

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Good Show

May 10, 2004

By Benjamin Frandzel

Songs of the City

The evening's world premiere, a prerequisite for a Left Coast program, was Beth Custer's delightful *Bernal Heights Suite*, five songs for voice and string quartet. Custer's witty texts take a slice-of-life approach in depicting the inhabitants and mood of her neighborhood, while the music draws on a broad range of styles, each handled with affection and skill. "The General of Godeus," for example, employs a dissonant, comical march to support a portrait of one of the neighborhood's characters, while "Big Love on Folsom Street" mixes a sly takeoff on Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady" with some dashing salon music.

Custer, who's best known as a versatile clarinetist/composer, did the singing, and though she doesn't have a big voice, she makes the most of her resources. For the most part, she leaned toward a cabaret style, adding variety with some whispery moments and an occasional half-singing, half-talking approach. Her full voice has a sweet expressiveness that was a perfect fit for her texts, and her melodic abilities and rich harmonic sense made this a musically substantial and utterly charming piece, with many affecting moments.

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