

# THE NEW YORK TIMES

May 24, 2003

## For a Champion of Song, It's About Communicating

By ANNE MIDGETTE

Nothing is more natural than a song. And nothing is more artificial than the standard art song recital. The singer stands frozen in the sheltering curve of a grand piano, enunciating syllables in five languages, all incomprehensible.

Oddly, many presumed fans of the genre think that incomprehensibility is part of the deal. "My brother once came to a 'Winterreise' I did," said Steven Blier, the accompanist. "I said, 'Did you follow along?' and he said, 'No, I just let it wash over me.' I said, 'Why'd you do that?'"

For Mr. Blier, communication is the whole point of the exercise. He is a co-founder and co-director of the New York Festival of Song, a recital series that just completed its 15th season. The festival is built on the democratic premise that all songs — from Brahms to Broadway to the Beatles — are created equal. In place of the formality of the traditional recital, the festival offers groups of good young singers in smart, offbeat programs, each organized around a theme: music of the Harlem Renaissance or an antiwar program. Leavening the mix are snippets of semistaging and even dance, with a stream of Mr. Blier's witty commentary tying it all together.

Recalling his confusion the first time he heard Charles Ives's "Concord" Sonata, Mr. Blier said: "I thought, this is probably what art song recitals feel like to people who don't speak these languages. I love this song so much, I don't want it to be stillborn. I want the audience to go, 'Oh my God, that was fabulous.' That's why I speak to them. I want to make them hungry to hear what's coming next."

Mr. Blier, 51, still has a shy pride in his own knowledge and the wide, twinkling eyes of the bright child he clearly once was. He began playing at 3, first accompanied in public at 13 (the 17-year-old singer was Matthew Epstein, now artistic director of the Chicago Lyric Opera), and graduated from Yale at 20 with a degree in English. He was promptly turned down by the Yale School of Music. "I had come out of my adolescent years with some fairly outré hand patterns," he said. "They watched me play, and they said, 'You will never play for anyone with the top down or with the top up.' When I'm standing in the wings at Carnegie Hall, about to play for Renée Fleming, or for Cecilia [Bartoli], I always look up and go, 'Oh, maybe just one more time, if you don't mind.'"

Instead of conservatory, Mr. Blier got on-the-job training in both classical music and cabaret. (He was for years an accompanist and arranger for the cabaret singer Martha

Schlamme.) The training laid the groundwork for his inclusive, eclectic series. In one sense he's a maverick; in another he's a man of his time, bringing an innate musicianship and a curious mind to bear on a range of different musics without prejudice. "I just believe that a song is a song," he said.

"There's this myth that classical music is difficult and popular music is easy," he added. "I am here to tell you that playing those Arlen songs or the Strayhorn songs, getting the changes just so, and the timing — in fact, you are improvising and arranging on the spot. Nothing's written out. You probably think I'm reading something off the page, that there's music in front of me. That would take hours. I don't have that kind of hours."

In an era when more and more music that used to be thought of as pop is becoming the subject of codified, classical-style study (jazz and musicals are two examples), Mr. Blier, with his encyclopedic knowledge of all things voice related, is a timely figure. When he started out, he said, singers used to resist his suggestions that they incorporate popular song into their programs; today they keep performing the songs he finds for them in other recitals. The song festival's brand of thematic programming is now embraced by larger institutions like the New Jersey Symphony, the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the American Symphony Orchestra.

And Mr. Blier has been embraced by the musical establishment. He teaches at the Juilliard School, works with musicians from the Metropolitan Opera's young artists' program and turns to his second keyboard and another medium to write articles for Opera News and The Yale Review.

He's a bit amused by his reputation. "I was the young artist and then I was the veteran accompanist within the space of a month," he said ruefully. "I thought, Wow — I never was in my prime!" Possibly furthering the veteran image is his use of a cane because of a form of muscular dystrophy that, he said, "limps in my family." But it hasn't hampered his performing. "I expect to be playing for another 30 years," he said.

Preparation for next season has begun. Look for a program of black and Jewish vaudeville songs, one of Barcelona-born composers and one of settings of poems by the New York School. This range, typical of a festival season, puts tremendous stylistic and musical demands on the accompanist, which in the glitter of Mr. Blier's polymathic performances is sometimes overlooked. Or perhaps listeners simply take his musical ability for granted, a part of the package.

"One singer said, 'You really lived up to your hype,' " he said. "I thought, Oh, my God, it's much worse than I thought."