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MUSIC REVIEW | NEW YORK FESTIVAL OF SONG

Mother Russia, With the Language Barrier Removed

By JEREMY EICHLER

'Alexander Blok and Anna Akhmatova: Poets Without Heroes' at Merkin Hall

The Ukrainian-born Jewish poet Chaim Nachman Bialik once claimed that reading a poem in translation is like kissing a bride through a veil. If true, this suggests that a program focused on the translated works of Russian poets like Alexander Blok and Anna Akhmatova would be an evening of small but insurmountable distances, poetry consumed but never quite internalized.

Fortunately, Steven Blier, a pianist and co-founder of the New York Festival of Song, found a rewarding way to bridge this distance on Wednesday night in Merkin Hall. His program elegantly interwove recitations of a wide range of Russian poetry, from Pushkin to Pasternak (delivered persuasively by the actress Kathleen Chalfant) with musical settings by composers like Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Georgii Sviridov and César Cui of still other Russian poems.

In different hands, the premise might have felt gimmicky, but the meticulousness of Mr. Blier's preparation and the quality of his programming choices brought a sense of depth rather than hokeyness. As is his custom, the pianist peppered the evening with commentary from the stage, shedding light on the numerous entanglements - amorous, artistic or political - that bound together poets, composers, painters, cafe society and of course the Soviet government, which kept such close and forbidding watch over many on this program. With help from the commentary, the readings and, of course, the expressive music, one felt aspects of these poetic worlds drift slowly into focus, despite the inevitable distances that remain, whether linguistic, historical, cultural or existential.

The first of the evening's two major song cycles was Prokofiev's "Five Poems by Anna Akhmatova," written in 1916. The poetry apparently drew Prokofiev out of the brash modernist mode of previous works like the "Scythian Suite" and into a more reflective idiom, filled with a concise yet moving lyricism that was perfectly suited to Akhmatova's poetry, with its modern sheen and its wide interstices, full of deep emotion and wisps of autobiography. In one song, "Memory of the Sun," the composer and poet unite to convey eloquently the onset of depression and a foreboding sense that "during the night winter will arrive."

That very season was already in the air for an enfeebled and gloomy Shostakovich, who in 1967 wrote his Romance-Suite with seven settings of poems by Blok, breathtakingly scored for soprano and piano trio. The most ravishing moments come in the slower sections, filled with spindly instrumental lines of aching beauty and vocal writing that glows with the arresting inner radiance of the composer's late works.

Juliette Kang (violin) and Thomas Kraines (cello) joined Mr. Blier to fill out this trio handsomely. The evening's two young singers were the baritone Nicolai Janitzky and the soprano Dina Kuznetsova. Mr. Janitzky's voice has a rich and cellolike warmth, but his emotional range on stage was limited, and as a consequence, so was his dramatic impact. Ms. Kuznetsova was a tough act to follow, with a dark-hued operatic voice and a way of inhabiting each musical world with a magnetism that seemed beyond her years.