

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Sing It So I Believe It!

Against physical odds, Steven Blier coaches deep emotions from New York's greatest singers.

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

IT'S REHEARSAL TIME in the classic Upper West Side apartment of pianist and vocal coach Steven Blier. Paul Appleby, a tenor, and Sasha Cooke, a mezzo-soprano, arrive and head for the kitchen to pamper their larynxes with tea. As the kettle moans and hisses, providing counterpoint to the hooting vocal warm-ups, Blier pilots his elaborately adjustable motorized wheelchair around a couple of tight corners to the grand piano. He gives his *Ready!* grin, and the 58-year-old pianist—who can move his hands and forearms deftly but the rest of his body only with difficulty—joins the two young singers as they begin to excavate music from deep inside their bodies. They plunge together into the perfumed, lightly erotic landscape of a song by Gabriel Fauré.

Over the past 35 years, Blier has become a guru of song, the man who patiently guides singers past their vulnerabilities, who coaxes them to scrutinize and express some tiny grain of meaning in the text, who homes in pitilessly on glints of fake feeling. A mixture of therapist, teacher, impresario, and pianist-for-hire, he co-founded the boutique organization New York Festival of Song in 1988 (with the conductor and pianist Michael Barrett), and researches, programs, produces, and plays in every concert. (The next one, "Manning the Canon: Songs of Gay Life," is at Merkin Concert Hall on November 30 and December 2.) Multiple times a week he commutes to Juilliard, where he nurtures and browbeats student singers and mentors a select few, like Appleby, a recent graduate, and Cooke, who is already an incipient star. He has toured with the likes of Renée Fleming and Cecilia Bartoli, who, rather than spend too much time rehearsing, have preferred to trust his instincts onstage. Now he dispenses casting advice to New York City Opera.

It would be a brimming life for anyone, but Blier must also contend with a form of muscular dystrophy called FSH disease, which has been slowly eroding his mobility. (The disorder is genetic, and affected his mother and aunts as well.) On his frequent travels, he wears a suit and a smile, because he depends on the kindness of strangers for tasks like stowing his carry-on.

"MANNING THE CANON: SONGS OF GAY LIFE"
MERKIN CONCERT HALL
NOVEMBER 30 AND
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The piano is less accommodating, but he has found ways to adapt. "When I roll onstage, I am the song's messenger," he says. "Maybe some other guy can play it better than I can, but I was given the message, and I have to deliver it."

An art song can be a lethal little thing, a sharp-edged crystalline structure that terrifies the most formidable singers. Narrative, language, distilled emotion, melody, the personality embedded in a single voice, and the intricate interlocking of the piano part all bond in a complex chemistry. With none of opera's comforting upholstery of costumes, lights, and orchestral sound, it bares every flaw of composition and performance: "A song has to look good when it steps out of the shower" is how Blier puts it.

Songs have undergirded Blier's life since childhood. At 10, he learned to play the score of *Annie Get Your Gun* by ear, and he developed an early and undimmed passion for Gilbert and Sullivan; he can hardly make it through a G&S overture without weeping. "I have to sit by myself, because I'm racked with sobs." Soon, he accompanied his first professional singer, the British soprano Valerie Masterson, in a rehearsal at a friend's apartment. "It was an electric moment," Blier recalls. "She was louder than anyone I had ever heard before, with this amazingly penetrating high register. To hear that sound in a New York living room at age 13 ... it was like the scent of blood."

Today, he still tries to encounter at least one new song every day. YouTube helps. So do a network of advisers and his own meandering taste, which embraces pretty much

Blier, center, surrounded by current and former students: from left, John Brancy, Meredith Lustig, Tobias Greenhalgh, Deanna Breiwick, and Paul Appleby.



anything that can be delivered effectively by a voice and a piano: Norwegian art songs, Bruce Springsteen's "Fire," Cuban ballads, Broadway tunes, zarzuela arias. What separates the ones that interest him from those that don't is not style, but a nugget of emotional intensity. "A song is the closest thing I know in waking life to dreaming," he says. "It's a coded version of reality. It's not like playing a scene from Chekhov, where you're trying to look like you're having a tea party or a nervous breakdown. Instead, you're enacting a coded, ritualized version of that moment, and somehow everyone in the hall is dreaming along with you."

Blier spends his days burrowing into the psychic core of songs and singers, and the labor can be grueling for everyone. "I was working on the famous Montsalvatge lullaby ["Cradle Song for a Black Child"] with this girl who was pretending to rock a baby, and all I could see is that there was no baby there," he recounts. "The words are 'Ya no eres esclavo'—'You are not a slave.' That tells you that you *were* a slave. You're a woman who has been around the block—*on* the block—but now you're living a life of dignity, and your baby's not going to have to go through what you did." After a little coaching in that vein, "she started singing the song, and suddenly she looked like a tough, weather-beaten woman. It wasn't really about the baby, it was about the mother."

In concert, Blier's emotional curiosity emerges as good humor and tenderness, but it can startle singers, says Sasha Cooke. "People open up when they're around him," she says. "You enter the room and all of a sudden everything feels very intimate. But some people don't want to be figured out."

Vulnerability and determination are the performing artist's two contradictory but equally essential tools, and Blier, the hypersensitive man who will bawl through *The Mikado*, has armored himself against his disability in a tough shell of optimism. A recent breakthrough in the genetics of FSH, one that has potential to slow the progression of the disease, has given him hope. "When you look at your mother and both of her sisters and the kind of deterioration they went through, and you think it might not be that way for you ... It's huge, even just to think it." Recently he performed at a benefit for the FSH Society, and came away with renewed gratitude for his still-powerful hands and forearms. "Instead of being freaked out, I thought, *I dodged so many bullets*. I was talking to this guy who always looked so angry, and I realized, he's not angry—he lost the ability to smile. I didn't lose that! Think what *didn't* happen to me." ■