

David Lang - Love Fail (2014)

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1 *He Was And She Was* 8:38 (words by David Lang, after Gottfried von Strassburg) 2 *Break #1 (Three Years)* 0:23 (words by David Lang, after Bérout) 3 *Dureth* 1:12 (words by Sir Thomas Malory) 4 *A Different Man* 1:16 (words by Lydia Davis) 5 *The Wood And The Wine* 8:01 (words by David Lang, after Marie de France) 6 *Right And Wrong* 2:22 (words by Lydia Davis) 7 *You Will Love Me* 2:17 (words by David Lang, after Gottfried von Strassburg) 8 *Forbidden Subjects* 2:57 (words by Lydia Davis) 9 *As Love Grows Stronger* 5:41 (words by David Lang, after Gottfried von Strassburg) 10 *Break #2 (Instrumental)* 0:19 11 *The Outing* 1:47 (words by Lydia Davis) 12 *I Live In Pain* 4:04 (words by David Lang, after Beatriz, Comtessa de Dia) 13 *Head, Heart* 3:10 (words by Lydia Davis) 14 *Break #3 (If I Have To Drown)* 2:46 (words by David Lang, after Thomas of Britain, and the Yom Kippur liturgy) 15 *Mild, Light* 4:46 (words by David Lang, after Richard Wagner) Anonymous 4 (Ensemble)

American composer David Lang's works are often conceptually tailored to a particular and unusual ensemble that matches the thematic content of the work. He has composed a piece (*Crowd Out*) for 1,000 voices, inspired by the sound of soccer crowds in Britain. Nevertheless, *Love Fail* marks something of a milestone for him: he has never before written for a group with the chops of the medieval-oriented female vocal quartet Anonymous 4. (*Shelter*, composed for Trio Mediaeval, is a pale comparison.) For Anonymous 4, too, the recording is a milestone: around the time it was released in 2014, the group announced its retirement after the 2015-2016 season, and it perhaps points the way to a future in contemporary music for its supremely talented members. *Love Fail*, like many of Lang's other compositions, is somewhat unclassifiable, and in this lies its appeal. It's not a cantata, song cycle, or opera, although it was originally presented on stage. The work is a rumination in 15 short sections on the medieval idea of love, and specifically on the story of Tristan and Isolde. Wagner's *Liebtestod* makes an appearance at the end. Mostly the work sets translated fragments (digitally translated, the composer says) of medieval poetry, along with some modern interpolations by poet Lydia Davis; the latter are effective riffs on the basic idea, and some are even humorous (try "*Forbidden Subjects*," track 8). Lang's music falls in between minimalism and a quasi-medieval style appropriate to the subject, with elements of pastiche and some hair-raising interludes. What

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sets it apart from the norm is the care with which it is shaped to take advantage of the multiple colors and sharp edges of Anonymous 4's voices, and at times the sounds heard achieve the grail of being simple and uncanny at the same time. Like Lang's other works, it will get your attention immediately, but it also has a real economy that is new and growing. Highly recommended. ---James Manheim, AllMusic Review

The story of Tristan and Isolde (or Iseult) is one of the greatest love stories in Western literary history, forming not only the basis for Wagner's opera, but also playing its part in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and providing inspiration for other tragic tales of love. For his composition/theater piece *love fail*, Pulitzer-winning composer David Lang searched through various texts that tell the story, particularly Gottfried von Strassburg but also Sir Thomas Malory, Marie de France and others, looking, as he says, for "weird incidents." Stripped of all reference to Tristan, Isolde/Iseult, King Mark or any other elements that would make the piece seem merely a dramatization of the age-old story, *love fail* is a fascinating meditation on love's lyricism, its almost mystic force, and its surprising moods and shifting desires.

Sung by the female vocal group Anonymous 4, noted for their adaptations of medieval compositions, such as plainsong, for female voices, *love fail* is a stunning exercise in vocal precision, polyphony, overlapping voices, and hypnotic variations on simple lyrics. The piece begins with "he was and she was," in which descriptive terms for the two lovers are sounded against a backdrop of voices, including percussive whispers. With the stage set for intensive listening, the evening becomes an occasion for marveling at what the four gifted singers—Ruth Cunningham, Marsha Genensky, Susan Hellauer, Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek—are able to do with their voices, creating layered effects that are—no doubt because of the medieval associations of the music—spiritual and meditative.

There are also humorous elements—mostly provided by texts taken from MacArthur fellow Lydia Davis. Wonderful examples of precision and compression in their own right, Davis' writings add a wry, modern touch to the piece. Perhaps my favorite segment, "right and wrong" (following "the wood and the vine," adapted from Marie de France, which is also particularly strong), provides convoluted R.D. Laing-like reflections on how being right doesn't make one right if, "in some cases," it is wrong to be right. The "right and wrong" instances are in reference

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to a female, making the piece a subtle comment on sexual politics as well as a general moral consideration. As sung, the interplay between the lead voice and the accompanying voice is riveting: the lead sounds a single note/word at intervals, and in those intervals the accompanying voice must sing through the text to the next interval. Pacing was everything in this unusual form of call-and-response; the call was almost a punctuation of the response while also acting as an introductory note for each sequence.

The texts are projected on a transparency behind the singers, making it easy to follow the words. There are also large projections showing male and female faces, made-up to appear as if they are in a fantasy film, that are more or less moving portraits. Primarily static, the images move slowly, and are more of a distraction than an illustration. Jim Findlay's set design is simple and elegant, able to look at home in a concert hall, a theater stage, or a church, but his video design was the least inspiring aspect of the piece. The lighting and look of the faces put me in mind of the recent Cindy Sherman retrospective—not an association I would normally bring to this work.

While each segment of love fail has its own significance, the 12 parts, taken together, yield a progression from introduction of the lovers to reflections on love's durability, and on the heart's forgetfulness toward the arguments the head furnishes against love. Musically, we might say it moves toward transcendence of the sorrows of love, though—again, due to medieval associations—the idea of true happiness on earth is remote, and so love and sorrow must be inextricably linked.

A vibrant work for voices, love fail does not fail to provide thought about love, evoking love's higher aspirations as well as some of its darker reaches. The masterful Anonymous 4 are not to be missed. ---Donald Brown, newhavenreview.com

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