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Worden's Diamond sparkles

Indie pop band makes rock shine

By Paul Freeman / Entertainment Writer

My Brightest Diamond is Shara Worden's brilliant project. The adventurous, New York-based singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist first developed a following as frontwoman of AwRY and supporting vocalist for Sufjan Stevens.

With My Brightest Diamond, she brings her exceptional talents fully to fruition. Her voice is an astonishingly expressive instrument, her lyrics fascinating and her melodies extraordinary explorations of sonic possibilities.

In Worden's world, rock and classical collide, sparking a dazzling display of musical fireworks. Her compositions prove to be both personal and fantastical, inventive and intimate, graceful and powerful.

Her latest album, "A Thousand Shark's Teeth" - more ethereal and classically oriented than her acclaimed earlier album, "Bring Me the Workhorse" - is due June 17th. A new single, "Inside a Boy," is already available on iTunes. Worden offers selections from both works, enhanced by drums, bass and "lots of toys" at her Bay Area shows. At Montalvo tonight, she shares the bill with remarkable Bay Area singer-songwriter Noe Venable.

In creating her new album, Worden employed structure, but didn't allow it to confine her. "I think of it almost like a flower garden," she said. "I set parameters around the music, oftentimes with tempo or key. It's like I know I'm going to plant X, Y, Z kind of flowers. But I'm not going to put them all exactly three inches apart.

"In the case of this music, I had set out to try and emphasize the string element and to de-emphasize the drums. There was a conscious effort to allow the writing to be based on the lyrics rather than pre-imposing a form onto the song that it wasn't necessarily asking for."

Worden pulled the intriguing album title, "A Thousand Shark's Teeth," from her song "Goodbye Forever." "That lyric was about examining intimacy and feeling that, if you could remove the obstacles that you have in giving and receiving love, then it would be like your ears and eyes are more open, you're more sensitive, as though the sun were love and you could feel the rays of

light prickling all over your skin like a thousand shark's teeth," she said. "Because the subject of relationships is all over the record, this was a good fit."

She wrote these complex, compelling songs over the course of six years. Attracted to children's literature, Worden cites "Alice In Wonderland," "At the Back of the North Wind," "The Little Prince" and Ravel's opera about a child, "L'enfant et les sortilèges" (which inspired her song "Black & Costaud"), among her influences. She also finds inspiration in science-fiction novels and unusual instruments. "Each song has kind of a different force or seed."

Writing can be cathartic. "It's part of the shedding process, like snakeskin. Sometimes it's helpful for me to write a song like 'Goodbye Forever,' because yes, I want to commit to being more vulnerable or open," Worden said, but admits, "There's fear before that. Suddenly, you've been able - through the expression of the song - to feel you are bringing the unconscious to the conscious. By becoming conscious of (your fear), you change."

Worden's music constantly changes. She has always absorbed diverse sounds. Her father was a national accordion champion, her mother played organ for their Pentecostal church and her uncle taught the youngster piano. At 3, she was writing songs by pecking buttons on her toy cash register.

She grew up primarily in Michigan and heard rock, rap and soul. In community theater, she performed in musicals. Worden earned a bachelor's degree in Vocal Performance at the University of North Texas, then relocated to New York, continuing to study opera.

Worden relished bringing more of her classical sensibilities into "A Thousand Shark's Teeth." "I've had this confusion as to why I have this passion for classical music and yet I can't choose that as my life path. It's been somewhat of a torment for me," she said. "With classical music, you must devote yourself to it in such an intense way. You can spend years working on one piece of music."

Rock, Worden said, is challenging in a totally different way. "The requirements in rock are very different for me as a vocalist. To sing the rhythm of Schoenberg's 'Pierrot Lunaire,' I'd spend a week on 48 seconds of music and still be only at the beginning of being able to do it. That's stimulating, a fun challenge, but if I'm going to learn a Beatles song, there's lots of rhythmical challenges there, as well."

Worden believes the value system is just different. "Classical artists have to subject themselves to a tremendous amount of discipline. When you hear Renee Fleming sing a high D and it sounds like a choir of angels or a sliver of the moon and you get chills all the way down your back, you suddenly feel like you've got clarity. The world is a beautiful place again. You think, 'God bless

you, Renee. Thank you for working you're a-- off and singing the high note that way, because you just changed my life. You made me know that all that discipline and work for that one high note, was worth it."

In rock, Worden finds freedom, though it's not limitless. "I can make my own music and I can express myself. That's the reason that I chose that path," she said. "But there are restrictions in everything. With popular music, you are subject to the aesthetics of your culture. Ideally you would be writing for yourself, but you also have to make money from it in order to be able to live."

Formal study of composition gives an intellectual quality to her writing. But it's her heart and soul that make the music so moving.

"You learn that major keys and fast tempo may give listeners a lift. There are physical, chemical reactions that happen in the brain," she said. "That's an interesting world to get into. You can be mindful of that, but I don't want to be manipulative. I resent it when I notice a (musical device) manipulating my emotions.

"You have to attach meaning to (musical devices). You need to make a human connection. I want to share the full gamut of emotion."

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