

Tuesday October 19, 2010 11 Heshvan 5771

## The Jewish Heart Of A Song Festival



[Festival co-founder and artistic director Steven Blier](#)

**From Gershwin and Sondheim to Dylan, a song for everyone**

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**George Robinson**

**Special To The Jewish Week**

The New York Festival of Song seems at first glance a slight misnomer. “Festival” suggests a short, sharp blast of events in a concentrated period of time. But NYFOS, now in its 23rd year, schedules events all year ‘round.

“It is a festival,” insists co-founder and artistic director Steven Blier, “but one that goes on all year. We think of each event as a festival event, and there’s a feeling that it’s a party at all times.”

This year’s party kicks off on Oct. 19 and, as usual, Blier and associate artistic director Michael Barrett, both of whom will be on piano alongside mezzo-soprano Sasha Cook and tenor Paul Appleby, have dipped heavily into every songbook imaginable.

NYFOS’s slogan is “No song is safe from us,” but they seem to draw from Jewish songwriters with particular relish.

“It’s deeply part of our culture,” Blier, who is Jewish, says. “I’ve done a lot of Jewish programs over the years, songs from the diaspora, from Jewish cultures all over the world. I don’t have to look very hard to honor my people. Just look for good songs and our people turn up.”

Look, for instance, at this week’s program “Beginner’s Luck.” The title, of course, comes from the Gershwins. And George and Ira will quickly be joined by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Marc Blitzstein and Bob Dylan. So even if the recital isn’t overtly Jewish in content — among the other songwriters included are Ferruccio Busoni and William Bolcom — Jewish songsmiths are well represented.

Blier has a simple rule when assembling a program. “I want to play everything I want to play,” he says. “I don’t know that I’m going to go around in life more than once. So I just want to play all the things that attract me.”

After that the primary concern is “how they fit together and the stories they tell, and where they sweep you, through so many cultures and eras,” Blier says. “I believe that these are all such valid, beautiful, important pieces, I don’t feel a distinction between them. Doing [20th-century Swedish composer Wilhelm] Stenhammer and Noel Coward in one program made perfect sense to me.”

Ditto Busoni and Dylan.

What makes a good song good?

“A good song has two factors,” Blier explains. “One is what I call the ‘across a crowded room’ meter.” He hums the line from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Some Enchanted Evening,” and notes the breathtaking way that the line and words soar in tandem.

“The words and the music seem to be absolutely inextricably linked to each other, and become eloquent immediately when you hear them,” he says, and then adds with a certain awe, “That’s one of the great lines in all music.”

To describe the other factor, Blier draws on a more arcane musical reference: Samuel Barber’s song “Nuvoletta,” drawn from James Joyce’s “Finnegan’s Wake.”

“When Barber takes these few lines and sets them to music, they suddenly become comprehensible,” he says. “You just get it. It’s a reading of Joyce you couldn’t get in a college seminar. The text is given a great reading that illuminates it.”

Then he adds, laughing, “I’m not a composer. I’m a purveyor of song. I know when it works, not always how it works.”

If Blier seems unusually relaxed in his own skin, perhaps it’s because underneath his skin, terrible things are happening. He has facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy, known as FSHD, a common form of MD that causes causing a progressive weakening of muscles in the upper arms, around the shoulder blades and in the face.

This summer, researchers made a major breakthrough in understanding the role of genetics in the disease. Understandably, Blier is still kvelling over that.

“Can you imagine how I felt,” he asks. “We’ve been unable to get anything out of anybody — the NIH [National Institutes for Health] has no interest because the disease doesn’t affect enough people. And we were on the bottom of the food chain on MD. I never thought I was going to live to see [a breakthrough].”

How does the disease affect his working life?

“Amazingly little,” he says. “I haven’t stopped doing anything. Mainly it’s just a problem getting places, problems with vehicles. I need help getting to a place; I need to have a car hired that I can get my scooter in.”

Musically, it has made remarkably little difference.

“If there’s a song that takes a little more time to learn, I’m more likely to offload it,” Blier says. “I’m older anyway, so I might be inclined to drop a song or two and not feel bad about it. After all, I’ve played an awful lot of songs.”

*The New York Festival of Song’s new season opens on Tuesday, Oct. 19 and continues on Thursday Oct. 21, 8 p.m. both nights, with “Beginner’s Luck: The Passion and Promise of Youth,” at Merkin Concert Hall (129 W. 67th St.) For more information and the rest of the NYFOS season, go to [www.nyfos.org](http://www.nyfos.org).*