

Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

Dreams, and the questions and images they evoke, frame tonight's program by soprano Sandrine Piau and pianist Susan Manoff. It is a lovely theme for a song recital, which, in contrast to opera or spoken theater, can take the listener on an inward journey of impressions, associations, and ideas. Tonight's program taps works from 19th century masters of the French and German art song traditions to provide a full measure of musical dreams in many guises: memories, elusive portents, fleeting visions of childhood, and ardent fantasies. And for balance, we will have a tart reality check in the form of Francis Poulenc's astringent wit to close.

Our dreamscape begins with three songs by Ernest Chausson (1855–1899). "Hébé," from

a poem by Louise-Victorine Ackermann, portrays the cupbearer to the gods from Greek mythology, her golden cup holds the ability to restore youth (a dream indeed!). Chausson opens the song evoking archaic modes, but gradually the simple melodies and chords give way to graceful arpeggios as Hébé, and her dream of youth, depart. As with many Chausson works, the gently chromatic harmonies fade into a musical question.

Night scenes predominate in the next set of works by Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847). The opening lied, "Neue Liebe" sets a Heinrich Heine verse. Mendelssohn's sprightly tempo depicts busy nighttime spirits. The bit of fairytale fun, turns, as so often in Heine, into

a deeper question about love, but this is soon swept away in a tidy piano figure by the end. The works that complete this set draw on familiar themes of Romantic lieder, supernatural ballads, and the singer at one with the night, with only a nightingale for company.

The next set, Francis Poulenc's (1899–1963) *La Courte Paille* (*The Short Straw*) sets verses by Maurice Carême, texts for a parent to sing to a young child, comprising lullabies, nonsense rhymes, and silly tales. These were written in 1960 for Denise Duval, a favorite of Poulenc, and a notable Blanche in his opera, *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*. The interconnected songs share musical ideas, for instance Poulenc's bright rhythms and puckish harmonies. They provide a lighter take on the evening's theme.

At the other end of the spectrum from Poulenc's clear textures is the dense musical palette of Alban Berg (1885–1935). Tonight's works date from 1905–1908, when Berg was studying with Arnold Schoenberg. They are the first three pieces from the set *Seven Early Songs*, and show the Late-Romantic foundation on which Berg built his later groundbreaking musical language (echoes of Strauss and Mahler are easy to spot). We are again in a nighttime world of vivid dreams, with ardent settings of poetry by Carl Hauptmann, Nikolaus Lenau, and Theodore Storm, who brings another nightingale to our stage.

We begin the second half with a return to dreams as fleeting impressions. Debussy—who catches the fugitive intensity of dreams better than any other composer—is represented by songs of loss, dreams that could never be realized. The set ends with the radiant, “Beau Soir”: gentle rustles of wind and waves in the piano backing the voice line's ardent plea to treasure the passing moment.

Richard Strauss' (1864–1949) four *Mädchenblumen*, op. 22 are to texts by Felix Dahn (a historical novelist) and take as their dream the conceit of portraying women as flowers. The sentimental poetry (a bit cloying even by the

standards of its publication date, 1891) nonetheless called forth a tender response from Strauss. Note how the piano and vocal lines in “Epheu” (Ivy) twine about one another, and listen for the ‘night music’ scene painting in the final song, “Wasserrose” (Waterlily), with its serene and high flying vocal line.