



A Rising Generation

Written by Allan Pulker

Thursday, 29 October 2009

This month's column is all about singing!

Two names jump out at me because of their involvement in four different events. They are Shannon Mercer and Carla Huhtanen, both young sopranos already with a wealth of experience behind them – and, I suspect, brilliant careers ahead. Of Mercer, Toronto composer and organist Andrew Ager says, “She is a true artist for whom I have unbounded admiration. What I like most is her consistent commitment to delivering the meaning of the text with an instrument of great flexibility and beauty, always with an unusual intensity of expression.” As for Carla Huhtanen, Boris Zarankin, co-artistic director of the Off Centre Salon, had only to hear her once (at last year’s Souleppper Cabaret Festival) to know that she met the exacting standards of his highly respected concert series.

The two sopranos appear together in Queen of Puddings’ November 12 performance of Swedish composer Karin Rehnqvist’s *Puksånger-Lockrop*, a category-defying composition described in Queen of Puddings’ press release as “a fearless, hair-raising, primal and exhilarating tour-de-force for two female singers and timpani inspired by Swedish folk music and herding calls.”



Huhtanen admires Queen of Puddings directors in general for their challenging repertoire choices, and says that this piece is challenging not only to the performers but also to the audience, in a way that engages rather than alienates the listener. Rehnqvist, she says, does this by using contrast as a musical development strategy, varying colours and textures, moving from passages that are almost hypnotic to gradual accelerations to traditional Swedish folk music techniques. These include the raucous and penetrating “kulning,” formerly used out of doors for herding cattle and communicating over long distances – Huhtanen calls it a “sung shout.”

On November 29 Huhtanen will join pianists Inna Perkis and Boris Zarankin, mezzo Krisztina Szabó and baritone Jesse Clark in Toronto’s longest running Schubertiad (their 15th!) at Glenn Gould Studio. The programme for this concert is of particular interest because it was all composed in the last year of Schubert’s all too short life. While it will include well known masterpieces, such as Shepherd on the Rock, and the posthumously compiled song cycle Schwanengesang, it will also include less known lieder.

“While I really enjoy doing contemporary music, I also love to sing lieder,” commented Huhtanen, “which is like a yoga class for the voice. With Schubert it is all about telling a story, communicating the words, it all starts with the words, with simplicity. It is so simple and so intimate; it’s just being there with the pianist and the audience. It has also been almost a discovery, after not singing any German repertoire for some time, to experience how good it feels to come back to singing in German.”

Zarankin also looks forward to working with Clark and Szabó – and with flutist Robert Aitken, who will perform Schubert's very last song, "Tauben Post," as a solo flute piece.

The third concert, on November 22, St. Cecilia's Day (Cecilia being the patron saint of music) and also Benjamin Britten's birthday, is called simply "Blessed Cecilia." It's the Aldeburgh Connection's second Sunday concert of the season and will mark the 350th anniversary of the birth of Henry Purcell and the 96th of Benjamin Britten. The Aldeburgh Connection at this event, according to their website, will "seize the opportunity of celebrating the songs of two English masters," and will "acknowledge the healing and sustaining power of music." The soprano soloist in this concert will be Shannon Mercer, who will share the stage with tenor James McLean, and bass-baritone Giles Tomkins.



The fourth event is Toronto New Music Projects' December 6 performance at the Music Gallery of Philippe Leroux's "Voi(REX)" for six instruments, electronics and soprano. Carla Huhtanen, the soprano in this performance, describes the work as "difficult," but also "fun and witty." Leroux, who was associated for many years with Pierre Boulez's IRCAM in Paris, is not yet well known in Canada, but his works are performed around the world.

The singers I've written about are of the rising generation of Canadian vocal artists whose talents are in demand, not just at home but abroad as well. In fact, at the time of writing, Mercer was in London rehearsing Eric Idle's comic oratorio *Not the Messiah* – she performed in its world premiere in Toronto in 2007 – and Szabó was in Ireland performing in the Wexford Opera Festival.

They, of course, are the latest in a long line of internationally renowned Canadian singers, the first of whom was probably Emma Albani, whose career began around 1870 – eight years before the birth of the legendary Canadian tenor, Edward Johnson, who not only sang at New York's Metropolitan Opera but later became its director. Since then many more Canadian singers have performed on opera and recital stages around the world.

Two of the greatest artists in our long tradition of vocal artistry were soprano Lois Marshall, and contralto Maureen Forrester. The two did a tour together in 1973, which will be commemorated by soprano Lorna MacDonald, and mezzo Kimberly Barber, in a special recital, "Celebrating Marshall and Forrester" on November 10 in the Maureen Forrester Recital Hall at Wilfrid Laurier University, where Barber is the co-ordinator of vocal studies, and on November 19 in Walter Hall at the University of Toronto, where MacDonald is the head of vocal studies. I see this not only as a tribute to two great singers of the past but also as a celebration of the singing tradition, to which these two great Canadians added so much.

I'm reminded of something one of our great Canadian singers, Richard Margison, said to me a dozen or more years ago: "I like *The WholeNote* because it covers the local scene, and that's where we all start our careers." How true! So keep in mind that great talent may be found even at small events in humble venues. By all means, do go and hear the great ones in our midst, but also get out and support a smaller event in a smaller venue as well. It's rewarding to be able to say – as I can of bass Robert Pomakov, whom I heard sing in a gymnasium at University Settlement House 15 years ago – that you heard so-and-so before he/she was famous!

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