

The Revisionist

Recitals today can contain songs by anyone from Brahms to Bowles to Nacio Herb Brown. STEVEN BLIER, artistic director of the New York Festival of Song, explains the principles of constructing a concert-song program for the twenty-first century.



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For as long as I can remember, I have been obsessed with song. It grabbed my interest when I was young, the way baseball was supposed to but didn't. The magical combustion of words and music has always seemed as essential as air and water. In a certain way, the rest of the world seems to be of my opinion; nowadays, the word "song" seems to have replaced the word "music." As I hummed along to Dvorák's Eighth Symphony at the dentist's office, with my mouth full of dental paraphernalia, my hygienist asked me, "Oh, so you know that song?" Meanwhile, the ubiquitous iPods are advertised as holding "20,000 songs"; if you download music, you pay by the "song," and that can mean any unit of music – from a bit of operatic recitative to a movement of a string quartet to the latest rant from some hip-hop star.

Unfortunately, when you add the word "art" to the word "song" you seem to have crossed the bridge from something everyone understands into a *recherché* world only aficionados can appreciate. I started my career with an enthusiasm bordering on the neurotic, but my experiences giving "art-song recitals" seldom had the payoff I expected. In the 1970s, solo vocal concerts didn't have much support from managers and presenters, who would always cluck about how "art

song” was only for the “special few” (while professing their *own* noble love for lieder). When Metropolitan Opera bass Lorenzo Alvary heard me play at a competition, he was enthusiastic about the way I made music and asked me where I wanted my career to go. When I replied that I wanted to devote my energies to song, his kindly interest in me turned abruptly into rage. With a face of impending apoplexy, he screamed, “THERE ISS NO RECITAL! YOU VILL NEVER HAVE SUCH A CAREER! YOU VILL PLAY – OPERA!”

In truth, by the mid-1980s my belief in the power of song was being challenged on all fronts. The singers who hired me were unwilling to experiment with the formula of their solo concerts, which were usually some tired version of their graduate recital. “Get to the famous tune” seemed to be the *modus operandi*. When I suggested to a well-known diva that she sing the verse to “White Christmas” and gave her a copy of it I had written out by hand, she threw it on the floor. “No one is interested in *that*.” Urban concert audiences seemed overbred and appeared to come to the hall more to pass judgment on a singer-and-pianist team than to enjoy the music. After the concert, audience members would enjoy telling you whether you had met their criteria – “I always judge a soprano by how well she does the ‘Air de Lia,’” gushed one matron. Another concertgoer hissed her verdict right after my postlude to Schubert’s “Ständchen” – “*very sentimental*” – loud enough to be heard later when the concert was broadcast.

Out in the heartland, audiences tended to be alienated by hearing music sung in a foreign language. In those venues, artists often share restroom facilities with the audience, and I shall never forget some of the homespun invective I overheard after I had played some Duparc songs on the first half of a recital.

But a few life-changing experiences around 1985 propelled my creative life in a new direction. I met the conductor and pianist Michael Barrett, who hired me to collaborate with him on a concert honoring Marc Blitzstein at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall. Michael’s creative energy and imagination were like a knife cutting through the Gordian knot of my career. Freewheeling, far-thinking, energetic and *branché* (he actually knew Leonard Bernstein), Michael had an independence and worldliness completely new to me. I had never met someone with so much vision, and it was infectious.

That same year, I heard Graham Johnson accompany Margaret Price in a lieder recital at Carnegie Hall, which I still recall as the single most revelatory art-song experience of my life. It was as if they had taken me deep inside music that I had known only as a succession of beautiful surfaces. I’d had similar moments hearing artists such as Janet Baker and Gérard Souzay, but for me everything coalesced that night. In the two and a half minutes Price and Johnson took to traverse Strauss’s “Du meines Herzens Krönelein,” I acquired a powerful new sense of what a song was. I was lucky enough to hang out with Graham a few months later when we were both at the Jerusalem Festival. There, I got a chance to hear his “Songmakers’ Almanac,” a well-regarded British thematic recital series. He brought a program on Jewish themes, which probably seemed like a good idea for the Holy Land. In truth, the Israeli audience didn’t cotton to it, and there were only about thirty-five people in the hall. I was the only person under sixty-five. The singers weren’t great, but it didn’t matter. The experience hit me like a thunderbolt. This was what a concert should do – stimulate and inform, uniting song with poetry and prose, history and humor. Graham’s playing had a delicacy and eloquence that I had not often experienced in my American colleagues. In the van that we shared back to the hotel, I hoped that my enthusiasm would help to counterbalance Graham’s humiliation at performing to an empty house. He vented his anger by making outrageously funny jokes. We became instant friends.

When I came home from Israel, I was Born Again as an artist. I could see where my life was going to take me – with or without the support of the Lorenzo Alvarys of the world.

Michael Barrett and I founded the New York Festival of Song in 1988, when we were approached by B. C. Vermeersch of the Greenwich House Music School; he had a cute 90-seat hall that he wanted people to know about and use. It seemed like the perfect laboratory to start an American “Songmakers’ Almanac,” built around our enthusiasms and our personalities. We opened with a concert of songs set to Shakespeare’s poetry. I had never produced a concert before, and the stress of seeing to every detail of the event – programming, translating, writing a program note, publicizing – got me so nervous that I lost my way in the first song, which I was transposing down a step. (Now the truth can be told.) But there was a strange excitement in the air as Braden and Brenda Harris sang settings of the Bard by Finzi and Britten, Kabalevsky and Brahms, John Dankworth and Dick Hyman. Blythe Danner read sonnets, and pianist Dalton Baldwin (one of my idols) was in the house to bless the event. Afterward, a woman came backstage and said, “I loved this concert! I want to hear this concert again!” I thanked her for her enthusiasm and started to talk up our next performance. “No,” she said firmly. “I want to hear *this* one again,” and she toddled off. This was my introduction to building an audience.

The New York Festival of Song has turned into an unexpectedly durable love affair. One part of the joy is the potential

for musical exploration. For me, the constant flow of new songs is like an artistic aphrodisiac, keeping my love of music burning. As an accompanist-for-hire, I would never have had the chance to explore so much Latin-American song (probably my most feverish musical delight), Paul Bowles's quirky masterpiece *A Picnic Cantata*, the primal thrill of Sviridov's *Russia Cast Adrift*, the mysterious delicacy of Fauré's late cycles, the unexpected delight of Gershwin's unpublished songs. We've also commissioned and given the premieres of some astounding new cycles, including Ned Rorem's *Evidence of Things Not Seen* and Robert Beaser's *Followers*.

Perhaps without consciously knowing it, Michael Barrett and I were responding to some larger cultural issues. The mid-century immigrant audience in America that used to turn out to hear lieder recitals was dying out, meaning that Austro-German song could finally loosen its stranglehold on the recital stage. All of us were listening to music differently from the ways our parents had. As we surfed through radio stations and flipped through our CD changers, we were making a soundtrack for our daily lives that freely mixed genres. It was time for our live concerts to get in on the act, too.

The "big star" recital will always be with us, and like any voice-maven, I relish the chance to hear – and accompany – artists such as Rolando Villazón, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and Cecilia Bartoli. You'd have to wrestle me to the ground to get me to give up my *Jussi Björling at Carnegie Hall* CD. Star recitals can also be quite interesting; Susan Graham and Renée Fleming are among the artists who make a sincere effort to build programs with a strong structure and have come up with some striking ideas. There's hope yet that the traditional art-song recital may be ready for a comeback: just look at new series like the Saint Paul Summer Song Festival, which features a week's worth of recitals this month by major artists such as Dawn Upshaw, Bejun Mehta, Jennifer Aylmer, Isabel Bayrakdarian and Michael Schade. I am glad to see that the old-style graduate-school recital (Handel-Schubert-opera aria-contemporary piece-Fauré-"charming" ender) is less in evidence than it used to be. I like hearing singers mix genres onstage, too; I had programmed songs by the Beatles and the Beach Boys, but recently, young Nathaniel Webster startled even this intrepid programmer when he included a Rufus Wainwright song on his Weill Hall recital right alongside standard art-song fare.

For me, thematic recitals have become the most interesting way to present concert songs. It gives the audience a much-needed historical or literary context for the music they are hearing, and it allows one song to bring out the meaning of another. The principles of constructing such a program are something like writing a play: you need a beginning, a good first-half closer, and a trajectory through the second half that clinches the story. Using several singers rather than just a single artist, we are able to consider a wider range of songs for the program; and having more than one vocalist instantly creates a sense of drama. If you do them right, thematic recitals focus the audience's attention where it belongs – on the words and music at hand, rather than on the diva's dress, or on comparisons with past performances. The rapt concentration of the audiences, their willingness to take a musical journey into parts unknown and their discovery that songs can teach you about history and expand your horizons have vindicated my original belief: people have an intrinsic need to be sung to, and song recitals should address that need as directly as possible. Others seem to agree: thematic recital series are springing up in Philadelphia (Lyricfest), Atlanta (Southeastern Festival of Song) and San Francisco (San Francisco Song Festival), each with their own style based on their artistic directors and the enthusiasms of their audiences.

In truth, all artists who get up to sing for a group of listeners, and all pianists who partner them, should benefit from the fact that old-fashioned recital strictures are so much looser than they were fifty years ago. Then, the general audience might have had more musical background and been able to hum along with Brahms songs that are terra incognita today. But that public was also more parochial and rigid. Today, a concert song could also include a sixteenth-century Catalan prayer or a tune by Stevie Wonder. It all comes back to that combustion of words and music, voice and piano. My credo is simple: sing what you love, think of the recital space as a sacred home for your imagination and your soul, and welcome the audience into a world you create for them. You won't go wrong. □

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