

“Pride and Joy”

Johanna Keller, April 29, 2002

The New York Festival of Song performs some highlights from 14 years of commissions and premieres.

"Our Pride & Joy: A Treasury of NYFOS Commissions and Premieres"

The New York Festival of Song

Michael Barrett (piano)
Steven Blier (piano)
Cyndia Sieden (soprano)
Cynthia Watters (soprano)
Rinat Shaham (mezzo-soprano)
Steven Tharp (tenor)
Philip Cutlip (baritone)
Kurt Ollmann (baritone)

Thursday 4 April 2002

Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, New York City

Stock: *The Voice of Temperance* (excerpts)

Liebermann: *Appalachian Liebeslieder*

Musto: *Dove sta amore*

Sellars: *Kissing Songs*

Rorem: *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (excerpts)

Denio: "Brother Fox"

Lieberson: "C'mon Pigs of Western Civilization Eat More Grease!"

Bolcom: "The Total Stranger in the Garden"

Bernstein: "Mr. and Mrs. Webb Say Goodnight"

Corigliano: "Dodecaphonia"

What's not to love about the New York Festival of Song? Pianists and co-founders Michael Barrett and Steven Blier are like two gifted and witty friends who have an abundant passion for art song and who invite you over to share their latest discoveries. Their extensive knowledge of the field, the original research that goes into each creative program, the well-wrought program notes and their smart repartee from behind the keyboard all combine to create a sense of celebratory occasion at every concert they give. Over the course of its fourteen seasons, the New York Festival of Song (NYFOS) has been a major force in the current resurgence of interest in the art of song. Most importantly, by commissioning and premiering several hundred works, NYFOS has added significant new works to the American art song tradition.

To showcase the best of those new works, NYFOS presented "Our Pride & Joy: A Treasury of NYFOS Commissions and Premieres" at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall — six singers accompanied by Barrett and Blier (most often playing four-hand at the piano) in lively, theatrical and engaging performances of 31 solo and ensemble songs by ten composers. Quite a feast.

"Welcome," a quartet song with the simplicity of a hymn from Jeffrey Stock's 1990 cycle *The Voice of Temperance*, provided an ideal opener — a kind of invocation, not unlike a prayer or speech with which one might begin a large and festive meal. When NYFOS first presented *The Voice of Temperance* a decade ago, it brought welcome attention to the then-relatively-unknown Stock: the New York Shakespeare Festival invited him to expand the work into a theater piece, which then launched his career in earnest. In this and another song from the cycle, Cynthia Watters, Rinat Shaham, Steven Tharp and Philip Cutlip sang together with a truly mellifluous blend.

In *Appalachian Liesbelieder* (1997), Lowell Liebermann set hilarious texts by poet Lauren Stover. The story involves two (as Blier put it) "deeply shallow" lovers — a tongue-tied Appalachian automobile mechanic and an equally inarticulate German woman who mangles two languages at once. Liebermann's writing is so deft and his text setting so accurate that at first the music seems utterly subservient to the bathetic and quirky drama. But gradually, the music asserts itself, taking seriously the inner lives of these seemingly hollow characters — and the gap between what these two losers must feel and what they are able to articulate is brilliantly made evident. Cutlip, in warm and agile voice, brought the handyman character to life in all his countrified slyness; Watters, while a very appealing stage presence, pushed her soprano to a hard edge (a recurring problem for her through the evening, and hardly necessary in the bathtub acoustics of Weill) and as a consequence frequently veered off-pitch.

Another treat was James Sellars' sophisticated, elegant and brief cycle *Kissing Songs* (1996), which makes an ensemble tango of John Fletcher's "Take, oh take those lips away" and a two-step of Thomas Moore's "The Kiss."

John Musto composed the five-song cycle *Dove sta amore* in 1995 to texts by Carl Sandburg, James Agee and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, all set with great subtlety and originality. "The Hangman at Home," with its minute shifts in musical gesture, is a textbook demonstration of how, in the best songs, music can agree with — or defy — the text. Cyndia Sieden, here accompanied by Blier, effectively utilized the full dynamic range and color palette of her voice; she delivered the disturbingly gorgeous lullaby "How many little children Sleep" with a crystalline *pianissimo*.

During the course of the program, individual songs were interspersed between the cycles. Best of these were two duets for mezzo-soprano and baritone. "The Total Stranger in the Garden," by William Bolcom (1978), concerns a wife railing against her husband, who is hidden behind his morning paper; it is a *New Yorker* cartoon brought to life by a simple semi-staged performance. "Mr. and Mrs. Webb Say Goodnight," set by Leonard Bernstein in 1988, follows in the tradition of his chamber opera *Trouble in Tahiti*, with all of the latter's smooth irony and uneasy domesticity. Shaham sang with a touch more hysteria than was required, creating some vocal havoc and dulling the dramatic effect. Kurt Ollmann, however, sang with his customary assurance and emotional connection — and without the score, having troubled to memorize all his numbers. He possesses the truly rare quality of singing with such ease that we seem to overhear his thoughts — a characteristic he shares with the great *Lieder* singers of the past century.

Steven Tharp walked on in a trench coat to play the detective who sings "Dodecaphonia," a 1997 setting by John Corigliano of a pun-filled text by Mark Adamo. By the end of his search for the serial criminal Twelve-Tone Rose, the detective has stumbled on an even more thoroughly modern Millie-Millie-Millie. (Was her last name Glass?) The NYFOS audience is musically astute (and on this occasion was full of composers), so they laughed at all the musical in-jokes; Tharp, with his lithe tenor and skillful comic timing, delivered the punch lines effectively.

The remaining two short works were disappointing. "Brother Fox," a curious fable song by Amy Denio, proved slight and not particularly affecting. And while Allen Ginsburg's diatribe "C'mon Pigs of Western Civilization Eat More Grease!" is certainly original and memorable, that's not reason enough to make a song of it. Peter Lieberman's setting does little more than introduce it to a new audience, though it's doubtful anyone could do much with it musically.

The evening ended with the nine songs that make up the final section of Ned Rorem's *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1998), one of the most important vocal works written in the past decade and a cycle that dares to take as its subject the arc of birth to death. Rorem's uncanny ability to find a great lyric is one of his most important qualities as a song composer; here he transforms the last paragraph of Colette's "*L'Etoile vesper*" into a magical gossamer duet (with lovely singing by Watters and Shaham) in which the vocal lines sometimes keep pace with one another and sometimes don't, just as the two horses in the text do. It's an example of the often-maligned technique of word-painting that, given the metaphorical sense of this text, works beautifully. The somber accompaniment of "Come In" perfectly evokes the fearsome and tantalizing dark forest in the poem by Robert Frost, and "Faith" makes a somewhat obvious Mark Doty poem into an affecting confessional narrative of the panic and dread one feels over impending death and loss. Like Rorem's ironically titled diary, *Lies*, written at about the same period, *Evidence of Things Not Seen* is some of the most honest and affecting work he has ever written. He is at his best when he drops his mask of wit and grandiosity and allows us to journey with him into the dark depths of fear and loneliness that we all share.

Since 1988, NYFOS has created opportunities and offered encouragement for composers to write their best songs — and provided occasions to hear those works expertly performed before a knowledgeable and enthusiastic audience. The results are works of art that will continue to enrich the repertory of American song.