

The Man at the Piano

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

This Monday evening, a small, vibrant arts organization, [The New York Festival of Song](#), which I've long treasured, will be celebrating its 25th anniversary with a gala concert.

The show is scheduled to include Joseph Kaiser, the opera singer; Judy Kaye, the Broadway actress; and William Bolcom, the composer. But the real star of the show will be the man accompanying most of those performers on the piano: [Steven Blier](#).

By evening's end, we will have listened to a program he devised, read an introduction he wrote and heard lyrics he translated. We will have laughed at his jokes and listened to him speak engagingly about the context of the songs we are hearing — something he does with great verve.

And, not least, we will have heard him play some of the most beautiful piano imaginable, whether a South American art song, a tune by Gershwin or a Beatles number. I suppose I should also mention here that Blier, 61, who co-founded the organization with another fine pianist, [Michael Barrett](#), suffers from a [degenerative disease called facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy](#). We'll get to that in a minute. Suffice it to say that he is one of the most extraordinary people I know.

I met Blier about a dozen years ago through Laury Frieber, a colleague at Time Inc. Seduced by his wit, charm, and boundless intelligence, Frieber began going to Nyfos concerts and soon joined the board. (Everyone connected to the New York Festival of Song simply calls it Nyfos.) She convinced me to go to a concert. That's all it took. I was hooked.

I had never heard anything like a Nyfos concert — still haven't, really. There are no microphones; Blier believes deeply that unmiked music creates a more intimate experience. At a Nyfos concert, the lyrics matter as much as the music.

Most of all, though, a Nyfos concert has a theme — not some made-up excuse for stringing songs together, but something that makes deep musical or historical sense. Blier told me earlier this week that the main quality he seeks — in a song, a concert, or a performer — is “truthfulness.”

“[Manning the Canon: Songs of Gay Life](#),” was a recent Nyfos program that explored the works of gay composers and songs about gay life. “Latin Lovers” included songs by Antonio Carlos Jobim as well as Ernesto Lecuona, the Cuban composer. My all-time favorite, which Blier programmed in 2002, was entitled “[Dvorak’s American Soul](#).” It explored the musical repercussions of the three years Antonin Dvorak lived in the United States in the 1890s — both on Dvorak and the black classical composers who studied with him. It blew me away.

Back when I first met him, Blier walked with a cane. I used to see him occasionally at dinners organized by Frieber, and, though he was happy to talk about anything under the sun, he didn’t talk about his physical problems. The dinners eventually stopped, and I saw Blier primarily from my seat at Nyfos concerts.

Some years ago, Blier began using a wheelchair. Over time, he went from someone who could lift himself up with relative ease to speak to us from the stage to someone who had to remain seated on his piano stool because his legs would no longer allow him to stand.

It seemed a miracle to me that the person trapped in this body was still such a stunning pianist. Yet when I asked him how long he expected to be able to continue playing, he said, “Forever.”

This is not, it turns out, the words of a man in denial. Despite the toll muscular dystrophy has taken on his body, Blier considers himself, in some important ways, lucky. It did not target either his face or his forearms and hands, which remain supple and strong. He can still laugh his endearing laugh and play his beautiful piano — perhaps the two most important things in the world for him.

But that’s not all there is to it. In recent years, Blier has engaged with piano teachers who have helped him compensate for restrictions on his upper arm movements. He has worked incredibly hard to adapt to his condition so that he can continue doing what he loves. Though he can’t conquer the disease, he has refused to let the disease conquer him.

“Muscular dystrophy is not something I would recommend,” he told me as our talk was coming to an end. “But it is an amazing teacher. It shows you what you are made of. To live your life in a wheelchair, you have to man-up. To go on stage takes some guts. But you find your confidence and you become your own advocate.”

Soon, we had stopped talking about his disease and were back on his favorite subject: music. “That moment of connection with me, my piano, the song, the lyrics, the singer, and audience — if you do it right, it is like a moon voyage,” he said. “The liftoff is incredible.”

Steven Blier may not be able to play forever, but so long as he is playing, I want to feel that liftoff, too.

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