

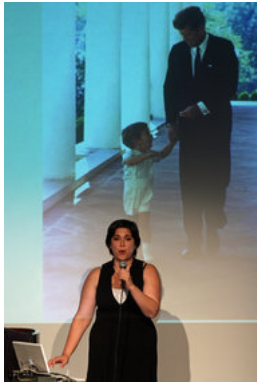
MUSIC REVIEW

The Quiet Before the Shots 'November 21, 1963: The Day Before,' at Symphony Space

By STEVE SMITH Published: November 11, 2013

Next to birthdays of prominent public figures, nothing engenders mass reflection and artistic endeavor as readily as big, round anniversaries of historical milestones. We're just 10 days away from one such date: Nov. 22, the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, which after half a century continues to take a dramatic toll on the collective American psyche.

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Kamala Sankaram performing in the program "November 21, 1963: The Day Before."

Remembrances of that occasion are sure to mount as days go by. But on Friday night, Symphony Space adopted a provocative approach to commemoration with a program titled "November 21, 1963: The Day Before," a multidisciplinary event involving dozens of writers, actors, visual artists, filmmakers and composers.

Long a haven for the spoken word, Symphony Space is well practiced at programs involving literature. Since the composer Laura Kaminsky became the institution's artistic director in 2008, music has become more integral to its programming mission. "November 21," conceived and produced in conjunction with the Hermitage Artist Retreat in Englewood, Fla., enlisted dozens of the retreat's fellows to create works in response to its titular theme.

Much of the evening's activity was entrusted to a fine core ensemble: the actors Eisa Davis, Olympia Dukakis, Carson Grant and B D Wong; the singers Megan Weston and Robert Osborne; and the pianist Margaret Kampmeier. Mostly fascinating, if decidedly overlong at almost three and a half hours, "November 21" evoked in 36 brief segments the world on the day before it was forever changed.

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Elsewhere, contributors plied diverse approaches, from Ann Morrison's childish impatience in a playful skit, "The Importance of Being Seven," to D. Rubin Green's

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sobering "Postmortem," a cautionary sermon about unanticipated loss.

Sometimes the assassination was a central theme, as when Ms. Dukakis affectingly portrayed the wife of Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the event, in "The Day Before," a monologue by [Arthur Kopit](#). Sometimes it was incidental but still had an impact, as in "The Day Before and During," [Josip Novakovich's](#) whimsical reminiscence of boyhood in Tito's Yugoslavia, affectionately read by Mr. Wong. Sometimes it barely registered at all: "A Most Beautiful Death," by Mr. Kopit and the composer Daniel Felsenfeld, recounted the final hours of Aldous Huxley, who died on Nov. 22.

Musical tributes similarly ranged from heavy-weather art song to pop-derived whimsy, much of it by composers not yet born when Kennedy died. The playwright Carter W. Lewis and the composer [Kamala Sankaram](#) balanced artifice and heart expertly in "John-John," evoking Kennedy's young son with ingenuity. Best of all was "The New Frontier," in which [Phil Kline](#) captured with a lullaby's soothing simplicity a fleeting moment when hope still held disillusionment and fear at bay.

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