

Concert Report: B-W Art Song Festival— recital by soprano Christine Brewer & pianist Craig Rutenberg (May 18)

Published May 24, 2010

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Christine Brewer is one of the great dramatic sopranos of our time. Opera audiences were deprived two seasons ago of her appearances as Brünnhilde in Wagner's Ring cycle at the Metropolitan Opera after she injured her knee and had to withdraw from the run. But she doesn't limit herself to the usual Wagner and Strauss roles (Ariadne aux Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten), singing among others Britten (Ellen Orford in Peter Grimes; the title role in Gloriana; Lady Billows in Albert Herring); Barber's Vanessa and Gluck's Alceste. Happily for the musical world, Ms. Brewer has also maintained a parallel recital and concert career alongside the opera. As part of the 2010 Art Song Festival held at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ms. Brewer and pianist Craig Rutenberg presented a featured recital of German and English language songs on Tuesday, May 18, in Gamble Auditorium of the Kulas Music Building.

Ms. Brewer announced from the stage after her first number, the very demanding "Divinités du Styx" from Gluck's Alceste, that she had on Tuesday come down with a cold, so she was altering her program. She eliminated a set of Richard Strauss songs and a set by the American composer Richard Hundley. If she was, by her own statement, not operating at full steam, one could observe that most singers would feel lucky to do on a good night what

Christine Brewer did when she was indisposed. Her recital program was demanding, even as reduced, and Ms. Brewer produced a stream of sound that was both powerful and bright, yet with an individually warm timbre. She has a very winning, natural stage presence, with none of the "stage-y" artifice that one encounters with operatic divas. As an example, in exchange for depriving us of the Strauss songs, after intermission—in what must have been a first at the Art Song Festival—Ms. Brewer offered a rendition of "Oh Susanna" on the harmonica, with Mr. Rutenberg offering body percussion accompaniment.

Following the Gluck aria, Ms Brewer presented a set of seven songs by the early twentieth century Austrian composer Joseph Marx. An almost exact contemporary of the Second Viennese School composers Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, Marx would have nothing to do with atonality, but composed in a very conservative style influenced more by Italians and the French impressionists. He was a noted pedagogue at the Vienna conservatory, as well as producing a number of works of musical criticism. He is now remembered mostly for his songs. Although conservative in their musical language, they are still difficult, with a wide vocal range, sudden leaps, and exposed entrances on soft high notes. Ms. Brewer surmounted the musical challenges gracefully, and her handling of the texts was alert to their meanings. (Texts and translations for all of the songs were included as a program insert. The translations seemed to be of varying quality, with some almost literal translations, but others more paraphrased.)

Because of her indisposition, after intermission Ms. Brewer eliminated a set of songs by the American composer Richard Hundley, but performed a song cycle by the American composer Alan Smith (b. 1955), Vignettes: Letters from George to Evelyn, from the papers of a World War II Bride. Smith has assembled a collection of primary source materials (as he has in several other cycles, all with the titles "Vignettes") from a soldier stationed in Europe during World War II. The letters

cover a period from December 1942 to March 1945, when he was killed in action. Smith also set the text of the telegram sent by the U.S. Adjutant General to George's young widow Evelyn. The cumulative effect of the songs was wrenching. Christine Brewer drew upon her operatic experience to express the emotions in the letters, from the fear of waiting for the D-Day invasion, to a full-out love letter ("It is still inconceivable to me that you have chosen to share your life with me...a love which has given me a new life, a new goal and a new approach to heaven."), to the monotone, staccato delivery of the death notice telegram. A brief epilogue reminds us of the love between these two young people. This cycle was the artistic high point of Christine Brewer's program.

Ms. Brewer closed the recital with a set she entitled "Echoes of Nightingales," songs that appeared on the "American sets" or as encores of

such early- to mid-twentieth century artists as Helen Traubel, Kirsten Flagstad, Eileen Farrell and Eleanor Steber. We had songs by now out-of-fashion composers Sidney Homer, Edwin MacArthur, Frank Bridge, Idabelle Firestone and Frank LaForge. Not timeless masterpieces, perhaps, but an enjoyable way to end an outstanding recital. One must not discount the importance of Mr. Rutenberg's collaborations with Ms. Brewer to the success of the program. He was attuned to her musicianship at all times.

As an encore Ms. Brewer sang an amusing setting of a review (if not real, it was certainly in the style of what one used to read in the New York Times) of a soprano's debut recital.