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A Rich, and Enriching, Exploration of Russian Song

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Most of the time, when we go to a concert, we're offered a program of music without much context other than what we bring to it in our own minds. We're used to this, and when the concert is good, we love it. But how much richer and more intriguing is the kind of program Steven Blier brought to the Kennedy Center on Friday with a group from his New York Festival of Song, under the auspices of the Vocal Arts Society.



First there was the music, 20th-century Russian songs with texts by Anna Akhmatova (a great personality in the grand tradition of other bohemians of the time), Alexander Blok and the poets who influenced them or whom they influenced. Illuminating this collection of relatively unknown songs were poems (elegantly read by the actress Kathleen Chalfant) that reflected and enlarged on the musical texts. Giving all of this shape and life were Blier's own stories, comments, mini-biographies and asides about the relationships between the composers and the poets, delivered from the piano with the charm of an intimate friend and the intensely researched scholarship of a pedagogue. One song followed another with almost no pause. Every detail was designed to give the evening seamless coherence, and you left the hall feeling enriched, enlightened, entertained and grateful for the experience.

Soprano Dina Kuznetsova and baritone Nicolai Janitzky shared the Terrace Theater stage for songs of Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Sviridov, Slonimsky, Tchaikovsky, Cui and Shostakovich, delivered with both restraint and dramatic intensity. Each has a voice capable of the most subtle expression, as well as the common sense and musical imagination to use that voice well.

Blier accompanied with astonishing delicacy, and violinist Juliette Kang and cellist Thomas Kraines, both splendid artists, joined the group for Shostakovich's "Romance-Suite, on Poems by Alexander Blok," wonderfully sung by Kuznetsova, and for the concluding embellished reprise of "The Little Island," the modest Rachmaninoff work that opened the concert.

-- Joan Reinthaler

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