

## *The Unanswered Question*

**WEILL:** 7 Deadly Sins; **PAUS:** Hate Songs;

**IVES:** 5 Songs (orch by John Adams); The Unanswered Question

Tora Augestad, mz; Magnus Staveland, Thorbjorn Gulbrandsøy, t; Halvor Melien, Olle Holmgren, bar; Brynjar Kolbergsrud, tpt; Oslo Philharmonic/ Joshua Weilerstein, Christian Eggen  
LAWO 1164—minutes

It is hard to identify any common ground in this odd assemblage of disparate works, and the notes offer no help in finding any. It is marketed with the title “Portraying Passion”. Each in some way poses a question about making sense of life, and that seems to be unifying principle.

(1) What is the cost of material success? In Brecht’s anti-capitalist satirical libretto for Kurt Weill’s *Seven Deadly Sins* a young woman, the practical Anna I (in Freudian terms call her “the ego”) and the impulsive, libidinous Anna II (call her “the id”) set out on a journey through American cities to earn money for the family to build a house. In each city Anna II succumbs to one of the Seven Deadly Sins as men are seduced, robbed, blackmailed, and driven to suicide. Augestad is a commanding singer and performs *Seven Deadly Sins* in fine cabaret style. She presents the contrasting Anna personae with pizzazz. A male quartet sings like an off-stage Greek chorus. Weilerstein conducts the orchestra in a strong cabaret performance.

(2) Why are human relationships so complicated? In *I Hate Men* by Marcus Paus (b. 1979), Dorothy Parker’s satirical text is both scathing and humorous, leaving the poet’s intent ambiguous. Augestad commissioned the piece and presented its first performance in 2014. She delivers this with sassy swagger. Her voice is clear and incisive as she employs a great variety of tonal color and technique. It may not be a pretty voice, but it is clear and agile.

(3) What do we value in life? Five Songs of Charles Ives arranged for orchestra by John Adams reveal a deep connection with life and the holy, which (in the composer’s own words from ‘Down East’) present “strains of childhood” and “songs from my mother’s heart” that “draws my heart where I would be”. She sings the Ives songs with tenderness, but her white tone and sometimes staccato approach do not work as well with these songs; they are better served by a more traditional vocal style with a smooth legato approach. Her style here may be more appropriate if she were singing some of Ives’s more experimental songs. This is the weakest portion of the program.

(4) What is the meaning of life? The program concludes with Ives’s evocative work *The Unanswered Question*. Ives noted that the slow tonal triads sustained by the strings all through the piece represent “The Silence of the Druids—who Know, See and Hear Nothing”. A solo trumpet intones a figure seven times, which Ives called “The Perennial Question of Existence”. Woodwinds respond each time in increasingly agitated tones—Ives called it “Fighting Answerers”—and after a time “realize a futility and begin to mock ‘The Question’” before finally fading away as the trumpet once more poses “The Question” and “The Silences” are left to their “Undisturbed Solitude”.

I have not heard a better performance of *The Unanswered Question*. Brynjar Kolbergsrud intones the trumpet motif with perfect clarity and weight as Weilerstein directs a wonderful aural canvas of “undisturbed solitude”. Eggen conducts the orchestra effectively in the Paus and Ives songs.  
Texts and translations.

R MOORE

*American Record Guide*