Beat by Beat | Art of Song

Sapphic February

LYDIA PEROVIC

There was a time when men loved lesbians and considered them essential for their own artistic output. No, stay with me, it’s true: that time is the latter half of the 19th century, the place is France, and the men are the poets of emerging modernism.

Charles Baudelaire’s Fleurs du mal’s working title was Les lesbiennes and the section that got him censored and fined includes poems Lesbos and Delpine et Hippolytée. (Femmes damnées somehow got away, in spite of its cries of solidarity: “Vous que dans votre enfer mon âme a pour-soeurs / Pauvres soeurs, je vous aime autant que je vous plains”). Paul Verlaine’s series of sonnets suivies / Pauvres soeurs, je vous aime is by Christine Schaefer with Eric Schneider.

Claude Debussy set three of the poems to music in 1897 to create the lush piano and voice opus now known as Trois Chansons de Bilitis. Debussy then worked on another, longer cycle titled Musique de scène pour les Chansons de Bilitis with 12 of Louÿs’ poems, but the text there is recited within the tableaux vivants with musical interludes scored for a small orchestra of flutes, harps and celesta. Recorded only a modest number of times—there’s a Deutsche Grammophon recording with Catherine Deneuve as the recitant—this other version of Chansons is extremely rarely performed.

The three-song cycle with piano is another story: it is widely claimed by both mezzos and sopranos and has been recorded frequently. February 9, at the noontime Ensemble Studio concert at the COC, it will be sung by the young mezzo-soprano Emily D’Angelo accompanied by Hyelin Kwon at the piano. Both piano and vocal writing are of great richness, both of heightened sensuality of the Anaïs Nin kind. The well-curated program that abounds in literary references will also include baritone Bruno Roy with Stéphane Mayer at the piano in Poulenc’s cycle La fraîcheur et le feu. Claude Debussy set three of the poems to music in 1897 to create the lush piano and voice opus now known as Trois Chansons de Bilitis. Debussy then worked on another, longer cycle titled Musique de scène pour les Chansons de Bilitis with 12 of Louÿs’ poems, but the text there is recited within the tableaux vivants with musical interludes scored for a small orchestra of flutes, harps and celesta. Recorded only a modest number of times–there’s a Deutsche Grammophon recording with Catherine Deneuve as the recitant—this other version of Chansons is extremely rarely performed.

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The Lieder are another cultural domain where the poetic “I” wanders across the sexes and rewrites the lover and the beloved, primarily thanks to the performers who interpret them. While traditionally the poetic subject has always been male and the object of his interest female, many composers would bestow the same cycle to a variety of voices, and singers and pianists themselves would adopt song cycles however they saw fit. But performing traditions get established and listening habits settle in, and today Berlioz’s Nuits d’été is sung primarily by mezzos and sopranos, while Schubert’s Die Winterreise primarily by baritones or tenors. Only a handful of mezzos have dared record the Schubert cycle: Christa Ludwig, Brigitte Fassbaender, Nathalie Stutzmann and Alice Coote. Fassbaender’s 1988 recording (with Arlibert Reimann at the piano) in particular ruffled misogynist feathers. “Can a Woman Do a Man’s Job in Schubert’s Winterreise?” pearl-clutched a New York Times critic in 1990 and proceeded to explain all the reasons the answer is no. Even fewer sopranos have recorded or performed it; one notable recent recording is by Christine Schäfer with Eric Schneider.

On a deserted island, two pairs of lovers are shipwrecked and victims of piracy, reunited to melodic strains of incomparable charm and grace.

The Deserted Island

L’isola disabitata

by Joseph Haydn in Italian with English surtitles

Kevin Mallon, Conductor

ARADIA ENSEMBLE

Malteis

Tennekoon

Dobson

Sunday, February 5 at 2:30 p.m.

St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts

416-366-7723 | 1-800-708-6754 | www.stlc.com
Lyric soprano Adrienne Pieczonka will be adding her unique voice and approach to the small but valiant contingent of Winterreise women this month, in the Mazzoleni Masters Concert Series at the RCM on February 12. Each singer brings a different personality to the narrator, and Pieczonka is likely to bring her deep knowledge of German language, her Vienna savvy and her impeccable Straussian pedigree— including her Marschallins— to the fore. A bright female voice will sing the dark poems to the ghostly presence of the beloved woman, and in this case it will be the voice of a singer who is indeed married to another woman. An important cultural first.

The cycle itself is ink black and non-negotiably so. “I came a stranger, I depart a stranger.” The first of Wilhelm Müller’s 24 poems, Gute Nacht, sets the tone. The narrator is leaving the house and his beloved, never to return. There was even talk of marriage, but all came to naught. He could have been a music teacher or a tutor there. We are never told; or why he is leaving, by choice or by somebody’s demand. “We are drawn in by an obsessively confessional soul... who won’t give us the facts,” as Ian Bostridge writes in his recent book Schubert’s Winter Journey.

He walks through the snow-covered wood, but equally through the landscape of his memory. Objects and trees appear that are heavy with meaning and pain, a postman rings but brings no mail, a graveyard is called an inn, and the snow and the ice remain constant. The final song takes us before the barefoot hurdy-gurdy busker: “Wunderlicher Alter!” Strange old man! Will his be the music to accompany the poet? Should the poet, in this apparent but not a little sinister break from the dark poems to the ghostly presence of the beloved woman, and bright female voice will sing Spenser’s sonnets set to music by British composer Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986). The rest of the program at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts in Kingston, is also of interest: Schubert’s Death and the Maiden string quartet and the Britten-arranged Purcell Chacony for strings in G Minor.

Lydia Perović is an arts journalist in Toronto. Send her your art-of-song news to artofsong@thewholenote.com.