

Critic/music authority encouraged composer

By Corinne Abalt
staff writer

Three new songs for soprano seem almost destined to find their way into the modern classical repertoire.

Wesley Fishwick, Royal Oak composer, wrote the music to three poems by Lorann Murphy of New Baltimore. Virgil Thomson commented favorably on them at the composers' forum he conducted at Oakland University earlier this month.

They were first performed by Bonnie Brooks, soprano of Birmingham, with Fishwick at the piano, at a gathering of the Little Musicale of Birmingham last week, again to favorable comment. The songs — together all three take about five minutes to perform — will be presented at the Birmingham Bloomfield Symphony membership drive meeting on June 30 and for Royal Oak Musicale in the fall.

Brooks and Fishwick are friends, both teach at McComb Community College, she is a soloist at Redeemer Lutheran Church of Birmingham, but also sings for programs at First Lutheran Church of Detroit where he is organist and choir director.

NEITHER HAD met Murphy until she arrived at Brooks' home for the Little Musicale program to hear her poems set to music for the first time.

It was her sister-in-law, one of Fishwick's piano students who took the poems to him, knowing he was

looking for something to work with. "I couldn't imagine my poems being songs," Murphy said. "I gave them to her, thinking no way could this happen."

When she heard Fishwick had set them to music she said, "I couldn't work the rest of the day. I was so excited." Murphy said she began writing poetry after she took a creative writing course 10 years ago. Before that she had been writing novels. She's had her poetry published in small press publications, magazines and newspapers, but when she heard them as songs for the first time, tears came to her eyes. "I was overwhelmed. I felt I breathed life into them and they walked. After hearing them performed, they danced."

She remembered she hadn't carefully chosen what she would send him to look at, she was skeptical, so she just grabbed a few.

Fishwick said he was excited as soon as he saw her work. "When I looked through the pile, I pulled out four or five that struck me right away. I knew what I wanted to do with 'The Star' (sic lines) right away. All three happened quickly. It must be what it's like to have a litter — popping out one after another."

FISHWICK HAS written other choral works. He wrote music for cello, piano and voice to a group of poems by Annie Dillard and Brooks

was the soprano when they were presented at Macomb Community College in April.

Fishwick liked Murphy's poems because they are filled with emotion. His music fits well with her words; it is strong, exciting, contemporary in style, using both classical and jazz idioms. Brooks's voice is well-suited to these brief, tumultuous splices of emotion.

Fishwick said he and about five other composers had submitted their musical scores to Thomson before the session at Varner Hall. "He's very hard of hearing, but he had studied my scores and he sort of liked performed them for himself. Mostly he was concerned about certain words in the line, where they were done well and where they could be improved." Fishwick said Thomson came back to his songs several times, was very encouraging and when he sang them for himself, his pitch was "in the ballpark."



Composer, pianist Wesley Fishwick talks about the three new songs with Lorann Murphy, who wrote the poems he set to music, and Bonnie Brooks, soprano, who is the first to sing them.

JERRY ZOLYNSKY/Hart photographer

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