

BY KEVIN MCAITEER

In the fall of 2000 poet and educator Nora Mitchell was commuting from her home in Burlington to Montpelier-area teaching jobs. During her time in the car, she began listening to a recording of a contemporary string quartet. Mitchell, who has two collections of poetry, *Your Skin Is a Country* (1988) and *Proofreading the Histories* (1996), is a composer of words with a (self-described) "limited background in music." But she wanted to make something like a string quartet, only with words.

While developing her muse for contemporary classical music, she was also faced with the contemporary politics in Vermont in the fall of 2000. During her commute, Mitchell heard the voices of the Civil Union debate being carried on public radio and, perhaps more visibly, along her route. The landscape of fields, barns, and homes was dotted with stark white signs with TAKE BACK VERMONT written in bold black letters – representative of the anti-civil union movement.

"It was disturbing," Mitchell remembers, "I'm a lesbian and a newcomer," which for some is considered "doubly an outsider." Mitchell, who has been living in Vermont since 1991, describes herself as someone who is not native in any state: her family moved around during her childhood. When being a 'Real Vermonter' became a qualifier for the authority to speak out for or against civil unions Mitchell felt, "it was as if to say that I could not fully participate in the debate."

Mitchell worked on reconciling her new fascination with the music of string quartets – specifically those of the composer Aaron Jay Kernis – and the voices she heard in her own head during her commutes, voices on the radio, and the voices represented in the TAKE BACK VERMONT signs. She used her creative energy to address another issue prominent in the news during the same period: the murder of Matthew Shepard.

Over the past 15 years, Mitchell had been personally affected by the three separate murders of two gay men and a lesbian, all of whom were either friends or relatives of close friends of hers. The struggle to acknowledge and address the pervasive nature of anti-gay violence within the context of the LGBT liberation movement was the third element that led to Mitchell's creation of *Minus Music*, a performance poem which will be presented at FlynnSpace on Thursday January 9 at 7:30 p.m.

*Minus Music* is part performance art, part dramatization, and part chamber opera, but with no musical instruments and very little "acting." The ensemble – "high alto"-voiced Sara Beck George, baritone Isaiah Keepin, tenor Will Marquess, and bass John Rouleau – focuses on the words carefully chosen by Mitchell and arranged in three movements, each with several parts, as well as an opening and closing fugue.

Mitchell draws upon various forms of poetry – pantoum, sestina, paradedelle – and arranges them in four voices to capture the imagination of the audience. The minimalist nature of this approximately hour-long production – there are

"We all have voices in our heads ... whether they are those of parents or siblings, language from letters to the editors, politicians' speeches ... and during the civil union debate I became more aware of them," says Mitchell, adding that

about musical forms, including borrowing textbooks on musical composition from a neighbor, who happens to be a composer.

Mitchell, who has never before attempted to write a piece in this unique hybrid form, also acknowledges that *Minus*

*Music*, at least on the surface, has some of the trappings of yet another LGBT-focused performance with a "gay-person as victim" theme. But Mitchell aims to "transform the language of hate into something else

– to use it against itself." Mitchell, supported by a talented, enthusiastic, and committed ensemble, accomplishes this goal through a variety of complex techniques incorporating the art of poetry, music, and dramatic performance.

*Minus Music* follows the story of a young gay man's coming-out process, his first love, and ultimately his murder. "As a poet," Mitchell remarks, "knowing I was creating a specific character who was going to be killed was a new experience." Yet the spontaneity more closely associated with poetry than fiction writing also happened for Mitchell. "I did not expect to make [the main character] a religious boy," Mitchell says. "Part of his pain was trying to balance everything – social, religious, and his own growing feelings about his sexual identity. And what resulted was his having a deeper sense of the divine."

"Much of the language used in *Minus Music* is public," Mitchell notes. She spent days in the State Archives pouring over letters of petition to the Judiciary Committee of the House – which, according to Mitchell, are particularly prominent in the language used for the opening fugue – as well as testimonies from Letters to the Editor of local newspapers, and even – for one of the more light-hearted parts of the performance – the personal ads.

By drawing upon these "public words," Mitchell illustrates how "thoughtless statements become part of one's thinking." If Mitchell and others found the language of the Civil Union debate creeping its way into our common vocabulary, then certainly, as Mitchell suggests, "a young gay person (also) has all that language in his head."

"In order to become himself, [the main character] has to learn to hear himself," Mitchell points out. That is the real beauty of *Minus Music* for the audience members as well. Mitchell's performance poem reminds us, through its musical arrangement and melodic voices, how words can be heard differently and how, when presented in poetic or musical form, their impact may change. Through both public and private words, *Minus Music* captures the emotions and significance of this time in Vermont's history, with all of its universal themes of struggle and pain, but also respect, love, and equality. ▼

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no intermissions, set designs, or special lighting schemes – forces the audience to find the richness in the words and images along with the stories they evoke as they engage with your imagination.

this was probably true for most people living in Vermont during the fall of 2000 – straight or gay.

In order to transform these voices into something musical that could be performed, Mitchell immersed herself in listening to music and reading



# VOICES CARRY

Poet Nora Mitchell's  
Minus Music:

A performance of poetry,  
music, politics and liberation

above, clockwise: Will Marquess, Isaiah Keepin, Nora Mitchell (writer), Sara Beck George, and John Rouleau (seated)