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What They're Having: The Nasher's Soundings season is off to an excellent start with a Yellow Barn concert with interesting themes

<http://www.theaterjones.com/ntx/reviews/20161218140037/2016-12-18/Soundings-New-Music-at-the-Nasher/Music-from-Yellow-Barn-Schulhoff-Reich-and-Wagner>

by [Wayne Lee Gay](#)



Steve Reich, Photo: Courtesy Nasher

Dallas — No work presented in the Dallas area anytime recently raises so many worthy and worthwhile questions as Erwin Schulhoff's *Sonata Erotica*, performed Thursday evening as part of the **Soundings** series at the **Nasher Sculpture Center**. Written in 1919, a quarter of a century before the composer would perish in the Holocaust, *Sonata Erotica* consists entirely of a female vocalist performing the sound of a woman having an orgasm.

The first and most obvious question: does *Sonata Erotica* belong on the concert stage—in particular, on a series devoted to a new approach to concert music and centered on serious contemporary music. The answer to that question is a resounding “Yes.” *Sonata Erotica* is a quintessential, and, indeed, inevitable product of the post-World War I era of experimentation, revolution, and absurdity in art.



Schulhoff, Photo: Courtesy Nasher

Liza Sadovy, the prominent British stage and television actress who is currently appearing as Madame Morrible in the London production of *Wicked*, performed *Sonata Erotica* here, from behind a screen onstage. In a moving program note, Sadovy revealed her personal (and understandable) anxiety concerning the work’s explicit depiction of sexual intimacy, and at the same time profoundly and convincingly defended this artifact of a troubled and revolutionary time.

A second obvious question concerning *Sonata Erotica*: is it a successful work of art? For this listener, the answer is “No” (at least for the time being). Although *Sonata Erotica* definitely belonged on this program, it fails, when pondered separately from the context of the historical moment it represents, on several levels. Art inherently demands artistry on the part of the creator; other than writing down the instructions, and imagining (or recalling) personal experience, Schulhoff as composer seems disturbingly absent from the work, and, through the unadorned representation of this most intimate of moments, shuts the audience out of involvement as well.

Imagined without the surrounding backdrop of music of Wagner, Korngold, and Reich on this program, *Sonata Erotica* is essentially meaningless, even in its meaninglessness.

Schulhoff further weakened the possibility of ongoing relevance for *Sonata Erotica* with the inscription “For Men Only” on the score—which, viewed from the perspective of 2016, raises numerous and varied negative and demeaning implications. Even allowing for its historical context, and the possibility of purely humorous intent or shock value, Schulhoff, with that gesture, severely undermined the artistic and philosophical credibility of the work on numerous levels.

The program opened with one of Wagner’s few works not written for the opera house, *Im Teribhaus* (“In the Hothouse”) from his five *Wesendonck Lieder*, here performed, while hidden by a screen, with a luxuriantly gorgeous tone and expressive quality by soprano Melanie Henley Heyn, with pianist Seth Knopp, the artistic director of the Soundings series. A theme of female eroticism for the program as a whole began to emerge in the next item, Erich Korngold’s richly chromatic but moodily innocent *Madchen im Brautgemach*, which translates loosely as “The maiden preparing for her wedding.” Here, violinist Daniel Chong joined Knopp for a stylish presentation of a work packed with late romantic harmonic gesture. (Unlike his unfortunate contemporary Schulhoff, Korngold escaped the Holocaust to settle in Hollywood, where he made his fortune writing scores for swash-buckling blockbusters of the 1930s and 1940s.)

At any rate, the illicit passion contained in the Wagner and the implicit innocence of the Korngold gave way to the explicit representation of the Schulhoff, further underlining an ongoing theme of female eroticism in music written by men.

This intriguing cycle then pointed the listener in a completely different direction with Steve Reich's *Different Trains* for string quartet and tape. But the relationship with the rest of the program, though subtle, was clear. The composer's transcontinental train rides between New York and California as a child in the early 1940s, and the simultaneous and tragic transportation by train of concentration camp victims (which included, of course, Schulhoff) at the same time inspired the work; the stunning relationship to the earlier works on the program became shockingly evident via the reference to a female Holocaust victim singing and applauded by German soldiers at the close of *Different Trains*. Nearly 20 years have passed since my first encounter with *Different Trains*, and I find the work more impressive than ever. In spite of the obsolescence of "tape" as a medium of expression in the digital age, the blending of live human element (here provided with impressive virtuosity by the Parker Quartet, currently in residence at Harvard) with electronically manipulated samplings of interviews with American railway personnel from the 1940s as well as witnesses and survivors of concentration camps is consistently effective.

Members of the Juilliard Quartet and Peabody Trio joined the Parker Quartet after intermission for Schulhoff's String Sextet of 1924, a testimony of sorts to the composer's ability to write more than musical representations of orgasm. The Sextet, here brilliantly performed, is by turns almost violently dissonant (and reminiscent of Schoenberg of that period) and energetic in the manner of Bartók. Pianist Knopp and soprano Heyn returned to present, with appropriately lush expression and tone, two more of Wagner's *Wesendoncklieder*, bringing this amazing musical journey to a close. With outstanding performers drawn from across the United States and intellectually stimulating programming, the Soundings series continues to be one of the crowns of musical life in Dallas.