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READING a season flier for the New York Festival of Song is like examining the product of some mad mapmaker's brain, where Spain lies right next to Harlem and borders on Norway. But then the organization has built itself by ignoring what other people thought they knew: about songs, about putting on concerts, about audiences' tastes.

NYFOS is not actually a festival at all, but a miniscule, 14-year-old organization that every season puts on six polished and lovingly curated one-night shows, each one made up of several singers, two pianists, a mountain of music and a theme. This season, Festival of Song has performed an evening of forgotten songs from the Harlem Renaissance, another of music by Spanish composers and a third of Scandinavian rarities. These events have found a grateful audience, and managed, bit by bit, to revitalize and reimagine the song recital in New York City. Thursday's program at Hunter College - songs by Kern, Gershwin and Porter on lyrics by P.G. Wodehouse - has a recognizable flair, though since the group was founded on the principle that no two concerts would be alike, it's hard to know what's typical.

The singers change from one concert to another, but the two founders, Michael Barrett and Steven Blier, are always there, switching off at the piano, turning pages for each other and occasionally sitting side by side at the keyboard if the song requires more than two hands.

They make an odd couple. Barrett is a conductor, and he looks the role, with his pewter coif and chiseled face. He is one of Leonard Bernstein's many protégés, and he has some of his mentor's casual American glamour.

When he met Barrett in 1985, Blier was a singer's accompanist who had begun playing for hire when he graduated from college at 20. "Being an accompanist is a little like being a plumber," he says. "People need you, but they don't necessarily want you there for dinner." The two are sitting in Blier's cluttered apartment on Riverside Drive, where the furniture seems to have been jammed into whatever space is left by a dusty grand piano and stacks of dog-eared music. When they first started working together, Blier recalls, "Michael was riding in limousines. I was hoping for cab fare."

Blier parries Barrett's self-confidence with rueful wit and a tenacious sense of purpose. A lifelong battle with muscular dystrophy has made it difficult for him to hoist himself out of a chair, but at every concert he stands between numbers and introduces each set of songs with a mixture of seriousness and self-deprecating charm.

He acknowledges that his illness has eroded his agility at the keyboard a little. "I can't throw my hands around quite as quickly as some people," he says. But that hasn't prevented him from working his way through a panoramic range of styles, from the classical canon, through ragtime and Cuban dances, past obscure byways like early 19th-century English parlor music, and on to decades' worth of American popular music. His versatility allows Festival of Song to program virtually anything that can be sung with piano and to dream up seasons that hopscotch freely through history.

New York Festival of Song was born from disillusionment. When its creators met, the word "song," especially when paired with "art," conjured up grim little evenings in which over-the-hill divas plowed dutifully through identical recital programs on the way to the opera arias they tacked on as encores, while the audience waited for high notes. Fired by the conviction that they could draw an audience made up of the curious rather than the connoisseurs, Barrett and Blier used the very obscurity of the genre they loved to rewrite the rules of presenting it. They dreamed of concerts that would star the music, not the singer. They wanted to perform songs they had never heard, and allow programs to drift promiscuously across Broadway, cabaret and the concert hall. "No song is safe from us" was one of their early mottos.

With a \$1,000 gift from a friend, access to a tiny auditorium at the Greenwich House of Music and a lot of big ideas, they began engaging singers. "I had no idea what it was like to produce a concert," recalls Blier, who had blithely suggested they work up an entire series. "It was like being in labor, with no epidural, all the time." That first year, they paid for the fliers, corralled their friends into singing, drummed up the audience and moved the pianos.

It's still tough going, but the group's reputation has made it easier to recruit singers, tap experts for wisdom and raise money. Singers have adapted Festival of Song material into their own recitals, and other presenters now imitate their format.

Often, a program will begin with a single tune. "A song doesn't have to be the greatest piece of music for me to love it, just like your friends don't necessarily have to be the greatest people," Blier says. But having forged a bond of affection for a three-minute package of music, he begins to develop a frame to make it shine. Usually, this involves months of scholarly research, which provides Blier with a store of information to dole out to the audience in two-minute speeches.

"Presenting this material is like taking your new boyfriend or girlfriend home to your parents," Blier says. "You want them to like this song you've been dating. When I talk to the audience, I don't want to tell them what they're going to feel, but I do just want to give them a little hook, something that's going to get them interested. By the time I'm done, they're dying to hear the music."

Having developed a program, Blier and Barrett have to find people to sing it, which can mean cultivating students for years until they are ready. "Casting is the hardest thing," Blier grimaces, waving off the challenges of selecting, arranging, learning, rehearsing and performing the music. "The level is high, and our programs are very sophisticated. I can't have a deer in the headlights on a NYFOS concert." Nor does he necessarily want famous singers, who sometimes arrive with rigid agendas and work habits formed by opera.

"Singers are used to taking directions in opera," Barrett says. "'Here's your music, here are your cuts, we don't interpolate the high B flat at the end. See you in 2005.' But putting a song over can be so subtle and so potent at the same time. The words might be 'The sky is blue and the birds are singing.' But if we say, 'Look, the background to this is that your boyfriend just left you and you're contemplating killing yourself,' we need people who are going to know how to internalize that."

Blier nods vigorously. "To do a recital, you need a strong inner life, and you need an imagination. These things help in opera, but - let's face it - a lot of famous opera singers

didn't have these particular strengths." Blier coaches every song, but he insists that ultimately, each performance must emerge from within the singer, not from his instruction.

The ideal cast member, Blier and Barrett agree, is someone who has matured under their tutelage, is easy to work with and brings an entrepreneurial zeal to the material. Blier cites Jennifer Aylmer, a 28-year-old soprano who has built her reputation partly on her experience with NYFOS. "You tell Jen a song is in Basque, and she gets in her car, drives out to a Basque restaurant in New Jersey and gets the staff to give her a translation of the text. That's the kind of performer we want."

WHERE&WHEN: The New York Festival of Song splits its season between The Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. "P.G.'s Other Profession," a program of songs on lyrics by P.G. Wodehouse, takes place Thursday at the Kaye Playhouse. It features Sylvia McNair and Christianne Tisdale, sopranos; Hal Cazalet, tenor; David Costabile, baritone; Gregory Utzig, guitar and banjo; and Steven Blier, piano. For ticket information, call 212-772- 4448.

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