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Music Features

Esperanza and Kenny

By **JON GARELICK** | September 28, 2010

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One of the most moving pieces on the CD is the original "Apple Blossom," which matches Spalding's fresh young voice against Milton Nascimento's now craggier instrument and sharply accented English in the story of an old man remembering a lost love. It's especially poignant when Nascimento goes into his falsetto.

"When I'm writing lyrics," Spalding explains, "I always think of Stevie Wonder. Sometimes in a song I can imagine he was trying to find some inverted way to show and not tell — but then he just tells it. He just says it in plain English. I think of him as a very brave lyric writer."



KENNY AND KATHERYN: The death of his daughter pushed Werner as a composer.

On October 2, 2006, Kenny and Lorraine Werner received the worst news a parent can hear: their daughter Katheryn, 16, was dead, killed in a car accident. A few months after the funeral, they took up on a friend's offer of the use of a condo in Puerto Rico. It was the first time the couple had been alone together since the accident. "The bottom fell out," Werner tells me from his home in the Catskills. "We just slept for five days on couches. We never even made it to the bedroom." When they finally roused themselves, they began to meditate — something Werner says he's "a poor practitioner of." But as he slowly found a center, he began to write poetry — an affirmation of life's transcendence. The poetry became the core of a piece that he'd been commissioned to write nearly a year earlier but which he'd almost entirely forgotten in his grief.

Werner, who comes to Scullers on Tuesday with a quartet that includes the Dutch singer Benjamin Koppel, received the commission through MIT. It was conceived as a concerto for the school's wind ensemble, which is led by Fred Harris of the music faculty. "I had to ask Fred, 'What is a wind ensemble?'"

Writing on his computer, sending music to Harris for advice, he gradually produced a piece that was performed at MIT in May 2007 with saxophonist Joe Lovano and Lovano's wife

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Esperanza Spalding wants to prepare her listeners for



... was performed at MIT in May 2007, with saxophonist Bob Lovano and Lovano's wife, singer Judi Silvano, as the featured soloists. It became the central piece on the new Half Note release *No Beginning, No End* (Half Note), which won Werner a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship.

Beginning with flutterings of voice, piano, and tenor saxophone, the piece builds to a full orchestra and a cataclysmic explosion of timpani before Lovano re-enters with querulous phrases, and then Silvano's voice over spare marimba tones and flute: "There is a flame, beyond all space and time." Over the course of five movements, it alternates dissonant turbulence, the grace of a brass chorale, touches of jazz swing, and a vast array of color. Through it all Lovano laces Werner's various motifs, and he wends his way in and out of the orchestration, moving imperceptibly from through-composed sections to improvisation. And Silvano has never sounded better. In one especially powerful moment, the orchestration clears for a moment as she sings, "You are always in my heart." There's a pause, she sings the line again, and here it modulates so that the word "heart" lands on a darkly radiant chord voiced by the entire ensemble.

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something different with her new Chamber Music Society (Heads Up). She made that clear at Sanders Theatre Saturday night.

ESPERANZA AND KENNY | September 28, 2010 Spalding's chamber music; Werner's elegy

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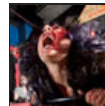
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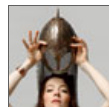
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For the first time as a composer, Werner found himself offering dramatic cues rather than the typical dynamic markings. So he'd say, "Here your awareness is rising, hope is beginning to blossom." Or, to Lovano for that opening statement following the accident: "You've just been thrust into a web of angels, and you're confused."

"The whole point of this piece was to straddle the physical world and the transcendent world," he explains. And he found himself functioning more like a classical composer. "I couldn't rely on a bass player and drummer to write on top of. This wasn't a concerto grosso for jazz trio and orchestra." Instead, the piece had to be generated "from the orchestra itself."

The five-movement suite is complemented by a choral piece that's all free-floating transcendence, a single-movement string quartet that's sheer anguish, and a final coda for piano, vibes, marimba, and harp that's like a benediction. Werner says that the piece has provided him with the opportunity to think cinematically. And he's given Lovano and Silvano two of their finest roles. The pianist/composer himself appears briefly throughout the piece, albeit eloquently. "I'm the Alfred Hitchcock in this movie," says Werner with a smile in his voice. "Just a cameo."

ESPERANZA SPALDING CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY | Sanders Theatre, 45 Quincy St, Cambridge | October 2 at 8 pm | \$22-\$32 | 617.876.4275 or worldmusic.org | **KENNY WERNER QUARTET** | Scullers, DoubleTree Guest Suites Hotel, 400 Soldiers Field Road, Boston | October 6 at 8 pm | \$20 | 617.562.4120 or scullersjazz.com

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