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Eclecticism Reaches Songful Heights

By JEREMY EICHLER

There were plenty of worthy performances at the Kaye Playhouse on Thursday night, but the warm ovation that concluded the anniversary concert of the New York Festival of Song was clearly directed toward the organization itself.

Founded by Steven Blier and Michael Barrett, this admirable group has luxuriated in the richness of the song recital for 15 years now, shrugging off stuffy conventions and charming audiences with programs that combine meticulous research with an infectious strain of vocal hedonism. Mr. Blier's deliciously witty introductions sew the parts together so that playful Gershwin tunes, lofty Schumann songs and hot-blooded tango numbers emerge as complementary pleasures feeding the same addiction to the human voice in all its variegated splendor.

Thursday night was no exception, as Mr. Blier and Mr. Barrett traded off at the keyboard, accompanying a mostly familiar cast of performers and displaying a gleeful disregard for petty concerns of chronology and geography. In that spirit the program opened with Karen Holvik capturing the jazzy insouciance of Kurt Weill's "One Life to Live," followed directly by Cyndia Sieden vaulting through the florid coloratura passages of an 18th-century work, "The Lark Sings High in the Cornfield," by Thomas Linley the Elder. Hugh Russell came next with Schumann's "Mondnacht," but his pensive tone was quickly dispersed by Weill's whimsical "Tchaikovsky," a long list of Russian composers that Peter Kazaras brought to a close in a crush of tongue-twisting sibilants.

The next set, titled "Our Guardians," opened with the somber tone-painting and wayward expressivity of Ned Rorem's "The Wave," sung beautifully by Kurt Ollmann. Amy Burton, who stood out for her rich, fiery soprano, sang "Penelope" by her husband, John Musto, as well as Leonard Bernstein's sultry "Julia de Burgos," blasting the final high C well on its way toward Spanish Harlem.

In a special appearance, the composer William Bolcom accompanied his wife, Joan Morris, in a steamy rendition of Harold Arlen's "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady," after which Mr. Blier, returning hesitantly to the piano, suggested the instrument might need a little time to cool off.

Not too long though, as there were still miles to go. A set called "Latin Lovers" brought a pair of songs by Ernesto Nazareth, a fleet Zarzuela aria by Ruperto Chapí, and the plaintive "Pampamapa" by Carlos Guastavino. Jennifer Aylmer matched vocal gusto with theatrical flair, and Mr. Russell generously served the music's doleful pathos.

The evening tapered with a set that Mr. Blier called his "desert island favorites": Carlos Gardel's signature "Por una cabeza," Gershwin's timeless "Ask Me Again" and Gordon Jenkins's classic "This Is All I Ask."

It must be hard to end a program when you love the material as much as these performers do, and so they didn't. More music followed by Mozart, Bernstein and — hey why not? you only turn 15 once — the Beach Boys.