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Weill Nights: The final Soundings concert of the Nasher Sculpture Center season featured a luminous performance of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, plus Brecht and Weill.

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by [Gregory Sullivan Isaacs](#) published Saturday, May 30, 2015



Photo: Nasher Sculpture Center, Liza Sadovy and Walter Van Dyk

Dallas — It isn't possible to exaggerate the impact of the performance of Schoenberg's German Expressionist masterpiece, *Pierrot Lunaire*, which was presented on May 20 in the Nasher Sculpture Center's **Soundings** series as part of the Dallas Symphony's Soluna Festival. Throw out anything you thought about this dramatic cycle, no matter how hard you have studied it or think you know it. Put simply—you don't know it at all until you experience a performance by soprano Lucy Shelton as she transports you to its funhouse-mirrored world.

Schoenberg asks for what he called *Sprechstimme*, literally speaking "voice," but meaning a combination of speaking and singing. He writes specific pitches for the words, but puts a line through the stem of the

notes to indicate that they are to be spoken on that pitch. Some notes he indicates are to be sung in a normal way. In some performances, this effect can sound like anything from odd to bizarre. The sound of the music, written for a small ensemble plus piano, is basically atonal, although close inspection reveals that it is not yet flipped over into Schoenberg's notorious 12-tone system. (This work dates from 1912 and 12-tone first appeared in 1923).

The full name of the work is *Dreimal sieben Gedichte aus Albert Girauds "Pierrot Lunaire"* (*Three Times Seven Poems from Albert Giraud's "Pierrot Lunaire"*). The poet Otto Erich Hartleben translated them into German. They tell the addled tale about Pierrot, the sad clown made famous in Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci*, the *commedia dell'arte* or the Punch and Judy shows.



Photo: Nasher Sculpture Center

Walter Van Dyk



Photo: Courtesy Lucy Shelton

Soprano Lucy Shelton

Roughly, here is the plot (others may see it differently): Pierrot pulls himself out of the fable, like an actor leaving the screen (think Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*). He finds himself trapped in a nightmarish scenario, descending into degradation and depravity. Eventually, he is crucified for his sins. He tries to return to his fictional character, but falls short of such redemption—as do we all. It is the narrator's job to tell us this tale.

Musically, *Pierrot Lunaire* is as intricate as a Swiss watch. For example, the first piece, *Nacht (Night)* is based on a collection of pitches that make up the octatonic scale (in which the steps alternate whole step and half step, which puts eight notes in the scale instead of seven). This group of notes are presented in a canon (exact imitation) as well as divided into opposing groups, transposed, split up, inverted, and put through every possible variation. Do you hear this in a performance? Not likely. The small grouping of instruments give the music a vacant sound and such compositional machinations are impossible to detect anyway.

You should toss out all of the above, because the construction of *Pierrot Lunaire* is irrelevant once the performance begins. Lucy Shelton sat in a spotlighted chair elevated above the instrumentalists, who

were darkened enough to vanish. From there, she became a fantastical being on a throne, or maybe a mushroom like something out of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She told us what she thinks is Pierrot's sad story, but it is really her own fantasy-laden version of events.

In Shelton's hands, *Sprechstimme* ceases to be an effect. Its wild leaps of half-sung intonation become the way this imaginary character actually speaks, much like a voiceover actor would do in animation (think Ellen DeGeneres as the mind-addled fish Dory, especially when pretending to speak "whale," in the Disney film *Finding Nemo*). In fact, many of us may know some "grand dame" actor or wildly affected prima donna soprano who talks in a similar, albeit toned-down, version of Shelton's creation.

Those unfamiliar with the poems, or who didn't speak German, had to contend with the curse of printed translations in small type and in the dark, but Shelton pulled them into her opium dream of a world anyway by her vivid characterization. Even if the listener didn't know exactly what she was intoning, the essence was clear. For those who know the poems, or could understand German, the experience was devastating.

For this reason, it would be wonderful to hear Shelton perform this work with projected subtitles, or even in English. (And why not? The German is already a translation from French.)

The second half was also a drama, performed by two outstanding singing actors, Liza Sadovy and Walter Van Dyk.

It was easy to take pity on the act that had to follow Shelton's shattering performance. In any other situation, it would have been as captivating as the preceding *Pierrot*, but it was difficult to leave that fantasy world, no matter how nightmarish, for gritty reality.

The show was *O Moon of Alabama*, a wonderful cabaret compiled by Michael Haslam (who was at the piano) made up of songs by Kurt Weill on poetry by Bertolt Brecht. The arrangement was for a small band of instruments reminiscent of what might have been found in a cabaret of the era.

The show also tells a tale of love. This time it is discovered, lost and eventually regaining by older and wiser heads. The show is filled with favorites, such as "Mack the Knife" from *The Threepenny Opera*, which opened the show. The lyrics started out in German, to give the flavor of Berlin between the wars, but soon (thankfully) switched to English so we could follow the complex interactions and shifting emotions of the organizing plot.

Perhaps it was because we were so emotionally exhausted from *Pierrot*, but the show, charming at first, eventually began to feel long, and then then endless. It was a programming error in that this one-act musical drama deserved a program of its own. For maximum appreciation, both *Pierrot* and "O Moon" should have been paired with a 30-minute (max) instrumental first half, from either the same era or something completely contrasting.

Soundings musical director Seth Knopp did a magnificent job of putting this program together, as well as the entire season of Soundings. He also delivered a star turn at the piano for *Pierrot*.

His first-class group of musicians was: Sooyun Kim, flute; Alan Kay, clarinet; David McCarroll, violin; Jonathan Dormand, cello; Seth Knopp, piano; Oren Fader, guitar; Michael Haslam, keyboard; Caleb Hudson, trumpet; Michael Hosford, trombone; Lizzie Burns, double bass; and Eduardo Leandro, percussion.

One more note about *Pierrot Lunaire*: Although we didn't notice the absence because of the quality of the performers, there was one important omission. The piece was intended to have a conductor. Without one, the numerology of the work is out of whack, as sevens abound. There are three groups of seven songs equaling 21 (this is also the title) and it is opus 21. More sevens appear in the structure of the work. However, without a conductor, there are (gasp!) only six instrumentalists performing. Absolutely shocking!