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Review: Two dramatic works featured in Nasher's Soundings concert

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The concert presented Friday night at the Nasher Sculpture Center will surely be remembered as one of the year's most extraordinary. Continuing this season's Sounding series of mostly modern music, it combined Leos Janácek's rarely performed song cycle *The Diary of One Who Disappeared* with a new video-and-music piece called *The Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book*, by the Bosnian-born, now Los Angeles-based accordionist-composer Merima Kljuco.

Composed between 1917 and 1919, the *Diary* tells the story of a young man whose infatuation with a dark Gypsy girl leads to pregnancy and, ultimately, leaving his family to live with her and their child. Short poems in the Central European Wallachian dialect explore multiple aspects of what we call love: obsession, seduction, tenderness, degradation, guilt and defiance. They're dramatized by tenor and mezzo-soprano singers, accompanied by piano, with occasional contributions from a three-voice female chorus.

Anyone who knows Janácek's operas will recognize these themes, inspired by the composers own hopeless love for a much younger woman, and also his musical signatures: short tangy motifs accompanying vocal lines that rise and fall with inflections of words and emotions.

Powerful stuff, it was grippingly dramatized at the Nasher, complete with lighting effects. Benjamin Butterfield supplied a sinewy lyric tenor and vivid declamation. Krisztina Szabó had just the right hint of sizzle in her succulent mezzo. Singing from the more resonant lobby, Coretta Smith, Stephanie McCranie and Moretta Irchil were the atmospheric chorus. At the piano, Arthur Rowe set moods alternately hypnotic and emotionally charged.

Though wordless, *The Sarajevo Haggadah* tells the story of a venerable illustrated Haggadah, a Jewish text prescribing the order of the Passover Seder. With video images by Bart Woodstrup derived from the

manuscript, plus more abstract effects, the 12 movements trace the book from its origins in 14th-century Spain, through the Jews' expulsion in 1492, an Italian exile, concealment from Nazis in a Muslim mosque and survival during the nearly four-year siege of Sarajevo that began in 1992.

The music is decidedly Central European-slash-Jewish in character. Chantlike material, sometimes simple, sometime florid, is woven through much of it, but there's also a jerky "Stampita" dance. The piano also supplies tone-paintings: violent poundings in the bass, tinklings on high, zither-like effects of strumming strings by hand.

Even with the arresting animated imagery, the music sometimes wears thin during the 43-minute duration.

Images of the librarian who saved the manuscript from the Nazis are surely overused in what seems an interminable movement.

But the piece tells a powerful story, and it was dramatically realized by Kljuco, playing accordion, and pianist Seth Knopp, artistic director of the Soundings series.