

## American beauties – Merkin Concert Hall and Weill Recital Hall

The itinerant **New York Festival of Song**, performing this season at the Merkin Concert Hall, is renowned for presenting outstanding singers – often very early in their careers – in thematic programmes that are very much out-of-the-box. In November, mezzo soprano **Kate Lindsey** and tenor **Joseph Kaiser** joined forces for *Fugitives*, an anthology of songs by composers suppressed by the Nazis. **Steven Blier**, the artistic director of the series, doubled as pianist and most engaging emcee. Part of his agenda was to show how the Nazi programme to root out ‘degenerate’ music had dealt a death blow to the entire German song tradition. Eleven voices were heard, ranging from the usual suspects (Schoenberg, Weill, Eisler, Zemlinsky, Hollander, Korngold) and the lesser known (Krása, Ullmann, Tucholsky, Schreker) to the utterly forgotten (Joki). The styles ranged from lush post-Romanticism to Weimar cabaret by way of exquisitely tinted *fin de siècle* vignettes, with a bouncy show tune thrown in for good measure (Weill’s ‘How Can You Tell an American’, from the Broadway musical *Knickerbocker Holiday*). The official bill closed with Eisler’s moving anthem ‘Peace Song’. Then came an encore from Kálmán’s goofy operetta *Herzogin von Chicago* – ‘Gershwin goulash’.

It was a huge assignment, with oodles of text. The singers delivered it all off-book, slipping from mode to mode as if there were nothing to it, ever sensitive to nuance yet never reaching for effect. Kaiser led the way with Zemlinsky’s faux-antique ‘Altes Minnelied’, his tenor ringing out with festive panache. Lindsey introduced herself with the same composer’s ‘Meeresaugen’, achieving searing intensity through a mask

of glacial poise. But she soon warmed up. Several numbers were performed *à deux*, with inventive musical staging and very presentable dancing. For ‘Peace Song’, the singers held hands. With this recital, NYFOS has once again raised the bar.

For the programmes of the **Met Chamber Ensemble** at Weill Hall, **James Levine** usually recruits musicians from the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, often with star singers. On 23 November, he and **Daniel Barenboim** were the only instrumentalists. After a first half consisting of Schubert’s Sonata in C Major for Piano Four Hands (‘Grand Duo’), they returned for the two Liebeslieder collections by Brahms (op. 52 and op. 65), accompanying a quartet drawn from the Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artists Development Program: **Lisette Oropesa** (soprano), **Sasha Cooke** (mezzo), **Matthew Plenk** (tenor), and **Shenyang** (bass). The Schubert was a musicians’ rather than a pianists’ performance: brilliantly alive, with bushels of wrong notes. The Brahms was another story. While the second-piano part, taken by Levine, is modest, Barenboim offered a revelatory rendition of the markedly more interesting first-piano part, shaping its melodies, rhythms, and exquisite embellishments in ravishing detail. In lesser performances, the vocal writing easily devolves into a free-for-all, but this time, it was a marvel of light and shadow. Oropesa, having

most to work with in this respect, was as remarkable for vibrant tone as for expressive variety. A subtle yet spicy presence in the ensembles, Cooke smouldered dangerously in her single solo, the warning of a village Circe (‘Wahre, wahre deinen Sohn’). Plenk’s agreeable, well-focused tone took on added glow in prominent solo lines as well as in his actual solos. Shenyang anchored the four-part writing with rock-solid assurance.

**MATTHEW GUREWITSCH**



Kate Lindsey and Joseph Kaiser in New York Festival's *Fugitives*

RICHARD TERMINI