consist of numbing Christmas Muzak.

Singing in almost a dozen languages, including Latgalian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Bulgarian, Belarussian, Greek and Hungarian, the extraordinary group often gathers its material through firsthand investigation, searching out elderly women in small villages where traditional songs and vocal practices are still remembered.

"The more research we do," says vocalist Juliana Graffagna, one of Kitka's artistic directors, "the more songs we find."

The group, which now features nine women, opened its Bay Area winter season on Sunday at Oakland's Lake Merritt United Methodist Church.

Singing without amplification, the ensemble was joined on several numbers by Bill Cope on various string instruments, including tamboura, bouzouki and lute. Dan Cantrell's accordion, which often functioned as an Indian harmonium, provides a harmonious drone.

Vocalists Lucia Comnes and Leslie Bonnett played violin on several pieces, which also featured rhythmic accompaniment by other singers on frame drum and tambourine.

Like Kitka's new CD, "Wintersongs" (Diaphonica), which was produced by singer and musicologist Linda Tillery, the concert opened with "Tec, Peleite, Zernju Zogtu," a gorgeous winter solstice song from Latvia in the ancient language of Latgalian. Arrayed in a semicircle, the singers switched positions after every

number, creating a seemingly infinite variety of vocal combinations and textures.

Many of the pieces offer holiday tidings and celebrate the birth of Jesus or lavish praise on the Virgin Mary, though some songs refer to pre-Christian deities and rituals. For instance, the Georgian chant "Gonja" is traditionally performed during a ritual in which a life-size doll of sticks, mud and rags is carried by women throughout the village in order to coax a change in the weather.

One needn't understand Georgian to appreciate the exquisite, hushed harmonies of "Shen Khar Venakhi," a millennium-old song of praise to the Virgin Mary now sung at weddings to honor the bride. The program notes' translations make the aural experience that much more sublime. "You are a vineyard just blossoming, whose blessed roots spring up from Eden/ A fragrant poplar, blooming in paradise . . . You are the sun, shining all over."

On "Bozha Svezda," a stately Bulgarian melody collected during a research trip last year, Bonnett and Janet Kutulas rendered the unmistakably Middle Eastern cadences, a mark of the Ottoman Empire's long reign over Bulgaria, with utter clarity.

The concert's most lively numbers were from Ukraine. With its joyous yelps, the raucous Christmas carol "A V Jerusalem" concludes with a line that was as universal a plea as any in the concert. "We wish you all health, and with this carol, we ask you for chocolates!"

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