

VOCE DI MECHE: November 2015

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[AMAZONAS 2015](#)



Guillaume Vincent and Jeanne Gerard

Music is always good, but chamber music in an intimate space is the best. We love the Weill Recital Hall where one can get up close and personal with the artists. There was a fine selection of artists Tuesday night sharing the Spanish music of which we are so fond. Coming from several Latin American countries as well as from Spain, they performed to draw attention to the rain forest of the Amazon--so important to the health and welfare of the entire planet.

It was a most generous program and the first thing that struck us about the singers--before we even heard them sing--was how beautiful and stylish Latin American women are. We might as well have been attending a Miss Universe contest! But these women have a great deal more to offer; all of them sang with intense involvement with the material and all connected well with the audience. Bravissima!

Accompanied by Oscar Lobete, Colombian soprano Ana Maria Ruge sang two lovely songs by Colombian composer Roberto Pineda Duque. Ms. Ruge appeared in a stunning diaphanous silver gown that matched the silver in her sound. We loved the romantic "*Tu Pupila es Azul*" as well as the melancholy "*Pobre Amor*".

Spanish soprano Laura Sabatel appeared in a stunning orange gown and serenaded us with "*El Arbol del Olvido*" by Argentinean composer Alberto Ginastera. The dance rhythm seemed to affect our entire body.

Lyric soprano Nardo Muñoz hails from Columbia and lent her ringing tone to "*Vivir Sin Tus Caricias*" by Cuban composer Eduardo Sánchez and "*Algún Día*" by Colombian composer Jaime Leónferro.

Looking like Amneris in a gorgeous green gown was Mexican soprano Mónica Ábrego who was joined by some stellar musicians from the Rebow Ensemble for *Cuatro Nocturnos* by the young Mexican composer Juan Pablo Contreras, a departure from most of the other works on the program which were composed in the early 20th c. Conducted by Ricardo Jaramillo, the combination of flute, clarinet, bassoon, bass and string quartet made for some fine listening and Ms. Abrego has a killer trill.

Slipping into this Latin American lineup was French soprano Jeanne Gérard who, accompanied by Guillaume Vincent, contributed three wonderful songs. In "*Canción del Ruiseñor*" from *Doña Francisquita* by the Spanish composer Amadeo Vives her lovely and agile voice joined with the piano in imitating the song of the nightingale. From *El Anillo de Hierro* by Spanish composer Pedro Márquez we heard "*Lágrimas Mías*", a song of suffering. And finally, "*Al Amor*" from the Catalan composer Fernando Obradors.

Mezzo-soprano Sarah Nelson Craft sang selections from the familiar cycle *Canciones Populares* by the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla. We have reviewed these songs several times this month and never tire of them. We were a trifle uneasy that Ms. Craft seemed to ignore the ironic symbolism of "*El Paño Moruno*" but by the time she got to the sad "*Asturiana*" and the angry "*Polo*" we became far more involved. She was accompanied by the superb guitarist Nilko Andreas Guarín.

Mr. Guarin delighted us in Manuel de Falla's *Danza de la Vida Breve* with cellist Serafim Smigelsky. The duo are equally adept at contemporary music as they performed the world premiere of *Reino Incierto* by Colombian composer Juan Calderón.

There was yet more instrumental music in this generous program--pianist Hyemin Kim performed Castelnuovo Tedesco's *Fantasia for Piano and Guitar Op. 49* with Mr. Guarin matching her pianistic skill on the guitar.

Mr. Guarin appeared once more in Luigi Bocherini's late 18th c. "*Introduccion y Fandango*" from his *Guitar Quintet No. 4 in D*. We particularly enjoyed the *glissandi* on Mr. Smigelsky's cello and Noemi Perez Segura's way with the castanets.

The final piece on the program was *Concierto del Sur* for Mr. Guarin's guitar and chamber orchestra, conducted by Mr. Jaramillo. We would like to point out that the newly formed Rebow Ensemble, which contributed so much to the success of the evening, continues to put a modern spin on classical music with its diverse collection of musicians. We will be hearing more from them in the future.

Mr. Guarin founded Azlo Productions to increase musical and cultural exchange between Spain, Latin America, and the USA and to unify the Americas through art. We have nothing but good things to say about social action through music.

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[GOYESCAS](#)



The cast of Bare Operas' Goyescas

Enrique Granados' "opera" *Goyescas* has lain dormant for a century, just like *Sleeping Beauty*. We put opera in quotes because the way we experienced it was as a dance/ song/ theater piece. The marvelous music pulls it all together. Maestro Sesto Quatrini himself did the arrangement for his 14 piece orchestra which played Granados' music as beautifully as one might hope for. Music Director Laetitia Ruccolo really knows the piano, the instrument for which the music was originally written.

Granados was inspired by the paintings of Francisco Goya who depicted the bohemians of the 18th c. --the *majos* and *majas* of Madrid. Librettist Fernando Periquet y Zuaznabar was obliged to fit the text to the melodies of Granados' previously written suite for piano.

The story is a simple one. One of the *majos*, the bullfighter Paquito, flirts with Rosario a woman of the upper classes, angering his girlfriend Pepa and enraging Rosario's high-born boyfriend Fernando. Fernando will let Rosario attend their dance but only if he comes as her protector. At the dance, the intrusion is resented and insults are exchanged. Paquito and Fernando fight; Fernando dies in Rosario's arms.

This is not the frothy plot of a *zarzuela*; it reminded us of how many operas have men killing each other, or at least threatening each other, over a flirtatious woman. *Eugene Onegin* comes to mind and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, among several others. We are here dealing with more than simple jealousy, however, since class issues are involved. We wondered what would happen today if some Wall Street types crashed a party in the projects.

The four leads came across rather well with the standout being tenor Sean Christensen who sang with a full-throated tenor, much enlarged since we last heard him sing. Furthermore he seemed every inch an aristocrat, sneering disdainfully at the punk/*majos*.

Soprano Lauren Yokabaskas sang the role of Rosario and sang it well; she convinced us that she loved Fernando, even if she didn't convince him! What was missing was an understanding of why and how she was flirting with Paquito or why she even wanted to attend the party. But the librettist didn't give us anything to go on. She was lovely in the wistful aria about the nightingale in the third scene and the subsequent duet when Fernando arrives, just before the fatal duel.

Hee-Pyoung Oh has a substantial baritone instrument and was quite convincing as the tough *majo* Paquito. He swaggered and threatened in a menacing manner which was quite different from the subtle threat and menace he portrayed when we heard him a couple months ago, singing the role of Giorgio Germont.

Molly Boggess as Pepa exhibited a fine mezzo-soprano and snarled in jealousy as her relationship with Paquito was threatened.

The work was fortunately sung in Spanish but our Latin American companion had as much trouble as we did understanding the Spanish. He also observed that the translation (by Angela Marroy Boerger) was often inaccurate. But the titles (Briana Hunter and Enrico Lagasca) were essential.

We agree with Bare Opera's goal of instituting innovations that make opera fresh and visceral, achieving intimacy in unorthodox spaces. Their first production took place in an art gallery. This production took place in a long narrow space (Bat Haus in Bushwick). The room was arranged so that everyone had a great view and a sense of intimacy, with the long side of the room providing a very wide but shallow playing space. Characters entered and exited by means of a staircase since there were no "wings". The orchestra was at the far end of the space. It all worked just fine. To our delight, we observed the mostly young audience enjoying themselves. Bare Opera is doing something right, selling out six performances. Tomorrow's *matinée* will have some of the same cast members and some different ones.

There was a stunning curtain raiser that served to set the mood. Excerpts from Isaac Albéniz' *1886 Suite Española* filled the air with rhythm and color and the sounds of a guitar, imitated but not present. Stunningly choreographed by Liz Piccoli, who also served as Assistant Director, three dancers interpreted five of Albéniz' tributes to cities in Spain. Although our taste in dance runs heavily toward classical ballet, we were surprised to find so much to like in the dancing of Sharlane Conner (the girl in white), Tiger Brown (the girl in red) and Vivake Kamsingsavath (the boy in rags).

The dancing was varied and seemed to ride on the surface of the music as if it were being created spontaneously. Ms. Conner is delicate but intense and uses her hands beautifully. Ms. Brown is fiery and athletic with great leaps. Mr. Kamsingsavath showed great ease with the moves of hip-hop but made them artistic in "*Castilla*". There was a tender duet between him and Ms. Conner in "*Granada*". There was an interesting use of a rope as the three dancers seemed to work out their relationship

with one another. In "*Asturia*" (our favorite) they were crowned with headgear made of tiny lights. In "*Aragon*", the crowns came off and the dancing became frisky and playful.

As much as we liked the dancing in *Suite Española*, we did not care for the dancers invading the space of *Goyescas* any more than the *majos* and *majas* enjoyed the invasion by the aristocrats. We found it distracted us from the singing.

We were not pleased by the costuming. Obviously Costume Designer Laura Kung was going for a certain look but the costumes were not especially attractive and required even less attractive undergarments. Neither were we taken by her costumes for the women in *Goyescas*. According to the program notes, she had in mind the designs of Balenciaga for the aristocrats but we doubt that the audience would have been familiar with his work of that epoch. Fernando's black suit and shirt seemed just about right but Rosario's costume with loose plaid pants looked unflattering.

Stage Director Jonathan Warman elected to set the work in 1980, or at least to be inspired by Pedro Almodóvar's films of that period, when Franco's death in 1975 initiated repercussions of anarchic freedom, individuality, and the new wave of punk.

This is only the second production by Bare Opera which attempts to, and has succeeded at, providing a fresh modern take on the opera experience. Visual arts are put on equal standing with music. That doesn't mean that the set was lavish. There was only a small platform and a large banner proclaiming "*Juventud Socialista Unida*"...United Socialist Youth, as we translate it.

So yes, it was rather bare in framework but the dancing and singing made it a fine evening!

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DOUBLE BILL AT JUILLIARD OPERA



Samuel Levine and his baby factory in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*--photo by Nan Melville



Cast of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*--photo by Nan Melville

Neither work on Juilliard Opera's double-bill is frequently performed; both deserve to be. The program notes written by the wildly imaginative director Ted Huffman describe in detail the resonances between the two one-act operas. To us, they are both parables about war. Francis Poulenc's wildly funny *opéra bouffe*, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, was produced in 1947 but based upon a surrealistic 1917 play by Apollinaire.

Although it was written about World War I, it was perfectly suited to the post-World War II period. War tends to waste a country's resources, both capital and human; following wars there is an understandable "baby boom" as the countries involved must replace the population. As Shakespeare put it--"The world must be peopled".

The moral urging of Le Directeur who opens the show is to produce babies. In this role, baritone Theo Hoffman employed his fine baritone and considerable comedic acting skills.

In an interesting gloss on feminism, the heroine Thérèse, dissatisfied with her role as a woman, decides to become a man and takes the name Tirésias. She sacrifices her breasts, grows a beard, snatches a man's moustache, and plots to enter several male dominated professions. And this was long before gender altering surgery was performed. How very prescient! Soprano Liv Redpath sang beautifully with a clear high soprano and generated sympathy for her character's ridiculous ambitions.

This abandonment of her wifely duties leaves her husband (Le Mari) no choice but to become a woman and make babies. Samuel Levine could not have been any better in this role, fighting off the advances of Le Gendarme who arrives on horseback. Fan Jia's baritone was perfect for this role. We have heard him sing in French before but had no idea he was a skilled comic actor.

You may be wondering how Le Mari made the babies. Tens of thousands of them! He started what looked like a baby factory, that's how. And he decided to produce babies who would grow up to be in professions he needed. Again, a prescient idea to imagine *in vitro* pregnancies. And also a barbed reference to parents who try to control their offspring's life choices.

As two embattled friends arguing over gambling we heard the excellent tenor Matthew Swensen (Lacouf) and the equally excellent baritone Xiaomeng Zhang (Presto). We have no idea what these characters had to do with the story but the entire piece is surreal.

We recall seeing this opera at Juilliard about 3 years ago and we remember that it was cleverly directed and costumed--but also very different from this production. Samal Blak was responsible for the Scenic and Costume Design which was highly original. The very long credenza achieved multiple identities, even that of the baby factory from which Mr. Swenson crawled out in diapers. A large entrance area upstage contained a two-dimensional horse for Mr. Jia's arrival. Costumes were appropriate for the late 40's and were occasionally shed. It isn't often that one gets to see tenors in diapers, tenors in dresses, baritones in boxers, and sopranos in scanties.

The libretto contained much wordplay that one might have missed if one did not speak French. Let us just say it was raunchy in spots. Director Ted Huffman did not

miss a single opportunity for a sight gag and the audience shared some marvelous belly laughs.

Poulenc's music is eclectic and there was much jazz to be heard and references to other composers' works. We heard quite a bit of dance music--waltz and polka rhythms abounded. In the pit there was a lively young woman conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson, who brought out every ounce of delight in the score. In a serious moment we believe we heard presages of *Dialogue des Carmélites* which Poulenc would compose a decade later. The Juilliard Orchestra has no peer and performed beautifully under Ms. Wilson's baton.

ANGELINE AND HER TATTOOED MAN



The sterling cast of Angeline and Her Tattooed Man (photo by Jill LeVine)

Before you start wondering who composed an opera with such a strange name, let us come right out and tell you that the title represents two songs from operettas by Victor Herbert--"My Angeline" comes from the 1895 *Wizard of the Nile*, while "The Tattooed Man" comes from the 1897 *The Idol's Eye*. Both had lyrics by Harry B. Smith.

Only in New York could you find an organization devoted exclusively to the works of this seminal figure of the music theater world who achieved extraordinary popularity at the turn of the 20th c. Thanks to the tireless work of Artistic Director Alyce Mott, Victor Herbert Renaissance Project Live (hereinafter referred to as VHRP LIVE!) has spent the last 16 months reviving his reputation here in New York.

Mr. Herbert was born in Ireland, raised in Germany, and became a huge success in the United States. He began as a cellist and went on to become a teacher, a conductor, and a composer. He has 2 operas and 43 operettas to his credit, not to mention instrumental music. We may think of him as a figure bridging the world of Viennese operetta and American musical comedy. The plots are silly but the music is glorious and the texts are often witty. What most impresses us is that, like Gilbert and Sullivan in England, he knew how to set the English language making use of clever rhymes.

Last night's program comprised nearly two dozen numbers drawn from 14 different operettas, selected on the basis of their tendency to provoke giggles, chuckles, and guffaws. The company has some fine singers, most of them operatically trained. Some of them we remembered well from last year's *Naughty Marietta* (review archived) and some of them known from Light Opera of New York (LOONY) an organization which also produces Mr. Herbert's works. We seem to be entering a period of Herbert Renaissance, as VHRP LIVE! has so named themselves.

Music Director Michael Thomas played Herbert's music with a light and lively touch and the singers appeared to be having a grand time. And of course, the audience did as well. Ms. Mott, wearing her Stage Director hat, kept things moving right along and Emily Cornelius' choreography produced a style that felt authentic. Although no one knows exactly what performances looked like over a century ago, everything about this production felt right, just the way we imagined it.

Erika Person made her company debut and revealed a fine aptitude for the style, probably based on her success with New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players. She had the fine diction and dramatic sense required for "Mrs. Grundy" from *Old Dutch*, a 1909 work.

Stephen Faulk, known from LOONY, performed the clever "I, and Myself, and Me", a clever ditty from the 1905 *Wonderland* that required him to exhibit three personalities.

We seem to remember him singing with a brogue in last year's *Naughty Marietta*. David Seatter who also sings with LOONY entertained us with "That's Why They Say I'm Crazy" from the same work.

The lovely Sarah Caldwell Smith, who performed the lead in *Naughty Marietta* and has been seen in NYGASP productions, was delightful in "Always Do As People Say You Should" from the 1898 *The Fortune Teller*. Of course there was a clever twist in the last verse and she made the most of it.

Robert Balonek, known from Chelsea Opera, was hilarious as he sang about filling "The Shoes of Husband Number One" from the 1915 *The Princess Pat*. Bray Wilkins performed "I Wish I Was an Island in an Ocean of Girls" from the same work.

Vira Slywotzky, known from Mirror Visions Ensemble, lent her large soprano to "Don José of Sevilla" from the 1897 *The Serenade*. She sang a duet called "Only in the Play" with Mr. Faulk that had a charm all its own.

There were a lot of jokes about women handling and mishandling men--and vice versa. One of those numbers "Make Him Guess" was performed by soprano Angela Christine Smith, a NYGASP and LOONY artist.

Katherine Corle and Mitchell Roe sang the cute duet "Love By Telephone" and we couldn't help wondering what a 21st c. librettist might write about love by internet. Oh, if only we had composers these days who could write a tune!

As for the Angeline of the program, she was a contortionist and a strange marital partner--a tale related by bass-baritone Matthew Wages, a Gilbert and Sullivan expert. And the catchy tune "The Tattooed Man" also belonged to him. Surprisingly, the two songs were not from the same operetta.

All of the voices were excellent and the singers knew how to get a song across. Our only reservation was that in the opening and closing choruses, the clever words got lost.

Coming in March will be Herbert's *The Fortune Teller*. Save 3/9 and 3/10 for a guaranteed good time.

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EIN LIEDERABEND



Jacob Ingbar, Christine Oh, María Fernanda Brea, Mikaela Bennett

A *liederabend* at Juilliard is always an event. We often feel as if we are discovering the stars of tomorrow at the early stages of their careers and that is exciting. Yesterday we heard four undergraduates, each one a promising artist. We also heard a counter-tenor who is a post-graduate; but Jakub Józef Orliński is already famous and missed the photo-op in order to make a plane to Europe where he is performing.

It was just a month ago that we heard and enjoyed his performance of some Italian baroque *arias*. Yesterday we heard him sing in French with a lovely tone that is

youthful but never thin. He sang five songs by Reynaldo Hahn; we loved the way his floated top notes lingered in the air. Although the French line was perfectly *legato*, our favorite *chanson* was the lively "*Fêtes Galantes*".

Soprano María Fernanda Brea is well remembered from last summer's *Fille du Regiment*, in which she performed a charming Marie for Prelude to Performance (review archived). Yesterday she sang once again in French--Alfred Bachelet's "*Chère nuit*" in which she perfectly negotiated the dramatic upward leaps. There were also three fine songs by Massenet. We loved "*Le printemps visite la terre*". In the serenade "*Nuit d'Espagne*" collaborative pianist Valeriya Polunina varied her technique to provide suggestions of a guitar, sometimes strummed and sometimes plucked.

Baritone Jacob Ingbar not only has a pleasantly mellow sound but the gift of storytelling. He wisely chose Robert Schumann's *Romanzen und Balladen Op. 53*, comprising three stories requiring a hefty dose of dramatic interpretation which Mr. Ingbar handled expressively. Kathryn Felt's piano was particularly lovely in "*Loreley*".

Soprano Christine Oh, accompanied by Jinhee Park, who has a soft touch on the keys, sang selections from Hugo Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch*. Ms. Oh has a fine *vibrato* and a voice that opens up on top like an umbrella. We wanted just a bit more expression in "*Wie lange schon war immer mein Verlangen*". When the poet finally gets a musician boyfriend she might show a bit of dismay when he scrapes away at the violin. Alternatively, she might blissfully ignore his ineptitude. In either case, we want the singer to have a reaction. In "*Mein Liebster singt am Haus*" the poet is given to adolescent hyperbole and we'd like to see more of the histrionics as she weeps a river of blood. Happily, Ms. Oh captured the humor of "*Ich hab' in Penna einen Liebsten wohnen*", the feminine equivalent of Leporello's "Catalogue aria".

Soprano Mikaela Bennett closed the program with four songs by André Previn. We have heard Ms. Bennett sing with NYFOS and were dazzled by her voice and stage presence as she sang American cabaret classics. Yesterday she put heart and soul into Previn's songs but we could not say we liked the songs or wanted to hear them again. She sang "Do You Know Him?" *a capella* and once again impressed us with her tone and her phrasing as well as her commitment to the text. We were also impressed with her diction; every word was clear. Emil Duncumb was her collaborative pianist.

We applaud these young singers for their talent, for their hard work, and for the effort put into memorizing the material so that they could make excellent contact with the audience. There were some minor flaws in the nasal vowels of French and an occasional inconsistency with the final "ch" in German but the diction was always clear and the text well communicated. Bravissimi!

BABETTE'S FEAST



Sebastian Lambertz, Babette Hierholzer, Eva-Maria Summerer, Laure Barras

We feasted on music last night when the German Forum presented a most satisfying recital at the Library for Performing Arts. (We also feasted on hors d'oeuvres and libations but we won't go there!)

With the illustrious pianist Babette Hierholzer (Artistic Director of the German Forum) accompanying two superb singers and the welcome contributions of clarinetist Sebastian Lambertz, nothing was wanting in this celebration of German music. The goal of the German Forum is to present outstanding young artists from the German-speaking world and, judging by the past couple recitals we've reviewed, they achieve this goal admirably.

President Henry Meyer-Oertel welcomed the audience and introduced the sponsors and notables in the audience as well as the young artists, and did so with grace and good humor which put everyone in the mood to have a good time. And so we did.

Swiss soprano Laure Barras opened the program with "*Mein Herr Marquis*" (otherwise known as Adele's "laughing song") from Johann Strauss' operetta *Die Fledermaus*. We have reviewed this very same *aria* twice already this week but let us say we heard it afresh from Ms. Barras.

What distinguishes her is not only the brightness and clarity of her voice but her total immersion in the character and the originality of her interpretation. Her Adele was considerably inebriated but that did not result in careless diction. *Au contraire*, every word was clear and, if you understood German, it was hilarious. And if you didn't understand the words, you could not fail to appreciate the facial expressions and gestures. The *fioritura* was as clear as champagne and just as bubbly.

And then along came dusky-voiced mezzo soprano Eva-Maria Summerer singing Prince Orlofsky's aria "*Ich lade gern mir Gäste ein*" which we have always called "*Chacun à son goût*". If the entire recital had been from *Die Fledermaus* we would have not complained. How delightful!

Clarinetist Sebastian Lambertz is performing his graduation recital from Mannes College on 12/4 and, in light of his enormous talent and onstage poise, we found it hard to believe that he is a student. He joined Ms. Hierholzer and Ms. Barras for the lyrical Schubert lied "*Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*", in which the clarinet echoes the voice. His lyricism was sustained throughout the register with dynamics under perfect control and some ear-tickling trills.

Dare we suggest that Ms. Barras' Swiss background gave her the edge in yodeling? Indeed, the way Schubert wrote it and the three artists performed it, one could easily visualize the lonely shepherd pining for his love in a distant inaccessible valley, with only the echo of the clarinet to keep him company. Just listen to the joyous major key when he realizes that Spring is coming and the snow will melt and he will see his sweetheart once again. The increase in tempo translated into great excitement.

Mr. Lambertz had his solo moment at the end of the program when he switched to his A clarinet, performing Francis Poulenc's *Sonata for clarinet and piano*. He has a terrific technique and a most expressive lyricism. As one might have predicted, we favored the second movement "*Romanza*" in which one of the motifs reminded us of Prokofiev's music for the ballet--*Romeo and Juliet*. The final movement could only be described as frisky.

We felt fortunate to hear some duets, which we always enjoy. Yes, we heard "*Abendsegen*" from Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel* just a few days ago, but hearing it in perfect German was a special treat. We also enjoyed the scene of the presentation of the silver rose by young Octavian to Sophie, his cousin's intended bride. Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* has some gorgeous orchestral colors which Ms. Hierholzer captured in the piano. There is nothing as satisfying as two voices in harmony!

There were two humorous folksongs which Ms. Barras introduced with a most charming manner. We would wager that she has had quite a bit of dramatic training since she so effectively inhabits the character of the text--first the ambivalent Babette (!) from Haydn's "*Eine sehr gewöhnliche Geschichte*" and the pubescent girl of Brahms "*Och Moder, ich well en Ding han*". We are not sure what dialect of German that was but both songs were rendered with great humor.

Ms. Summerer also had her chance to sing with clarinet in Brahms' *Zwei Gesänge op. 91*, originally written for voice and viola. Her voice has a firmness and breadth in the lower register that is quite appealing.

We had only one minor quibble and we have been quibbling about this for quite some time. We would hope that singers would memorize their arias and not use music stands. The singers made much more of an impression when they sang "off book".

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LARISA MARTINEZ AND FRIENDS



Larisa Martinez and Suchan Kim

We have enjoyed the operatic performances of versatile soprano Larisa Martinez for the past two years-- a winsome Barbarina in Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*, the larger than life Musetta in Puccini's *La Bohème*, Fire in Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, and Giulietta in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*. So it was no small thrill to experience an entire evening of her performances at the old world townhouse of the Kosciuszko Foundation, presented by the Lyric Chamber Music Society of New York.

The program was wisely designed to show off Ms. Martinez' many assets but also included the artistry of splendid baritone Suchan Kim, whose Mozart we have heard and appreciated, and four cellists, with the superb accompanist Laetitia Ruccolo at the piano. As if this were not enough we also got to see some fine Spanish dancing from Elisabet Torras Aguilera.

Ms. Martinez appears to have it all--a beautiful and stylish appearance, a warm stage presence, fine technique, and a most attractive sound with just the right amount of *vibrato*. We enjoyed her most in the operatic works, virtually swooning over "*Eccomi... Oh Quante Volte*" from the aforementioned Bellini, in which the doomed Giulietta despairs of the marriage planned for her and longs for the distant Romeo.

Bellini's long lovely phrases were exquisitely rendered. The *fioritura* was florid and delivered in ringing tones. High notes were beautifully spun out and dynamics used effectively for emotional impact.

Two duets with Mr. Kim were extraordinary from both vocal and dramatic standpoints. From among many possibilities of soprano-baritone duets, the choices were perfect. In "*La ci darem la mano*" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Mr. Kim was a sly seducer and Ms. Martinez an ultimately compliant Zerlina.

Mr. Kim has a substantial sound and fine phrasing and easily switched gears to become the unfortunate Rigoletto patiently listening to Gilda's recitation of her seduction/rape by the Duke. He clearly showed Rigoletto's inner turmoil while he attempted to comfort his beloved daughter. It was a real heart breaker and Ms. Martinez switched easily from the minx in the previous scene to the betrayed young woman in the second.

We experience Ms. Martinez as more of an opera singer but that doesn't mean there was any fault in her *lieder* singing. We might have preferred a less operatic sound for Brahms' simple folksong "*Botschaft*", but we enjoyed hearing Clara Schumann's "*Liebst du um Schönheit*" and were better able to put Strauss' setting out of our ears than we were the first time we heard it.

But the best *lied* was the meditative "*Nacht und Träume*", one of Schubert's finest, as she eased up on power and volume, respecting the lovely text.

Hugo Wolf's "*Erstes Liebeslied Eines Mädchens*" has its frisky *double entendres* and Ms. Martinez captured them with a sly smile.

We had just heard mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard sing the 15th c. Spanish folksong "*Las Morillas de Jaen*" and it was great to hear it once again. The graceful dancer Elisabet Torras Aguilera added her terpsichorean skills, casting aside the castanets she used in Isaac Albeniz' "*Sevilla*" in favor of a fan, which only Spanish women know how to employ so effectively. She also danced through the cute Obradors song "*Chiquitita la novia*".

Following the dancing, four cellists made their entrance and proceeded to play "Fugue #1" from Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*. Elad Kabilio was reviewed last week but Grace Ho, Oded Hadar and Caleb van der Swaagh were new to us. We have never heard four cellos in ensemble but Mr. Kabilio did a fine job of arranging; the variety of tone was impressive with bowing and plucking bringing out the different voices.

The four cellists remained to accompany Ms. Martinez as she sang more of Villa Lobos' "*Bachianas #5*" than we have ever heard before. We still prefer the *vocalise* section which allowed us to focus on the singer's purity of tone.

As encore we heard a selection called "*La Petenera*" from Moreno Torroba's 1928 zarzuela *La Marchenera*. Those who read us will recall how fondly we think of *zarzuela*. Again, our greedy ears want to hear the entire work!

JACOPERA



Jesse Pieper, Jennie Legary, Anastasia Rege, Christina Hourihan

"Why JACOPERA?" we wondered when we received the invitation. Duh! Jen, Ana, and Chrissy-- JAC. Three friends who love to sing and started a group to present recitals. Last night we attended their debut at the National Opera Center, and a mighty fine debut it was.

We had reviewed soprano Christina Hourihan in the dog days of summer and actually went onstage to wind up her Olympia. That aria was not on last night's program but there was plenty of other material to enjoy.

We particularly enjoyed Ms. Hourihan's sense of drama in everything she sang, making each aria believable, even when out of context. Mozart's "*Batti Batti, o bel Masetto*" from *Don Giovanni* was a standout and truly conveyed the various strategies Zerlina uses to win Masetto's forgiveness. This gal can really act!

Saturday night we heard "*Mein Herr Marquis*" from Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* sung in English. Last night Ms. Hourihan sang it in the original German and we liked it so much better. We could really believe her as the maid Adele putting on airs for her employer Eisenstein.

We also enjoyed her "*O non credea mirarti*" from Bellini's *La Sonnambula* both the *cantabile* section and the *cabaletta* "*Ah, non giunge!*" in which she unleashed her coloratura skills.

Soprano Anastasia Rege made serious inroads into our disinterest in singing in English. We particularly liked her performance of "The Trees on the Mountain" from Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*; we liked it so much we hope to hear the entire opera in the near future. Most importantly, we could understand the words!

Similarly, "Dido's Lament" from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* was beautifully rendered with fine diction and lovely phrasing. But she also sang well in Italian--the "*Ave Maria*" from Verdi's *Otello*--always a heart breaker.

Mezzo-soprano Jennie Legary had her finest moment in "*Va! Laisse couler mes larmes*" from Massenet's *Werther* which impacted us with its intense feeling and the richness of Ms. Legary's voice. She not only handled the French beautifully but also sang in Italian --"*O Mio Fernando*" from Donizetti's *La Favorita* in which she displayed a great deal of strength in the lower register. We wonder why this glorious opera is so rarely performed.

One advantage of having a group of singers is the opportunity to mix it up with duets and trios. The opening duet was the first movement from *Stabat Mater* by Pergolesi which sounded gorgeous but was marred by the use of (YIKES!) music stands.

The two sopranos sounded glorious in "*Sull'aria*" from Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* with Ms. Rege taking the role of the Countess and Ms. Hourihan performing the part of Susanna. It would have been much better off the book, and the same can be said for "*Sous le Dôme épais*" from Delibes' *Lakmé*. Memorize, girls, memorize!!!

The closing number was "Lift Thine Eyes" from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in which the three voices created perfect harmonies that thrilled the ear.

Piano accompaniment was provided by the excellent pianist Jesse Pieper who is relatively new to New York and who deserves a welcome mat.

This fine grouping will be going on tour and are sure to delight audiences on the West Coast.

(c) meche kroop

LUCIA--A GHOST STORY



A ghost (Christine Duncan) haunts Lucia (Kristina Malinauskaite)

It's been over two years since we heard soprano Kristina Malinauskaite sing "*Regnava nel silenzio*" at a Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble recital. Yesterday we got to hear her perform the entire role, one for which she is well suited. Donizetti's masterpiece *Lucia del Lammermoor* is a gothic tale that resonates with us today since it shows the enormous personal cost of tribal rivalry and the subjugation of women.

Poor Lucia is robbed of the love of her life, Sir Edgardo of Ravenswood (Michael Celentano), by her selfish manipulative brother Enrico (Yun-Kwan Yu), who forces her to marry Lord Arturo Bucklaw (Lindell Carter) to save himself from political ruin. This cannot end well and of course it doesn't. Lucia goes mad, stabs Arturo, hallucinates, and dies. Edgardo stabs himself when he learns of her death. Enrico is filled with remorse and shame.

The opera received an honorable production by Vocal Productions NYC with some valuable contributions by students of the High School of Art and Design, the auditorium of which was host to the production, and a fine space it is!

The costumes, credited to Zhanka Melnechuk were appropriate to the 19th c. and suitable for a household in mourning for Lucia's late mother. Costumes for the wedding scene were lively and colorful. Men wore sashes emblematic of their clan. Set designer Kent Gasser kept things simple but effective for Act I with a fountain and a cemetery. Projected on a screen upstage were scenes reflective of the setting.

Captain of the Guards Normanno (David Roush) is trying to locate an intruder with whom Lucia has been meeting secretly at dawn. His ratting her out to Enrico sets the tragedy in motion.

Lucia's scene with her handmaid Alisia (Viktoriya Koreneva), as she waits for Edgardo, serves to show the audience just how fragile she is. Donizetti's music here is eerie and Associate Conductor Francisco Miranda's handling of the "harp" was superb. Ms. Malinauskaite shone in the *cavatina*--beautifully lyrical in the *cantabile* and increasingly frantic in the *cabaletta*.

The scene was enhanced by the balletic presence of the ghost of a woman who died at the fountain (Christine Duncan). This spirit reappears in the scene when Lucia dies. We found it powerful although others may prefer to have the spirit exist only in Lucia's mind and not onstage. Alisia is worried for Lucia and tries to persuade her to abandon this hopeless love since the two families have a long-standing blood feud.

Of course the scene we were all waiting for was the mad scene and Ms. Malinauskaite did not disappoint. She built the scene slowly to the *fioritura* fireworks. The duet with the flute was haunting. One rarely hears a glass harmonica these days!

It was great to see a young woman conducting and Vera Volchansky was fun to watch as she used her body as well as her baton to pull together an orchestra that got off to a somewhat ragged start. We always enjoy the woodwind solos and the recalcitrant horns. The Maestra brought out the hoofbeats of Enrico's horse as he approaches Edgardo's castle where he challenges the latter to a duel.

Kevin Courtemanche served as Stage Director and kept things moving along. Not only was the ballet of the spirit an interesting addition but also the inclusion of a scene we had never seen before--a scene in which Chaplain Raimondo (Kofi Hayford) accuses Normanno of creating the tragedy. Normanno fall at his feet in shame.

Trevor Trotto is credited with the lighting and this was most appreciated in the storm scene when Enrico comes to challenge Edgardo to a duel.

Chorus Master Bill Atkinson can be credited with the fine work of the small chorus. Valentin Peytchinov is Artistic Director of Vocal Productions NYC and we cannot help spilling his beans. Next May they will be presenting Verdi's *Don Carlos*! After seeing their *Contes d'Hoffman* and their *Lucia di Lammermoor*, we are convinced they are not afraid of a challenge.

On a final positive note, the titles were exceptional and added a great deal. They included identification of which character was singing what. We need more of this!

It's a great mission to put on fully-staged operas with orchestra, giving young singers an opportunity to perform an entire role and giving audience members an opportunity to see good opera at a minimal price point. Bravi tutti!

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OPERA, ALL OPERA, AND NOTHING BUT OPERA



New York Lyric Opera Theatre

Last night we attended an Opera Gala at Weill Recital Hall. We heard 32 singers in 16 scenes. Our ears are ringing with so much beautiful music, conducted from the piano by Maestro Richard Cordova, whom we well remember from Little Opera Theater's presentation of Carlisle Floyd's *Slow Dusk*. Last night he did not have an orchestra at his disposal but he made the piano sound like one!

If General/Artistic Director Elizabeth Heuermann was responsible for directing, we would like to point out that several of the scenes showed the result of a creative hand. Ms. Heuermann apparently put the show together and also sang the role of Adele in the final scene comprising most of Act II of Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*.

It is this final scene that sticks in our mind. It was festive; it was well sung; it was gorgeously costumed by Mori Lee with performers wearing masks to match their gem-colored gowns. Not only did Ms. Heuermann make a fine Adele but soprano Jessica Sandige was a standout as Rosalinde, pretending to be an Hungarian Countess. This "*Czárás*" was fortuitously and appropriately sung in German--appropriate because of the humorous line "Of course I'm Hungarian, I just sang in German".

The rest of the scene was sung in English, perhaps not our preference, but the translation was a good one and the English was well enunciated, something we do not take for granted. Mezzo soprano Allison Waggener, remembered from Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble, nicely handled the *travesti* role of Prince Orlofsky, host of the costume ball.

Thinking about the rest of the evening, there were more highlights than we have room to write about but we will try to cover at least a few.

We have previously heard Ms. Sandige only in small roles so it delighted us to hear her twice last night--not only in the Strauss but also as Cio-Cio San singing "*Un bel di*" from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Without benefit of costume, wig, makeup, or scenery, her clear bright soprano did the work, expressing all the love, longing, and false hope that we would wish for. Variety of *tempi* and dynamics contributed to the performance.

Tenor Percy Martinez, whom we have reviewed many times, did justice to every role he took on and managed to color each role differently. He made a fine Rodolfo with Jennifer Smith as his Violetta in "*Libiamo*" from Verdi's *La Traviata*. (We might have appreciated her performance more if she had not been holding her score. It was distracting.)

He portrayed another young lover in Puccini's *La Bohème*, trying to break up with the seriously ill Mimi (Beier Zhao) in Act III. In stunning contrast with these tender lovers were Clara Lisle as Musetta and Michael Binkowski as Marcello--one of the scenes in which we admired the direction.

Again Mr. Martinez succeeded in portraying the very different lover Pinkerton, a far more complex character. His Cio-Cio San, Beier Zhao, had the advantage of appearing Asian but somehow looked worried and anxious during the love duet.

Another artist who impressed us was baritone José Pietri-Coimbre who enlivened every scene he was in, not only with his fine voice but with his willingness to inhabit the role. From Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, his Papageno was pure delight and his Papagena, Holly Sparlin Sargeant, was a perfect match, showing evidence of a music theater background.

He was a perfectly slimy Don Giovanni seducing Zerlina. The effect was heightened by the fact that his scene partner, 16-year-old Gwyneth Campbell, was so petite and innocent looking.

In the quartet "*Non ti fidar, o misera*" he continued his fine performance with excellent contributions from the Donna Anna of Shauna McCarthy, the Donna Elvira of Iris Prcic, and the Don Ottavio of John Ramseyer. It was totally convincing and the voices blended beautifully.

Another very affecting piece was the final scene of Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*. Jennifer Noel's large soprano was just right for the Marschallin. Victoria Graves made a splendid Octavian and Elise Mark was excellent as the young Sophie. Baritone Michael Binkowski appeared briefly as Sophie's father Faninal and it was a bittersweet moment when the Marschallin walked offstage with him. The contributions from Maestro Cordova's piano were extensive.

Elise Mark also made her mark as Manon in "*Ce bruit de l'or*" in Massenet's opera of the same name.

Coloratura soprano Madison Marie McIntosh lent her finely focused instrument to "*Dov'è Lucia*" from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. We have reviewed Ms. McIntosh previously and are watching her professional development with interest. We hope we will soon hear her do the mad scene!

It is quite a challenge to create an opera scene without orchestra, costumes, sets and makeup but most of the scenes succeeded admirably. There were several other singers on board whom we hope to have a chance to review in the future.

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OLE!



Sharon Isbin and Isabel Leonard

Last night at Zankel Hall, two world-renowned artists graced the stage and demonstrated all the magic of Spanish music. If you came for emotion, you got it. If you came for gorgeous sound, you got it. If you came to feel the multi-cultural aspect of music from Spain, you got it. If you came for glamour, you got it.

As we have pointed out, Spain is geographically part of Europe. Almost. Sharing a border with the south of France, it juts out into the Atlantic, almost kissing Morocco. Spain is culturally its own, with strong influences from N. Africa dating back to the period of Moorish domination.

Much of the music coming out of Spain in the 19th and 20th c. bears echoes of flamenco. It is surprising but much of the music we associate with guitar was originally written for the piano.

We have often written about *zarzuela*, the Spanish version of operetta, but last night's recital contained no *arias*, only art songs written by Spain's best composers. The recital was unique in that there was no collaborative piano, rather a collaborative guitar played by the world class guitarist Sharon Isbin who seemed to breathe in tandem with Ms. Leonard and whose solos astonished us with their virtuosity.

Nothing astonishes us about Isabel Leonard whose spectacular mezzo-soprano sheds magic on whatever she chooses to sing. We have often written about the rich overtones of her voice which lend it a most particular texture. Her stage presence is stunning but accessible and her phrasing always makes artistic sense.

She has a long intense involvement with Spanish music. Let us begin at the end when Ms. Leonard finally discarded the music stand which had impaired our connection for most of the evening. More on that later.

Manuel de Falla wrote his *Siete canciones populares españolas* in the early 20th c. Ms. Leonard really connected with the audience and used her innate sense of drama to wring every ounce of color and change of mood from the seven songs. We particularly enjoyed the playful "*Jota*" in which Ms. Leonard conveyed the secret passion of the young lover; Ms. Isbin's guitar contributed the texture.

The intense "*Polo*" was so deeply felt that we experienced a pain in our very own heart. That's what a song should do for us!

In the remainder of the program, Ms. Leonard used a music stand, even for music which we know she knows well. Judging by the applause which interrupted every set after each and every song, the rest of the audience didn't care. But we did.

This is our own personal bugaboo. When a singer breaks contact to look down or to turn the page, we feel the fine thread of attachment snap and we then retreat to reading the translation, instead of feeling the connection. The singer may very well be totally involved with the material but not with the audience. We want to feel what they feel about the song and we lose it.

This deficit was experienced all through the marvelous and varied program. We love Federico Garcia Lorca's *Canciones españolas antiguas*, settings of folk songs, strangely presented in two sets separated by two guitar solos. Ms. Leonard is a gifted storyteller and engaged the audience with her easy natural introductions. We particularly enjoyed "*Romance de Don Boyso*" and "*Los mozos de Monlón*" which allowed the artist room for a dramatic reading over the voice of the guitar.

Two selections from Xavier Montsalvatge's *Canciones negras*, arranged by Ms. Isbin, were performed, of which our favorite was the tender lullaby "*Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito*" which our companion found to be racist. (Well, yes, but the De Falla songs are sexist--both products of their time and place and, in our opinion, beyond criticism).

A special treat was a composition by Joaquín Rodrigo. We have long loved his 1939 *Concierto de Aranjuez* but never knew that he extracted the Adagio and that his wife wrote text for it, a nostalgic piece of poetry in French. Victoria Kamhi was a Sephardic Jew, born in Turkey, and a pianist who gave up her career to assist her blind husband. So, we don't know why it is in French but we loved Ms. Leonard's French diction.

A contemporary work by the American composer Richard Danielpour was commissioned by Carnegie Hall and saw its *première* on the program as well. The text is based on the poetry of Rumi, the 13th c. poet whose life story is filled with fascinating detail.

Writing in what was then the Persian Empire, presumably in Farsi, the poet wrote of love and spirituality. Raficq Abdulla's translation, while considered one of the finest, did nothing for us. Perhaps they are more interpretations than translations. Perhaps they have lost much in the translation.

"Listen" seemed to be shoehorned into rhymed couplets and came across as doggerel which did not scan at all. Although we loved the music as played by Ms. Isbin, it seemed to us that it missed the eroticism of the second two selections--"This Night of Love" and "Your Beauty".

We did find the work far more listenable than most contemporary music, and Ms. Leonard's English diction lacked for nothing. The most musical part was when she sang on the syllable "La"; it probably would have sounded a lot better in Farsi! It is our opinion that before setting a text, a composer should think about whether the text needs music to enhance it!

We will not close without casting compliments on Ms. Isbin. We heard two late 19th c. masterpieces--Enrique Granados' "*Andaluza*" from his *12 danzas españolas* and

Isaac Albeniz' *Asturias*, arranged by Andres Segovia--written originally for piano. Ms. Isbin's powerfully *rasqueadas* instilled the pieces with flamenco flavor.

The familiar melodies are marked by strong bass notes with a fine filigree. We definitely were feeling the "gypsy soul" and recognized the guitarist as an artist who communicates what she herself is feeling. Her playing involved subtle changes of dynamics and technical mastery of the highest order. In Francisco Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, the *tremolo* in the right hand called forth the vision of the plashing fountains.

As encore, we heard the Mexican composer Agustín Lara's 1932 "*Granada*" which brought the audience to their collective feet. We felt magnificently entertained.

We cannot end without returning to our comment about glamour. If an artist mentions her designer we feel called upon to comment. Austin Scarlett provided one hit and one miss. The beautiful Ms. Leonard sported a red strapless gown that spilled into a pool on the floor; it was breathtaking. The lovely Ms. Isbin had a gown that appeared matronly, unbecoming, and uncomfortable.

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FROM OP TO POP



Michael Fennelly, Maya Yahav Gour, Alexa Jarvis, Sean Michael Plumb, Jane Shaulis, Galeano Salas, and Sol Jin

Last night Opera Index held its annual membership party and recital. President Jane Shaulis served as M.C., speaking briefly about the 33 year history of the organization and how successful it has been at helping young singers climb the professional ladder by holding competitions and awarding grants. A perusal of the Opera Index competition winners from prior years yields dozens of famous names, singers who were first recognized in the early stages of their careers.

Members were treated to a highly entertaining recital by five of this year's award winners. Tenor Galeano Salas, whom we heard as an Apprentice Singer at the Santa Fe Opera last summer, opened the program with "*Che gelida manina*" from Puccini's *La Bohème*. Mr. Salas has a lovely romantic Italianate sound with a fullness in the upper register.

But the most compelling aspect of his performance was the way he created the entire scene--with no set and no scene partner. It was most convincing and we were happy to learn that he has been invited to return to Santa Fe Opera next summer.

He also sang Maria Grever's "Jurame" which wowed the audience.

Mezzo-soprano Maya Yahav Gour produced a nice even French line in "*La romance de l'étoile*" from Chabrier's *L'étoile*. Her background is as a jazz singer and she is presently a promising Master's Degree student at Mannes College.

Her voice has a most interesting texture and we enjoyed her bluesy delivery of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes".

Baritone Sol Jin, recently recognized in Opera News, sang "*Avant de quitter ces lieux*" from Gounod's *Faust*. He has a substantial sound and a lovely *legato*, creating that long lean line that we want to hear in French opera. In the martial central section, his voice became more forceful and the phrasing more clipped--a good use of variety.

He also sang a delightful Korean song in which metaphors from nature were used to describe romantic love.

Soprano Alexa Jarvis has a big sound that she employed well in "*Stridono lassù*" from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*; she invested the song with ringing tone and substantial drama.

She also sang "Someone Who'll Watch Over Me". It delighted the audience to hear singers mix it up from "op" to "pop".

Baritone Sean Michael Plumb delivered "*Pierrot's Tanzlied*" from Erich Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt*. He has a wonderful instrument and stage presence, but what we really noticed was his superb German diction and a *vibrato* that reminded us of a cello.

As if this expanded program were not enough, we also heard a couple of duets--Ms. Jarvis took the role of Mimi to Mr. Salas' Rodolfo in the first act duet "*O soave fanciulla*" and then Mr. Salas sang the fourth act duet "*O Mimi, tu più non torni*" with Mr. Plumb as his Marcello. These duets were beautifully sung and dramatically convincing.

The hard working Mr. Salas had just arrived from Europe and had two auditions earlier in the day, which did not stop him from just one more song--"Because You're Mine". Some singers just love to sing! And we love to listen!

The accompaniment for the recital was perfectly handled by Michael Fennelly.

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[FROM RUSSIA WITH \(MUCH\) LOVE](#)



Dina Kuznetzova, Dalit Warshaw, Steven Blier, Michael Barrett, and Shea Owens

Last night our dear *impresario*, *raconteur*, and pianist Steven Blier presented a program "From Russia to Riverside Drive: Rachmaninoff and Friends". We are always happy to hear Russian songs and Rachmaninoff's extravagant lyricism is at the top of our list. The more we hear, the more we want to hear. This concert was presented as part of the New York Philharmonic's Rachmaninoff festival.

Soprano Dina Kuznetzova has appeared frequently with New York Festival of Song and always impresses us with her glorious voice and intense involvement with the text--a true songbird she is! Baritone Shea Owens has similarly appeared with NYFOS and is also known to us from the Santa Fe Opera. He is always a pleasure to hear with his romantic leading-man sound and the sincerity of his stage presence.

New to us is composer/pianist/theraminist Dalit Warshaw. We have always been fascinated by this strange instrument, played without touch, but we never expected to have the opportunity to hear and see one played live. We had a fine time trying to figure out how Ms. Warshaw drew such sounds out of it.

We spoke with her at the post-concert reception and learned that our speculation was only half right. Yes, the right hand creates the pitch but no, the sound is not created but rather the silence is sculpted from the sound made by the theramin. Does that make sense? Well, we think one would have to actually confront the instrument oneself to understand! It's inventor, one Lev Sergeyevich Termen, might have been anticipating the advent of electronic music!

The program included a few songs with which we are familiar due to their presence on a lot of recital programs. Sergei Rachmaninoff started composing songs at the age of 17 and, after leaving Russia, never wrote another. One of our favorites dates back to this early time period and "In the Silence of the Night" shows the influence of his teacher Tchaikovsky. How could it be anything but intensely moving--a song of lost love. Mr. Owens sang it with a lot of inner fire but without a lot of outward "signaling".

We noticed this also when he sang the meditative "She is as Lovely as the Noon" with its bursts of melismatic singing. Meanwhile, Mr. Blier's piano reveled in a lot of exotic purling figures. In "The Torrents of Spring" he showed appropriate exuberance with Michael Barrett's piano enjoying the passionate postlude.

But it was toward the end of the program when Mr. Owens sang Rachmaninoff's only comic song "Were You Hiccupping?" that we got a complete picture of his dramatic range and flair for humor.

Although Mr. Owens is not Russian born, my Russian-speaking companion pronounced his Russian "exemplary". We do not know if he speaks Russian but his diction succeeded in every way.

Miss Kuznetzova is Russian born so her diction is not an issue. The major aspect of her performance was the intensity of her involvement in "Russian soul". Every phrase seemed deeply felt and produced with a most attractive *vibrato*.

In "No Prophet, I", Mr. Blier's piano rippled along while she used a variety of dynamics, exhibiting a beautiful *pianissimo* in the line about being a singer with the lyre as a weapon.

Among the many songs new to us was "Melody" with its whispers of Orientalism in the piano and a text that idealizes a beautiful death. We also enjoyed her performance of the searching "A-oo!"

And what about that theremin! It makes an eerie kind of whiny sound that sounds like nothing else on earth. We enjoyed it most in duet with the voices. The final work on the program was the famous "*Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 15*". Without any words, the voices of Ms. Kuznetzova and Mr. Owens expressed a dozen different feelings; the various combinations with and without the voice of the theramin encompassed a variety of textures.

As encore we heard the 1945 Buddy Kaye/Ted Mossman "Full Moon and Empty Arms", a blatant theft from Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto #2, performed by the ensemble, including the theramin.

The program also included songs by composers Rachmaninoff knew when he immigrated to the USA. We heard Joseph Schillinger's "Orientalia"--two vocalises written for voice but performed by Ms. Warshaw and Mr. Barrett. Also a bluesy number by Duke Ellington ("On a Turquoise Cloud") in which Ms. Kuznetzova's voice blended beautifully with Ms. Warshaw's theramin and Mr. Blier's piano.

However, from this portion of the program, our personal favorite was "Little Jazz Bird" from the brothers Gershwin's 1924 opus *Lady, Be Good!* Mr. Blier went absolutely wild on the piano and Mr. Owens sang it charmingly. We hope it will be scheduled on one of the "Sing for Your Supper" evenings at Henry's.

We are eagerly awaiting the next NYFOS recital at Merkin Hall, featuring songs by

Schubert alongside those by The Beatles. There is always something compelling coming up. As Mr. Blier says "No song is safe from us."

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Christian Zarembo, Marquita Raley, Amy Shoremount-Obra, Yujoong Kim, Philip Cutlip, Eric Downs, Matthew Patrick Morris, Cecelia Hall

We are always excited about a new opera company and eager to see what they have to offer. Every now and then we experience a company with a vision that goes beyond the standard one of providing performance opportunities for young singers or attracting a new audience. Last night we witnessed the birth of an exciting new company--Venture Opera--without any excruciating labor pains. We are sure that much labor went into their production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* but we missed all that. We got to greet the welcome new baby in all its glory.

Thursday night we heard Jonathon Thierer sing at the Classic Lyric Arts Gala (reviewed beneath this review) but last night he wore a different hat--that of Founder and General Director of Venture Opera. We welcome this new baby with open arms.

Ordinarily we don't like to see our favorite classics altered in any way, but this non-traditional presentation did not take anything away from Mozart's tragicomic masterpiece but rather added something new that led to a more visceral understanding of librettist Lorenzo da Ponte's message.

The production was designed and directed by Edwin Cahill with a sure hand. The arc of the story moved along swiftly and all the encrusted *clichés* and tropes were swept away. The inherent tragedy was made even more poignant by the framing device which was set up during Mozart's portentous overture.

The ghost of Tirso de Molina, the author of the original Don Juan story, (Joel Reuben Ganz in a non-singing role) calls up the souls of the characters from Purgatory and, when the actual opera begins, they relive their lives and their sins. They are barefoot and their fingernails and toenails are painted a ghostly white.

Both Tirso de Molino and Lorenzo Da Ponte were born Jewish and obliged to convert to Catholicism, even becoming priests--the former in late 16th c. Spain and the latter in 18th c. Venice. What better venue for this work than the Angel Orensanz Center, a deconsecrated 19th c. synagogue built in the Gothic Revival style of the grand cathedral of Cologne. Most of the action was staged on the pulpit but the aisles and balconies were put to good use as well.

The eponymous Don Giovanni in this performance, as played by the formidable baritone Philip Cutlip, is sinful in many ways--he is a rapist and a serial seducer, he abuses his servant, he lies and tricks people. Mr. Cutlip's Don oozes menace, not charm. He is a corrupt priest of the Catholic church who abuses his power. Lust, gluttony, greed and pride color his every action.

Most of the characters are guilty of manipulation. Donna Anna, powerfully sung by the stunning soprano Amy Shoremount-Obra, manipulates her fiancé Don Ottavio, stringing him along, clearly never intending to marry him. Her bright and well-focused instrument was well employed in the service of the character.

The peasant girl Zerlina, marvelously portrayed by Cecelia Hall, has her fiancé Masetto, well sung by sturdy bass Matthew Patrick Morris, wrapped around her finger, much as she wraps him in the white cloth that later serves as the sheet on their nuptial bed. She betrays him on their wedding day and uses her sexuality and hyperbolic offers of submission to win his forgiveness.

Leporello, portrayed without the customary *shtick* by baritone Eric Downs, is a coward and easily bought by the Don's money, even if it is stolen from the collection plate. He is an accessory to the Don's crimes.

Only Donna Elvira is straightforward. Marquita Raley sang the role with great power. Her voice is a special one with lots of texture and overtones that made her seem a force with which to be reckoned. She is protective toward Zerlina, warning the peasant girl--and not just because she wants the Don for herself.

She is capable also of forgiveness but guilty of self-deception, like many women who think they can reform a bad dude. She suffers from wrath and also envy. Just see her smirk at the finale! Donna Anna has Don Ottavio. Zerlina has Masetto. She has nobody and will enter a convent. Surely she begrudges others what she cannot get.

Don Ottavio comes across as the only good guy onstage. We reviewed Yujoong Kim three years ago at Juilliard and wrote that we wanted to hear more of him. He has a beautiful sweet ringing tenor that is filled with romantic promise. He was an ardent suitor in this production and sang "*Il mio tesoro*" with great lyricism and finesse. "*Dalla sua pace*" was omitted but again..."We'd like to hear more".

We don't know why this noble soul wound up in Purgatory, nor why the Commendatore was there either. Perhaps they committed sins we hadn't heard about! Christian Zarembo sang the role of the Commendatore with a substantial and grounded bass.

In sum, the casting was perfect and each singer was as superb dramatically as he/she was vocally. The musical values were excellent. Maestro Ryan McAdams has an energetic style just right for this opera and commanded his orchestra effectively.

The orchestra was situated off to the side so that his back was to the singers and he was obliged to turn around from time to time. During the party scene, the musicians playing the rustic tune departed the orchestra, which was playing a minuet, and sat on the opposite side of the stage--a novel and effective way to illustrate the differing tastes of the different social classes present.

Pauline Kim Harris played the lute solo onstage during the serenade scene. Every opportunity to make use of this interesting and acoustically wonderful venue was seized.

Costume Design by Bradon McDonald was apt. Don Giovanni and Leporello were dressed in vivid red and black. The women were dressed in white, grey and touches of black. Don Ottavio wore a white dinner jacket. It all seemed to fit with their characters. Effective lighting was by Yael Lubetzky.

All through the performance we were noticing little things that meant a lot toward underscoring the inherent violence of the tale. Donna Anna dons her dead father's bloody glove. Elvira twists a scarf in her hands as she thinks of strangling Don Giovanni. Don Ottavio threatens with a red pistol.

The only directorial choice that struck us as wrong was in the final scene when Don Giovanni snorts cocaine instead of indulging his gastronomic gluttony. If you understand the Italian or if you are reading the titles, the discrepancy between action and words is unsettling.

We can scarcely wait to see what Venture Opera comes up with for their next adVenture.

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IT'S CLASSIC, IT'S LYRIC, IT'S ARTISTIC--IT'S CLASSIC LYRIC ARTS!



Artistic Director of Classic Lyric Arts Glenn Morton and his talented group of young artists

A gala is defined as a social occasion with special entertainments or performances, a festive celebration-- and that is exactly what transpired last night when Classic Lyric Arts celebrated its young artists and entertained those denizens of Planet Opera fortunate enough to be at the annual Fall Benefit Gala.

For those of you who don't already know, CLA runs two highly esteemed programs which aim to advance the careers of young singers by on-site immersion in the cultures of France (L'Art du Chant Français) and Italy (La Lingua della Lirica). Everything is covered--diction, style, repertoire, stagecraft, and career development. The students are also given international performing opportunities.

Filmmaker August Ventura has documented these programs for anyone to witness the magic that takes place, and we have attended some of the master classes taught by some truly brilliant teachers who brought out the best in their students.

We will come to the entertainment part of the evening shortly but first we wanted to comment on the tribute given to the program by former student Dorothy Gal who shared with the audience some charming stories about the training she received. She

was not the only *alumna* present. These young artists develop a strong loyalty to the programs and a deep attachment to Artistic Director Glenn Morton.

As far as the singing goes, we were royally entertained as the students showed off their newly acquired artistry. Beautiful soprano Mikaela Bennett, fresh out of the Italian program, provided a splendid performance of "*O, mio babbino caro*" from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*.

There was a sparkle in her top notes and plenty of pleading, enough to convince her *poppa* to give her anything she wanted. We just recently heard her for the first time with Steven Blier's "Sing for your Supper", singing cabaret in English. It was quite a treat to learn of her skills in Italian.

We adored mezzo-soprano Kady Evanyshyn's lovely performance of "*Connais-tu le pays*" from Ambroise Thomas' *Mignon* for its long lyrical phrases and fine French style. This gave firm evidence of her hard work in both programs.

Does anyone not love "*Ah! mes amis*" from Donizetti's *La fille du régiment*? One tends to hold one's breath waiting for the tenor to nail those high C's and Vincent Festa tossed them off without a sign of strain. High notes aside, the aria was delivered with beautiful tone and apt sincerity.

We always love a good duet and the lovely Larisa Martinez paired with baritone Suchan Kim for "*Tutte le feste al tempio*" from Verdi's *Rigoletto*. The pair sounded excellent together and succeeded in conveying all the pathos required. Ms. Martinez' voice opens up beautifully on top and Mr. Kim has a full tone with a great deal of depth.

Vera Kremers sang "*Youkali*" by Kurt Weill and made every word count. Even at the top of her register, we understood every word. This was perhaps the best French diction we have ever heard from someone not born in France. Her bright voice was firmly grounded. We would have liked a bit more emphasis of the tango rhythm but we got plenty of that from Laetitia Ruccolo's piano.

The quartet from Puccini's *La Bohème* is a wonderful showpiece. Rodolfo and Mimi have a tender moment while Marcello and Musetta are having a knock-down drag-out

fight. Soprano Nadia Petrella gave us a tender well-modulated Mimi with tenor Matt Greenblatt a fine Rodolfo. Ms. Bennett returned as Musetta with baritone Bret Thom as Marcello. These four graduates of the Italian program perfumed the air with virtual garlic. Michael Sheetz was the excellent accompanist.

Händel's opera *Serse* is one of the composer's best. In "*Va godendo/lo le dirò*", the role of Serse, usually sung by a mezzo-soprano, was sung by Gon Halevi while Jordan Rutter sang the part of Arsemene, which is also generally sung by a mezzo-soprano. In a kind of reverse gender-bending, these two countertenors made a special kind of music. It's a *fach* of which we are very fond and we enjoyed the change.

Soprano Tamara Rusque gave a moving performance of Cio-Cio San's big aria of self-delusion--"*Un bel di vedremo*" from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Her big rich sound has an impressive resonance and her acting skills were convincing.

Dongling Gao left the European world behind and graced us with a lovely Mandarin love song accompanied by Jia-Jun Hong. And finally, three handsome dudes performed the trio from *On the Town* by Leonard Bernstein. Michael Stewart accompanied while Mr. Greenblatt, Mr. Thom, and Jon Thierer had a marvelous time with it; the joy was reflected on the faces of the audience.

We want to give three cheers to the programs, the artists, and to Glenn Morton. So....hip, hip, hooray. Or as we say nowadays, WOOT!

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FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE



Benjamin Laude, Maya Lahyani, Elad Kabilio

Last night we experienced "Music Talks" for the very first time. We hope it will not be the last. Host and master cellist Elad Kabilio has a mission of presenting classical music in an intimate and informal setting, bringing this music to a broader public. On the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music, he has skills as an educator and manages to convey quite a bit of helpful information without talking down to his audience.

He founded "Music Talks" four years ago and we were happy to be made aware of his project by the sensational Israeli mezzo-soprano Maya Lahyani whom we first noticed (and reviewed) at last year's Gerda Lissner Awards Recital in which she sang the "*Habanera*" from Bizet's *Carmen*.

We are far from experts in the field of chamber music but we are eager to learn and profited by Mr. Kabilio's comments about Russian music. Not only were the comments useful but there was live demonstration on both cello and on Benjamin Laude's piano that sharpened our listening skills.

Aside from the vocal music, which we will come to shortly, we heard selections from three generations of Russian composers. As one may have predicted, our Romantic ears responded most enthusiastically to Tchaikovsky's *Nocturne for Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 19*.

We learned that a Nocturne was generally played at the end of an evening of music and we learned to listen for the opening theme in the cello which was lavishly embroidered by the piano when it returned after the lavish *coda* of the second section.

We then heard *Chant du Ménéstrel, Op. 71* by Alexander Glazunov, who came along a generation after Tchaikovsky. The cello was intense and we related best to the lyrical center section.

Stravinsky's revolutionary tendencies and eclecticism were discussed before we heard his 1925 *Serenade in A* for piano, beautifully played by Mr. Laude. We learned why this composer returned to Romanticism for this work and why each of the four sections lasts only 3 minutes. (If you can guess why and write it in the comments section below, you will get a free subscription to the blog!)

The first part "Hymn" was an homage to Chopin and once Mr. Laude played the original Chopin melody on the piano, we could better appreciate what Stravinsky did to it. We also learned about how he avoided defining the major/minor issue at the conclusion of the piece "*Cadenza Finale*".

As valuable as the instrumental part of the program was, we found the highest level of interest in the vocal section. Ms. Lahyani is a mezzo of the highest order who can be seen and heard onstage at the Metropolitan Opera. She has a voluptuous plushy sound that was just right for Sergei Rachmaninoff's Romantic songs. The first four were composed when Rachmaninoff was barely past his teenage years.

We loved the intense drama of "Oh Stay, my love, forsake me not!" written in the throes of an ill-fated love affair with a girl who had (insert gasp) "Gypsy blood". "Morning" is a gentle song which Ms. Lahyani swelled to a fine climax. "In the silence of the mysterious night" was followed by our favorite "Do not sing, my beauty, to me".

This is among our dozen favorite songs by ANY composer. The minor key melody is memorable and the words are haunting and ineffably sad. It is still running through our brain and inhabiting our heart. Ms. Lahyani did particularly well with the vocalise section. The depth of feeling and variety of dynamics were impressive.

We also heard an intense song from a later period of Rachmaninoff's *oeuvre*--"All once I gladly owned", and as encore, Tchaikovsky's well known "None but the lonely heart".

To our ears, Ms. Lahyani's Russian sounded just fine but our native born Russian companion told us that although the words were mostly comprehensible, the Russian was pronounced with a significant accent.

We have one criticism of this otherwise superb performance. We have written often about the use of a music stand. In this case, Ms. Lahyani barely looked at it and we had the impression that the score was there more as a security blanket. But it does serve to interrupt the connection with the audience.

All told, it was a most worthwhile evening--mostly entertaining with a healthy dose of instruction.

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THE STARS AT NIGHT ARE BIG AND BRIGHT...



This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Richard Tucker Music Foundation. Sunday night's recital was not just an opportunity to hear some of the greatest voices onstage today; it was also a celebration of the foundation's work in supporting young American opera singers with awards, grants and performance opportunities at every stage of their careers. As if this were not enough to perpetuate the legacy of Richard Tucker, the foundation also offers free performances in New York City and supports music education enrichment programs.

The biggest prize, the Richard Tucker Award, went this year to the glorious and glamorous mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton who gives us goose bumps every time we hear her. The best part is that this glorious instrument belongs to a completely likable and unaffected young woman who exudes Southern charm from every pore.

Anyone interested in acquiring stage presence should observe Ms. Barton as she strides onto the stage knowing that she is her own woman and in full confidence of what she has to offer. And offer she did! In fine French she bid farewell to Carthage in Queen Dido's aria "*Je vais mourir...Adieu, fière cité*" from Berlioz' *Les Troyens*. She knew exactly when to give forth and when to pull back, milking the aria for every ounce of pathos. She floated a top note so effectively it seemed to evaporate.

Her delivery of "*Acerba voluttà*", the Principessa's aria from Francesco Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, revealed the luscious texture of her voice when confronted with soaring Italian melody. Phrasing and dynamics lent even more interest.

The other famous aria from this opera belonging to the titular character "*Io son l'umile ancella*" was given a touching performance by the glorious soprano Renée Fleming whose career was launched by a Richard Tucker grant 25 years ago. To hear a glamorous star sing of humility in such a convincing fashion was evidence of her incomparable artistry.

She also contributed two lovely duets. The first had her singing Marguerite to Piotr Beczala's Faust in "*Il se fait tard*" from the Gounod opera of the same name. Their voices balanced beautifully. We were not so enthusiastic about the second pairing when she sang Mimi to Andrea Bocelli's Rodolfo; she did fine but Mr. Bocelli's slender tenor was no match for her vocally. We could barely hear him. This was an impoverished *Bohème* leaving us as cold as Mimi's hands.

Perhaps he was invited to participate because he is famous with the general public but it seemed somewhat unfortunate to me that he was put on stage with all these great voices. In his solo, "*M'appari tutt' amor*" from Friedrich Flotow's *Martha*, one strained to hear him; this was also the case in his duets with any of the other singers. No matter! The audience loved him.

Soprano Nadine Sierra, who has won career and study grants, has been achieving phenomenal success recently and deserves it. Although she did not perform a solo, we greatly enjoyed her duets. She sang Juliette to Stephen Costello's Roméo in Gounod's "*Va! Je t'ai pardonnée*" and the two of them had such incredible chemistry that we forgot it was a recital. We have already lined up tickets to Mr. Costello's performance of this role in Santa Fe next summer!

Mr. Costello's solo "*E la storia solita del pastore*" from Francesco Cilea's *L'Arlesiana* revealed a fineness of tone and depth of feeling. The night we went to hear Mr. Costello as Percy in *Anna Bolena* (we had enjoyed his performance so much a couple years earlier) he was out sick but this performance made up for it. He won his award in 2009, after getting a career grant two years earlier. The foundation really does nurture its grantees.

Christine Goerke has a soprano that shakes the walls. If there had been a set we could have said that she chewed up the scenery when she sang Princess Eboli's aria "*O don fatale*" from Verdi's *Don Carlo*. It was an electrifying performance, giving different colors to each of the three sections, creating a complex character.

Ms. Goerke always knows her characters and brings them to vivid life. Although we love Mozart and *bel canto*, we are glad that this amazing artist is finally achieving her true purpose onstage. She won the Richard Tucker Award in 2001. Perhaps they saw her potential before anyone else did.

Mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard is a star of the first quality who stood out since her days at Juilliard. Her award came in 2013 and we have never seen her give a performance that was less than brilliant. She per-

formed "*Nacqui all'affano...Non più mesta*" from Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. With her brilliant *bel canto* technique and rich flexible instrument, she is the perfect Rossini heroine. The fireworks of her *fioritura* linger in the memory.

Coming onstage towards the end of the recital was Angela Gheorghiu who impressed with her performance of "*In quelle trine morbide*" from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and "*Ebben! Ne andrò lontano*" from Alfredo Catalani's *La Wally*. She stuck us as an old school diva with great command of the stage, the material, and the audience's attention.

We were happy to hear tenor Piotr Beczala because his communication with the audience was so far superior to that in his Zankel Hall recital two nights earlier. He knew his way around "*Nessun dorma*" from Puccini's *Turandot* and managed not to imitate anyone else. He exhibited the easy top notes that had sounded strained at the recital. He had some excellent choral assistance from the massive New York Choral Society who had opened the program so effectively with the well-chosen curtain raiser "*Ohé! Ohè Presto*" from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*.

Tenor Lawrence Brownlee sang "*Terra amica...Cara! deh attendimi*" from Rossini's little known opera *Zelmira*. His voice was exposed by the light orchestration and proved to be pleasantly flexible. However, he tended to push his high notes rather than floating them.

We have saved the best for last. Christine Goerke and Jamie Barton joined forces for the duet "*E un anatèma*" from Ponchielli's *La gioconda*. Two huge voices, perfectly matched, dukeing it out for romantic supremacy=major wow.

The evening closed with excerpts from the "Triumphal Scene" from Verdi's *Aida*. The New York Choral Society, under the direction of David Hayes, and members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Maestro Eugene Kohn, were joined by all the singers onstage. Trios of trumpets blared from the second ring of the newly renamed David Geffen Hall, creating a Surround Sound effect that was thrilling, drawing the evening to a sensational close.

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