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David Felder is a composition professor in the University at Buffalo's Music Department. A better way of describing his art might be to say that he works with sound.

Felder operates outside the realm of notes and clefs, sharps and flats. Tonight, when Lippe Hall in Slee Hall plays host to his latest creation – a massive song cycle commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation – it would be wise to arrive ready for anything. Sound could come from behind you. The lights could go out. Prepare for subsonic rumblings and supersonic electronics.

The song cycle, “Les quatre temps cardinaux,” features Laura Aikin, the soprano from the Buffalo area who has soared to worldwide prominence. Aikin recently sang the title role in “Lulu” at La Scala. Joining her is the celebrated bass Ethan Herschenfeld, whose roles include Sarastro in Mozart's “The Magic Flute.” Felder likes Herschenfeld's unconventional talent. “He also goes into New York City comedy clubs,” he marvels. “He does comedy shtick.”

Felder's new song cycle, 50 minutes long and 20 months in the making, explores the concept of time. Two of the poems included, “Spring Light” and “Buffalo Evening,” are by Robert Creeley.

The cycle's title refers to a poem by French poet Rene Daumal that runs intermittently through the whole work. Daumal died at 36 from tuberculosis, but his short life was full of inspiration.

“His work paralleled things I have had in my experiences,” Felder reflects. “He ended up rejecting what might have been considered cutting-edge avant-garde modernist thinking, in favor of finding something eternally poetic. It turns out that Uday Shankar and his troupe of dancers and musicians came to the West in the '20s and '30s. Daumal became the traveling secretary for their performances. Here's the amazing part. He taught himself Sanskrit because he didn't believe there were good translators in the West. Think about that a minute. He translated 15th century treatises on drama and music and theater. I found this amazing. ... An artist's role in society is completely different from what we think. The line between art and its purposes has been completely distorted.”

Felder, like Daumal, has gone from one inspiration to another. That was how he learned about poetry.

“My scholarship is not conventional,” he admits. “Basically I followed bread crumbs. One thing leads to another, and I follow.”

Felder chose poetry to take the listener through various times of the day. He uses the word “transpersonal,” meaning that the experiences the poems describe transcend the individual.

“The Daumal poem is the next to last poem he ever wrote. It’s a kind of transcendental poem,” Felder says. “The subject in the perspective is kind of transpersonal. It’s really concerned with the spiritual man, the higher man.

“The other poets, they do what great poets can do – they make us see the eternal in everyday moments.”

Creeley’s “Buffalo Evening” acts as a transition. “It takes place at dusk. That comes at the cusp, where my cycle changes from dusk in fall to night in winter. Bob is really great in looking around him, seeing where he was at the moment, creating connection with eternal moments frozen in time because they connect with everyone.”

Another poem bound to capture everyone’s imagination is “Insomnia,” by Dana Gioia. “Now you hear what the house has to say,” the poem begins. It is tantalizing to anticipate what Felder does with Gioia’s references to the creaking floors, gurgling pipes and, in the insomniac’s heart, nagging regrets. Without giving everything away, he describes it as “very dark, but not scary.”

The audience will be able to hear the poetry read in recordings by the poets. Felder senses music in their voices.

“Bob Creeley was a very musical reader,” he says. “There’s a lot of things he does when he reads that are innately musical. Dana was trained as a musician also, there’s a tremendous sensibility about music in both of those poets. When you hear them read, and listen to the sounds of the vowels, they’re very musical rhythms. Bob is really interesting cause he was interested in jazz. The rhythms of the poems are very different from Dana’s.”

Felder, like the poets he quotes, seeks the subconscious. He uses electronics to bend and twist the poets’ voices, isolating consonants and syllables. Musical instruments, too, go off-roading. You may find yourself deep, deep in the bass, or soaring in high-treble, bell-like sounds.

The program opens with “Tweener,” a 2010 Felder composition for solo percussion, electronics and large chamber ensemble. It is, in its own way, as adventurous as the song cycle.

Felder invites people to give it a try.

“It’s contemporary music. It’s not music which is going to sound like Mozart and Schubert, things people might be conventionally attached to,” he says.

However, he adds, he loves and respects musical traditions.

“I’m attached to great music that comes from anywhere. You’re going to hear a lot of great music informed by what is channeled through my work. When you hear Stravinsky, you hear folk melodies. When you hear Mahler, you hear folk or popular music filtered through his music. I’m very much of that tradition, except that it’s a little wider for me.”

Concert Preview

David Felder, Song Cycle

“Les quatre temps cardinaux,” performed by Ensemble Signal and the Slee Sinfonietta, 7 tonight in Lippes Concert Hall in Slee Hall, University at Buffalo North Campus, Amherst. Tickets are \$15. Info: 645-2921.

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