

## Petra Haden / Stephen Prina

BY ERIK BLUHM The Ford Amphitheater, Los Angeles CA July 1, 2005

As an early-in-the-match jab at consumerism and the commodification of culture, *The Who Sell Out* (1967), with its infamous faux advertising jacket, appeared on department store shelves as the love generation fell prey to scientific marketing strategies. The minds of "head" artists like Peter Max were tapped by ad agencies in hopes of connecting with the expanding youth market, and even iconoclasts like Grace Slick could be heard hawking Levi's over the radio to hordes of parentally



financed teenagers desperate to buy their way into counterculture acceptability.

That Los Angeles-based singer Petra Haden has chosen *Sell Out* as her foot in the Swingle Singers door *right now*—in this red-hot moment of media-appointed superstars and Starbucks-issued Dylan CDs—is, however, apparently coincidental, having more to do with the heppness of its spirited Brian Wilson-meets-Carnaby Street arrangements than any subversive message contained therein. Hers is not a tribute to insurrection or a comment on the legacy of targeting audiences, but more of an impressive "How'd she do that?", show-and-tell project that, since its release on CD some months back, has made an admittedly well-deserved splash in the indie-rock pond. Still, when Haden mounted the stage, giggling, and leading nine young women behind her, all in dressy gowns, I will admit I experienced momentary jolts of talent show terror, closing my eyes and wishing that something more wicked (maybe Burzum?) was this way coming.

But The Who's songs are brilliant, and Haden's a cappella renditions impressively precise and buoyant. In "Armenia (City in the Sky)," "I Can See For Miles" and "Silas Stingy," the singers rose to thunderous heights. They warbled staccato bleeps and dum-dummed their way through the bass parts, all the while standing in a half-circle, smiling and with good posture. What's not to like? I beamed, as periphery celebrities like Jack Black and Miranda July swayed along and stylishly attired people held lit cell phones in the air instead of lighters.

In 1894 critic Bernard Shaw, troubled by the "streamlining" of classical music by contemporary composers under the aegis of "popular demand," vented that it was the difficulty of Beethoven, rather than its accessibility, that imbued his music with such profundity, even if the public didn't understand that. He accused composer Giacomo Meyerbeer of "following the great masters as a starling follows the plough, picking up the tidbits (...) and serving them up (...) unmixed with nobler matter." Of course, comparing Pete Townsend to Beethoven is absurd (likewise Haden to Meyerbeer), yet as an analogy Shaw's complaint proves somewhat relevant, for Haden's performance—whether it represented an appropriation, adaptation, or a tribute—never ventured far from the treacly surface of pop aestheticism, and thus bypassed completely what made *Sell Out* not a sellout in the first place. "Without its troublesome nobilities, depths, and spiritual grandeurs," Shaw complained, such music contains nothing more than "cheap, popular, obvious, carnal luxuries."

"Petra Haden Sings The Who Sell Out" was presented by the Activation of Social Space through Art and Sound. Opening the well-attended show at the very lovely outdoor theater (SASSAS, which normally presents at the Schindler-designed MAK Center, has a knack for settings), was noted conceptualist Stephen Prina, who, springy of voice and nimble of wit, led the rather reluctant crowd (aside from his ex-students and colleagues) through a series of art world ballads and romantic vignettes laced with insular humor no doubt lost on the majority of the crowd, drawn there by their "eclectic" public radio membership. Assuming the folk singer archetype, the Harvard professor with acoustic guitar demonstrated his adoption of what he calls "perversity as a productive mode" by successfully turning pop standards like "All the Young Dudes" and the Glen Campbell hit "Galveston" into lively semantic workouts.