

THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 1993

Composers — American Song Cycle

By Marilyn Tucker
Chronicle Staff Critic

Robert Greenberg's "Iron Balconies and Lilies," presented in the new American music series by Composers, Inc., at the Veterans Green Room Tuesday night, is an important and impressive addition to contemporary song-cycle literature.

Soprano Sylvia Anderson was soloist in Greenberg's settings of nine Yiddish poems, presented in English translations, that speak of various aspects and stages of life. The musical settings were extremely free, the vocal line often in a kind of *sprechstimme* that evoked distant memories.

Along with an important piano accompaniment (Earle Shenk as a superb musical partner on Tuesday), Greenberg enhanced the expressive communication with accompanying parts for flute (Esther Landau), oboe (Laura Reynolds), clarinet (Charles Messersmith), violin (Anna Presler), viola (Erin Stuart) and cello (Jason McComb).

Trancelike Recollection

The cycle began with "A City by the Sea," Anna Margolin's trancelike recollection of a past only partly remembered. Anderson groped at the vagueness of the poet's memory most effectively in an eerie *sprechstimme*.

The expressive portraits that followed began with a youth's recollection of "Hay Mowing" in Moyshe Kulbak's poem, in which the instrumentation was at least as aggressive as the action of the scythes, brutish work for which Greenberg offered chillingly ferocious music.

The other images and Greenberg's metaphors that called them up were equally direct and forthright. Anderson created a kind of elegiac ritual grief of simple folks in "When Grandma, May She Rest in Peace, Died," poem by Kulbak, with piercing agony provided by the oboe.

There was a lovely song of "Longing," poem by Rachel Korn, wonderfully enhanced by clarinet and viola, and an agitated frenzy surrounding death in "Ancient Murderess Night," poem by Margolin.

Two songs involving children were a traditional "Lullaby," sung without accompaniment, and "Toys," Abraham Sutskever's fantasy in which toys become a powerful metaphor for love.

Final Rest

The songs of death and final rest were Jacob Gladstein's "Old Age" and Jacob Isaac Segal's "Rest," the latter's calm acceptance of the angel of death replacing the skittery fear of the former.

Michal Lesham conducted, giving this fine work the assurance of its underlying passion.

In the first part of the program, pianist Barbara Shearer presented Robert Basart's "Slow Pictures," the final work created by the Berkeley composer who died earlier this year. The images invoked in the three short pieces of "Other Orange," "Blue Again" and "Lavenders Greens" were gentle and subtle reminders that the world can open up with something other than a big bang.

Martin Rokeach's two-part

"Out of My Skin" was an amusing diversion in calm following nightmare. This was written for and performed by the Emerald Ensemble of clarinetist Diane Maltester, oboist Margot Golding, and flutist Susan Waller.

Two solo works that made bold attempts to stretch their performers beyond normal virtuosic boundaries were Richard Wernick's "Cadenzas and Variations II," played by violinist Helene Pohl, and Shirish Korde's "Tenderness of Cranes," played by flutist Jean DeMart.