

The New York Times

Review: Mivos Quartet Performs Gesualdo, Berg and Kate Soper

By DAVID ALLEN MARCH 12, 2015

It might seem odd to open a concert of new string quartets with arrangements of vocal madrigals by Carlo Gesualdo, as the indispensable [Mivos Quartet](#) did in its impressive evening with the composer-soprano [Kate Soper](#) at Columbia University's Italian Academy on Wednesday.

After all, Gesualdo died 400 years before Ms. Soper began "Nadja" (2013-15) and [Clara Iannotta](#) started "A Failed Entertainment" (2013), the works that made up the program's second half. But as the scholar Glenn Watkins argues in his book "The Gesualdo Hex," this late-Renaissance composer's work stands on the brink of atonality, in an emotional and harmonic world familiar from late Wagner, Schoenberg and Berg.

Even with the quartet evoking a viol consort's timbres and Ms. Soper plainly singing the erotically morbid texts of "[Mercè grido piangendo](#)" (1611) and "[Moro, lasso, al mio duolo](#)" (1613), the links to Berg's "Lyric Suite" (1926), performed after the Gesualdo, were clear. Like Gesualdo's music, Berg's suite changes moods rapidly and distinctly. In this performance, Berg's allusions to ancient styles and to works by Wagner and Zemlinsky melded fluidly with a resolutely contemporary quality, through a ferocious attack, an uneasiness of structure and textures of shaved graphite and thick acrylic.

In the 1970s, [musicologists](#) realized that the "Lyric Suite" was a love letter to Berg's mistress, Hanna

Fuchs-Robettin. Scholars recreated a version of the last movement, with a soprano singing the text of Baudelaire's "De profundis clamavi," which Berg had omitted in the published score but shown to his lover. It's usually not heard, and Ms. Soper's unsteady singing only added to my sense that Berg's privacy is better respected.

Ms. Iannotta's [quartet](#) is named after the working title of David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest." This music has a scraping quality, deploying sounds created by sliding a bow across a polystyrene block, or crunching the bow hard on a string, barely moving, as if a door were creaking. There's an intriguing, delicately repetitive section in which swishes and plucks dance with store-counter bells, but the piece felt fragmentary on a first hearing.

So too did Ms. Soper's world premiere. "Nadja" is in three overlapping parts, with texts by Alfred Tennyson, Ovid and André Breton that, as the composer explains in a program note, explore "the scorching, preposterous, inspiring and/or incomprehensible heights of feminine love as experienced by its quarry." The tempestuous quartet part was ably performed by the Mivos, and the vocal line, sung with absolute authenticity by Ms. Soper, soars with long melismas, leaps high and low, and dissolves into rapid, spoken text, shared at one point by the instrumentalists. At times it left me baffled — but sometimes that's what unique compositional voices are meant to do.