

Notes on the Program

By Andrew McIntyre

On tonight's concert, our recitalists present a distinctly modern program spanning three languages, two hemispheres, and multiple genres, yet what differences we find in language and musical idiom are bridged by time: every composer featured in this recital lived and composed in the twentieth century. While the Strauss and Tosti selections were both written in the waning years of the nineteenth century, both composers bridged the gap between the two centuries, ushering in a new era of composition.

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Selections from *Sechs Lieder von Adolf Friedrich Graf von Schack*, Op. 17

"Ständchen," a tale of two young lovers' late-night rendezvous beneath the town linden tree, begins with the gentle tinkling of piano keys, perhaps the soft twinkling of stars through the leaves. The near-constant flurry of undulating figures in the piano and the frequent leaps in the vocal line capture the excitement of the couple. Von Schack's poetry is laden with symbolism: linden, nightingale, and rose, all evocative of young love, leave little to the imagination. In this song, one of Strauss' earliest numbered works, we see already his mastery of building tension and portraying unbridled joy.

The boldness of the first song stands in sharp contrast to the winding, chromatic melodies and melancholy which open "Nur Mut!" yet here too we find deeply emotional writing. In the second and third stanzas the music and text become most impassioned, ascending to the words "glorious blue heaven."

"Barkarole" takes its name from the style of folk songs sung by Venetian gondoliers. The rocking rhythm evokes a boat moving "from wave to wave in a dance." Another impassioned love song, here Strauss uses increasingly wide leaps to illustrate the narrator's mounting

impatience as he approaches the balcony of his beloved. In von Schack's poetry we again find frequent evocation of the natural world, a central fascination among Romantic artists.

"Morgen!," No. 4 from Vier Lieder, Op. 27

1894 saw the unsuccessful premiere of Strauss' first opera, *Guntram*; Pauline de Ahna, then Strauss' fiancée, sang the soprano role. Later that year, the two would be married, and it was for this occasion that Strauss wrote the four songs of opus 27 as a present to Pauline ("Cécilie," the second song in the set, the night before the wedding!). Both text and vocal line begin and end mid-thought, the lack of finality suggesting a moment in time stretched into eternity.

LILI BOULANGER (1893-1918)

Selections from *Clairières dans le ciel*

Though illness tragically cut short her life at the age of twenty-four, French composer Lili Boulanger accomplished as much as many of her older counterparts. Born into a highly musical family including celebrated teacher Nadia Boulanger (her older sister), Lili was surrounded by music. A child prodigy and first female winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome at age nineteen, Lili composed a significant volume of works. *Clairières dans le ciel*, a thirteen-song cycle, stands among her finest achievements.

Taken from Francis Jammes' *Tristesses*, the cycle ruminates at length on a failed romance. On the first page of an early draft, Lili wrote that the music should be sung as if the relationship were "still fresh in the mind."

"Un poète disait" captures the moment of new love. Harmonies turn on a dime à la Fauré: the effect is pleasantly intoxicating, like the fragrance of spring flowers. In "Nous nous aimerons tant," the couple is rendered

speechless; the text and languorous piano accompaniment share a similar lack of motion. Boulanger sets “Vous m’avez regardé avec toute votre âme,” one of the shortest poems in the entire cycle, with equal measure of tenderness. The narrow descending intervals in the voice suggest a lover’s gentle caresses.

As the cycle progresses, the lovers’ affection has begun to fade. “Les lilas qui avaient fleuri” (the ninth song in the complete cycle) opens with a flurry of activity in the piano, like the scattering of autumn leaves. The vocal writing in this song shows Lili Boulanger at her most expressive, as dissonant harmonies clang against the words “my heart should die” and inchoate feelings of anger and frustration burst forth.

FRANCESCO PAOLO TOSTI (1846-1916) “Marechiaré”

While the history of Neapolitan song stretches back centuries, many view the festival of Piedigrotta, begun in the 1830s, as the birthplace of the modern *canzone napoletana*. This is a genre very much of the people: the subjects of these songs are often everyday situations (in the same vein as *verismo* opera) and, as the name suggests, they are written in Neapolitan, a language similar to--yet distinct from--Italian. Tosti’s music gives primacy to the voice: the simple accompaniment and repetitive, catchy melody gave festival singers opportunity to show off, and allowed festival goers to easily take the songs far beyond Naples, giving “Marechiaré” and other *canzoni* lives of their own.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976) “The Children and Sir Nameless”

This ballad by Thomas Hardy tells of the pompous Sir Nameless, whose decision to immortalize himself in statue form rather than fathering children hilariously backfires. An irreverent take on the cruel, sometimes humorous ironies of fate, Britten’s blustery music further cuts the eponymous knight down to size.

“The Last Rose of Summer”

Thomas Moore’s popular poem and melody have been translated into numerous languages and set by many great composers including Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Glinka, and Gounod. Britten leaves the original melody mostly untouched, opting instead to add quasi-baroque ornamentation and a subtly-dissonant, harp-like accompaniment. Britten’s setting shows a preternatural ability to turn the old and well-worn into something new, exciting, and slightly off-kilter, even while using centuries-old idioms.

“The Choirmaster’s Burial,” from *Winter Words*

Britten found this text in a copy of Hardy’s *Collected Poems* given to him and his partner, tenor Peter Pears, by the author Christopher Isherwood. Here we again see Britten mixing idioms from very different stylistic periods: the lilting, Purcelling ornamentation and the harmonization of the hymn-tune “Mount Ephraim” transport the listener across more than two centuries of sonic landscapes.

Though the following set of songs are all distinctly American--American texts set by American composers--a connection to Paris, France links them all. John Gruen, born in the northern suburbs of Paris, fled Europe with his family to escape fascism. Chanler, on the other hand, went to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger, while Rorem, “always attracted by things French... already French at home in Chicago,” would gain notoriety with his scandalous *Paris Diary*. Like Chanler and so many other American composers, Lowell Liebermann shares a direct musical lineage to Paris and Nadia Boulanger through one of his teachers, the late David Diamond.

JOHN GRUEN (1926-2016)

Selections from *Three by e.e. cummings*

Critic, photographer, composer, and biographer, modern-day Renaissance man John Gruen's work spanned multiple genres and seven decades. Though an accomplished composer in his twenties, he soon discovered "there were few opportunities in America for a composer who specialized solely in art song." Fortunately, those pieces have become a small yet significant part of the American recital repertoire.

The interplay of text and music in these songs evinces a clear artistic affinity between composer and poet. Light, bouncy, and humorously erratic, "Spring is like a perhaps hand" shows both artists delighting in the joys of language. Cummings, himself an amateur pianist and composer, understood well the power of rhythm and syntax, and how to effectively distort and reshape them.

"Lady will you come with me into" is equally playful and off-kilter; here, Gruen renders Cummings' hard stops and ends of phrases as cheeky pauses. The descending interval of a minor third that opens and closes the song calls to mind a child's schoolyard taunt; the final phrase, truncated, ends like a joke waiting for the punchline.

LOWELL LIEBERMANN (b. 1961)

"The Arrow and the Song," from *Six Songs on Poems of Henry W. Longfellow*

In this setting of a simple yet poignant Longfellow poem, a hurried stream of notes on the piano surround the voice, which moves in a direct, declamatory style. The busy, fast-moving accompaniment depicts both the swift arrow and flying song while still letting the text, a rumination on the power of music, shine through.

THEODORE CHANLER (1902-1961)

"I Rise When You Enter"

American composer Virgil Thomson wrote that the songs of his lesser-known contempo-

rary Theodore Chanler, "though few in number, are probably the best we have." Of the fifty or so songs in his oeuvre, many of the texts were supplied by Leonard Feeney, a Jesuit priest and friend of Chanler's. There was an unusual collaboration, with Feeney sometimes supplying texts to music Chanler had already written. The relationship between the men would become strained, as Feeney's radical views (Feeney would later be excommunicated for roughly twenty years) alienated the mild-mannered Chanler, but not before producing songs such as this one, a buoyant piece brimming with madcap optimism.

NED ROREM (b. 1923)

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Robert Frost called this poem, one of his most famous, his "best bid for remembrance." Ned Rorem's aim for the work would be less grandiose: written while he was a student at Juilliard, this short song bears the dedication "for my father." The unostentatious, reflective music complements but never overpowers, wisely letting Frost's immortal words remain at the forefront.

EDEN AHBEZ (1908-1995)

"Nature Boy"

When eden ahbez (born George Alexander Aberle), a self-described "Nature Boy" and forerunner of the hippie movement, handed a copy of his song to Nat King Cole's manager Mort Ruby in 1947, he was a little-known pianist living beneath the first "L" of the Hollywood Sign (so legend goes). A year later, Cole's team tracked ahbez down to buy the rights to the song. Though ahbez had stolen the tune from a Yiddish musical (they ultimately settled out of court), he sold the rights to "Nature Boy" for \$10,000. The song, which tells of a "strange, enchanted boy" and his entreatment to love, is mournful and plaintive, as if told from the perspective of one who had heard the boy's message too little too late.

HAROLD ARLEN (1905-1986)

“One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)”

A long, meandering “tapeworm” in Tin Pan Alley parlance, this tale of a down-on-his-luck barfly became a hit for many of the greatest singers of the twentieth century, including Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Tony Bennett. For Frank Sinatra, it became one of his most enduring “saloon songs;” he recorded the song for six different albums over the course of five decades.

RAY CHARLES (1930-2004)

“Hallelujah, I Love Her So”

As 1955 was drawing to a close, Ray Charles

was discovering his first taste of mainstream recognition, including the first in a string of notorious run-ins with the police. Prior to a performance in Philadelphia one week before Thanksgiving, a dispute with a fiery DJ over a dressing room led the DJ to phone the police and inform them that Charles and his band were using drugs. The group were promptly arrested (headlines read “NABBED IN DOPE RAID”); while Charles was able to post bail, the band spent a week behind bars. A relatively minor scandal, it was soon forgotten with the release of more crowd-pleasing hits like “Hallelujah,” a raucous fusion of gospel and blues, sacred and profane.

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