

ROSNER: Sextet for Strings Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, op. 47 (1970, rev. 1997).

Besos sin cuento, op. 86 (1989). Sonata for Trombone and Piano, op. 106 (1996).

Sestetto Agosto; Julia Bentley, voice; Pinotage; Gregory Erickson, trombone; Angelina Tallaj, piano.

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Pinotage will charm you out of your socks in the Besos sin cuento ...

There is indeed a lighter Rosner, although lightness does not imply lightweight. Besos sin cuento ("kisses without number"), a cycle of songs, setting six Spanish Renaissance love poems. The sentiments run from earthy to elegiac to teasing to tender. Rosner apparently wrote them just because he wanted to, without thought of immediate performance (the story of how the recording came about is pretty funny; you can read it in Rosner's CD liner notes). He gave himself the job of writing something without "overtones" of mortality or the religious. He succeeded pretty much, although I would argue that the fifth song, "Duermes, Licisca" ("sleep, Licisca"), about an aging woman, once a beautiful hellcat, is an archetypal ubi sunt and thus speaks to mortality. Rosner wrote the cycle for voice and the brilliant and sensual combination of Debussy's sonata for flute, viola, and harp. He adds a tambourine in the fourth song, "En JaÈn" ("in JaÈn"). The harp typically evokes the lute or guitar, while the "melody" instruments suggest a wordless voice. However, within this little quartet, Rosner achieves great color variety. For example, the third song, "Al Amor" ("to love," from whose verses Rosner gets the cycle's title) is only for voice and flute. Also, although Rosner has expressed a brighter point of view than usual, he has done so without compromise. The ensemble must be razor-sharp, often in unusual meters like 5/8 and 11/8, and the tunes themselves are damned difficult to sing. The melodies aren't especially bizarre or hard on the ear—in fact, they're beautiful—but they do require a really good singer. To me, they seem more congenial to instruments than to the voice, with long, long phrases and odd skips. They don't forgive a weak pair of lungs or a "sort-of" sense of pitch. I don't know what a Spanish speaker would make of the settings (like Rosner, my Spanish confines itself to menus and bits from the movies), but they certainly get across the poems' emotional points. The songs all come over strongly and vividly, with great changes of mood, and I can't really pick a favorite without mentioning them all. Wonderful....

S.G.S. (April 2003)