

Trinity Wall Street Presents

A CONCERT OF
THE SONGS OF
CHRISTOPHER BERG

February 28, 2013, 1pm

Naomi O'Connell, soprano
Jesse Blumberg, baritone
Christopher Berg, composer and piano

PROGRAM NOTES

Today's program includes songs composed between 1978 and 2006. The earliest, "Selling Techniques," from 1978, was composed during a stay at Yaddo, and as a tribute to its poet, Nellie Hill, whom the composer encountered there. The latest, "Letter from Richard," from 2006, was composed for a concert by the Mirror Visions Ensemble featuring songs based on correspondence, and later performed at Paul Sperry's 75th birthday concert.

In between, there are groups of songs on poems by Stevie Smith (three of a set of five), Frank O'Hara (five of a set of twelve), Vladimir Nabokov (one of a set of four), six songs on postcard texts of Stephane Mallarmé, a duet on a letter of Madame de Sévigné, and two short songs on letters of Abraham Lincoln. As with the Nellie Hill songs, the two songs on poems by Carol Stevens Kner resulted from a personal encounter with the poet and were commissioned by soprano Phyllis Clark. "Sonnet on Liberty," on Oscar Wilde's poem, was commissioned by baritone Richard Lalli. "La Moisson," finally, is an extraordinary meditation on mortality by Robert Desnos, a Surrealist poet and tragic victim of the Holocaust, composed for the Mirror Visions Ensemble and first featured on a program focusing on the life and music of Darius Milhaud.

Other poets and writers whose texts have been set by Berg include Tim Dlugos, Gertrude Stein (his first songs), Jean de la Fontaine, Dante, Goethe, W.H. Auden, V.R. Lang, Perry Brass, Erik Satie, William Jay Smith, Benjamin Franklin (a letter in French, set for vocal trio), Emmanuel Chabrier (again, letters) and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Recordings of many of these songs (as well as duets and trios) have been made by sopranos Tobé Malawista, Lauren Snouffer, and Vira Slywotzky, mezzo-soprano Janice Felty, tenors Carl Halvorsen, Scott Murphree, and Paul Sperry, baritones David Krohn, Richard Lalli and Chris Pedro Trakas, and actress Elaine Stritch, on the Albany, MusicMaster, Musical Heritage Society and Opus One labels.

Berg's small catalogue of instrumental music includes piano music (much of it recorded by Bennett Lerner on the Albany label), two string quartets (one with voice), a flute sonata, a cello sonata, a clarinet sonata, and for orchestra "We Have Heard the Chimes at Midnight," a Sinfonietta, and a set of short pieces called Outmoded Forms.

Berg is also the composer of a musical, Back Home (New York Musical Theater Festival 2007) and an opera, Cymbeline, based on Shakespeare's play. Most of his music is published by his own company, Tender Tender Music, distributed by Classical Vocal Repertoire.

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Aubade

My dove, my doe
I love you so,
I cannot will not
Let you go,
'Tis not the day lights yonder sky
It is too soon
I hear the cock's discordant cry,
He doodles to the moon.
It is not day
I say
It is the moon.

Alas, my love, it is the day,
Born twin to sun, but opening first,
The womb of night.
There lies the day,
Her cheeks are gray,
Alas so soon it is the day.
And now in agony her dam will try
To bring forth sun, and in fulfillment die.
No easy birth is here,
Before our eyes
Night bleeds
And, born caesareanwise,
Her son in flaming gear
Comes forth and her succeeds.
Once more for man the heavenly twins are born,
Farewell, my love, adieu, it is the dawn.
Stevie Smith

The Bereaved Swan

Wan
Swan
On the lake
Like a cake
Of soap
Why is the swan
Wan
On the lake?
He has abandoned hope.

Wan
Swan
On the lake afloat
Bows his head:
O would that I were dead
For her sake that lies
Wrapped from my eyes
In a mantle of death,
The swan saith.
— Stevie Smith

Little Boy Sick

I am not God's little lamb
I am God's sick tiger.
And I prowl about at night
And what most I love I bite,
And upon the jungle grass I slink,
Snuff the aroma of my mental stink,
Taste the salt tang of tears upon the brink
Of my uncomfortable muzzle.
My tail, my beautiful, my lovely tail,
Is warped.
My stripes are matted and my coat once sleek
Hangs rough and undistinguished on my bones.
O God I was so beautiful when I was well.
My heart, my lungs, my sinews and my reins
Consumed a solitary ecstasy,
And light and pride informed each artery.
Then I a temple, now a charnel house.
Then I a high hozannah, now a dirge.
Then I a recompense of God's endeavour,
Now a reproach and earnest of lost toil.
Consider, Lord, a tiger's melancholy
And heed a minished tiger's muted moan,
For thou art sleek and shining bright
And I am weary.
Thy countenance is full of light
And mine is dreary.

— Stevie Smith

Letter from Richard

May 25th, 2006

Dear Christopher,
Last week, I attended a song festival in Arkansas. Other composers from South America and the U.S.A. were also invited to take part. At an evening concert of my music the director of the festival announced that the organization was giving me an award! She asked me to come to the stage. I got rather excited, thinking the award was money! The award turned out to be a colorful banner and a sculpture. The next morning I was picked up at 5:00 and driven to the airport in Little Rock. When the plane arrived in New York it landed in a rain storm. All week long in Arkansas the weather had been lovely, the sky perfectly clear and the air fresh as a daisy.

Cordially,
Richard

Selling Techniques

He loves to watch himself
standing naked before the mirror
doing business on the telephone.
Each action is deliberate:
he bows and smiles while speaking
to his customers as if he's dealing
with himself. His minor flaws
don't bother him, the pot belly,
the baggy chin, he looks right over them
to the powerful swagger he's developed,

the commanding sweep of his arm.

Se loves to watch him.
She lies the on the bed,
her hands folded on the pillow
behind her head, and she smiles
at his act; and then she jons him,
her long skinny body next to his fat one,
the telephone between them. He continues
talking, selling someone something,
while she imitates every bow in the mirror,
every sweeping motion.

— Nellie Hill

Sonnet to Liberty

Not that I love thy children,, whose dull eyes
See nothing save their own unlovely woe,
Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know,-
But that the roar of thy Democracies,
Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea
And give my rage a brother - ! Liberty!
For this sake only do thy dissonant cries
Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings
By bloody knout or treacherous cannonade a
Rob nations of their rights inviolate
And I remain unmoved - and yet, and yet,
These Christs that die upon the barricades,
God knows it I am with them, in some things.

— Oscar Wilde

A Discovery

I found it in a legendary land
all rocks and lavender and tufted grass,
where it was settled on some sodden sand
hard by the torrent of a mountain pass.

The features it combines mark it as new
to science: shape and shade—the special tinge,
akin to moonlight, tempering its blue,
the dingy underside, the checquered fringe.

My needles have teased out its sculptured sex;
corroded tissues could no long hide,
that priceless mote now dimpling the convex
and limpid teardrop on a lighted slide.

Smoothly a screw is turned; out of the mist
two ambered hooks symmetrically slope,
or scales like battledores of amethyst
cross the charmed circle of the microscope.

I found it and I named it, being versed
in taxonomic Latin; thus became
godfather to an insect and its first
describer—and I want no other fame.

Wide open on its pin (thought fast asleep),
and safe from creeping relatives and rust,
in the secluded stronghold where we keep
type specimens it will transcend its dust.

Dark pictures, thrones, the stones that pilgrims kiss,
poems that take a thousand years to die
but ape the immortality of this
red label on a little butterfly.

— Vladimir Nabokov

FROM LINCOLN LETTERS

Soap [letter of September 28, 1860]

...Some specimens of your Soap have been used at our house
and Mrs. L. declares it is a superb article. She at the same time,
protests that I have never given sufficient attention to the “soap
question” to be a competent judge.

Yours truly, A. Lincoln

Aria (to a Lady) [letter of September 22, 1860]

...Your kind congratulatory letter, of August, was received in due
course – and should have been answered sooner. The truth is I
have never corresponded much with ladies; and hence I postpone
writing letters to them, as a business, which I do not understand.
I can only say now I thank you for the good opinion you express
of me, fearing, at the same time, I may not be able to maintain it
through life.

Yours very truly, A. Lincoln

FROM “SONGS OF LEISURE”

Lechery

Day after day rain lurks,
mopes over eaves,
gropes crevices,
then ensnares;
strokes windows,
swells doors,
stalls, bores,
floats, gloats,
asked to leave,
smirks.

The Visit

Today they have all come for the weekend.
The car is parked, they scatter on the lawn:
Happiness twirling on her painted toes,
Solitude silently clutching his book,
and close behind, Solicitude, who warns
the others off the snaky garden hose.

At lunch, sour Melancholy perches on a stool,
her sodden mantle shading the buffet,
but she's ignored by Bonhomie, whose jokes
and family tales garnish the cheese and meats,
while sly Suspicion sniffs the dessert tray
and Self-Absorption fills himself with quiche.

Later, by the lake, the hard edges blur,
shimmering in ripples that reflect the light.
It's true that for a spell Pomposity,
blustering along the dock, holds forth
on twine, the binding strength of cotton, hemp,
and nylon sold on skein or cylinder. . . .

The others simply stroll away or swim
until it's time for cocktails on the porch
and someone kindly asks for his advice
about briquettes and how to fire the grill.
Virtue, thank God, takes charge of washing up;
while the rest, like children catching fireflies,

saunter noisily to the field where they
pluck constellations from the Milky Way.
After dark, they shuffle off to bed,
except for pallid Romance, who clings fast
to Tedium while he reads the Times aloud.
Now Resolution leaves them, shuts the doors,
turns out the lights, lauds the good luck that kept
Decay (her dank grotto of clicking teeth)
at home; lolls with the crossword and a book,
all the day's chatter stopped. And in its place,
from discrete rooms throughout the house,
only the uncertain harmony of transient snores.

— Carol Stevens Kner

LES LOISIRS DE LA POSTE

Whistler

Leur rire Alec la même gamme
Sonnera si tu te rendis
Chez Monsieur Whistler et Madame
Rue antique du Bac, cent Dix.

Their identical laughter,
both ringing the same scale,
will sound forth if you hie yourself
to the home of Mr. & Mrs. Whistler,
rue Antique du Bac, 110.

Ernest Chausson

Arrête-toi, porteur, au son
Gémi par les violoncelles,
C'est chez Monsieur Ernest Chausson,
Vingt-deux boulevard de Courcelles.

Stop, carrier, at the moaning
sound of 'cellos, that's where
M. Ernest Chausson lives,
22, blvd. de Courcelles.

Huysmans

Rue (as-tu peur?) de Sévres onze
Subtil séjour où rappliqua
Satan tout haut traité de gonze

Par Huysmans qu'il nomme J. K.

Rue (are you afraid?) de Sévres 11,
A subtle dwelling that was approached by
Satan - boldly referred to as "a dude" by
Huysmans, whom he calls J. K.

Verlaine

Tapi sous ton chaud macfarlane
Ce billet, quand to le reçois
Lis-le haut; six cour Saint François
Rue, est-ce Moreau? cher Verlaine.

Crouching with this note under your wan
Inverness cape; when you receive it read
aloud; 65 St. Francis Court, rue -is it
Moreau. dear Verlaine.

Reynaldo Hahn

Le pleur qui chante au langage
Du poete, Reynaldo
Hahn tendrement le dégage
Comme en l'allée un jet d'eau.

Reynaldo Hahn tenderly draws forth
the weeping that sings in the poet's
language, as does a fountain in the
walkway.

Degas

Rue, au vingt-trois, Ballu j'exprime
Sitôt juin à Monsieur Degas
La satisfaction qu'il rime
Avec la fleur des syringas.

23, rue Ballu. I express to Monsieur
Degas, now June has arrived, satisfaction
that he rhymes with the flower of the
syringa.

La Moisson

Incroyable est de se croire
Vivant, réel, existant.
Incroyable est de se croire
Mort, feu, défunt, hors du temps.
Incroyable est de se croire
Et plus incroyable encore
De se croire, pour mémoire,
Un rêve, une âme sans corps.

Belles roses du passé,
Roses, odorantes roses,
Qui dès l'aube frémissiez,
A la nuit déjà déclosez,
Votre sort rapide et long
Est égal à nos années
Même si, dans le salon,
On vous apporte fanées.

Nos dieux étaient trop fragiles,
C'étaient de petites gens,

Dans un petit domicile,
Vivant de fort peu d'argent.
Plus grande est notre fortune
Et plus sombre est notre sort.
Nous ne voulons pas la lune.
Nous ne craignons pas la mort.

Par nos cinq sens ligoté
Notre univers rapetisse.
Adieu rêve, adieu beauté!
De vous je fais sacrifice
Au monde trop limité.
Robert Desnos

The Harvest

It is unthinkable to think of yourself
Alive, real, existing.
It is unthinkable to think of yourself
Dead, deceased, defunct, outside of time.
It is unthinkable to think of yourself
And still more unthinkable
To think of yourself as a memory,
A dream, a soul without a body.

Beautiful roses of the past,
Roses, fragrant roses
Which tremble after dawn,
By night already opened wide,
Your fate, brief and long,
Is the same as our years
Even if, in the drawing room,
You are brought in faded.

Our gods were too fragile.
They were little people
In a little house
Living on very little money.
Our fortune is greater
And our fate more gloomy.
We do not want the moon.
We do not fear our death.

Tied firmly by the five senses
Our universe shrinks.
Goodbye dream, goodbye beauty!
I sacrifice you
To the too limited world

Translation by William Kulik with Carole Frankel

FROM "PORTRAIT EN MINIATURE DE MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ"

Les gourmandizes

Mai's puisque nous y sommes, parlons un peu de la cruelle et continuelle chère que l'on y falt, surtout en ce temps-ci; ce ne sont pourtant que les mêmes choses qu'on mange partout: des perdreaux, cela est commun; mais il n'est pas commun qu'il soient tous comme lorsqu'à Paris chacun les approche de son nez faisant une certaine mine, et criant: ((Ah, quel fumet! sentez un peu;)) nous supprimons tous ces étonnements; ces perdreaux sont tous nourris de thym, de marjolaine, et de tous ce qui fait le parfum de nos sachets; il n'y a point à choisir; j'en dis autant de nos cailles grasses, dont il faut que la cuisse se sépare du corps à la première semonce (elle n'y manque jamais), et des tourterelles, toutes parfaites aussi. Pour les melons, les figues et les muscats, c'est une chose étrange: si nous voulions, par quelque bizarre fantaisie, trouver un mauvais melon, nous serions obligés de la faire venir de Paris, il ne s'en trouve point ici; les figues blanches et sucrées les muscats comme des grains d'ambre que l'on peut croquer, et qui vous feraient fort bien tourner la tête si vous en mangiez sans mesure, parce que c'est comme si l'on buvait à petits traits du plus exquis vin de Saint-Laurent; mon cher cousin, quelle vie!

But since we are here, let's talk a little about the cruel and constant feasting that goes on here, especially at this time of year - not that we don't eat the same things that are eaten everywhere: partridges, for instance, are common enough, but less common is that they should all be like those which in Paris, when their scent approaches one's nose making it twitch with pleasure, provoke cries of "Oh, what an aroma! Just smell that!" We suppress all these raptures. These partridges are all redolent of thymes marjoram, and of everything that makes the scent of our sachets - you have no choice in the matter! And I would say the same of our fat quails, whose things should come off at the first invitation (and they never refuse), and of the turtle doves, all just as perfect. As for melons, figs, muscat grapes like seeds of amber that you can bite into, and which would go to your head if you were to eat them without some restraint, since it's like taking little sips of the most exquisite St. Laurent wine. Oh cousin - what a life!

— Madame de Sévigné

FROM "TWELVE SONGS ON POEMS OF FRANK O'HARA"

A Warm Day for December

57th Street
street of joy
I am a microcosm in your macrocosm
and then a macrocosm in you microcosm
a hydrogen bomb too tiny
to make an eye water
and yet I toddle along
past the reverential windows of Tiffany
with its diamond clips on paper bags

street of dreams painterly
Sidney Janis and Betty Parsons
and Knoedler's so Germanesquely full
you don't notice me
except that I am isolated by my new haircut
and look more Brancusi than usual
as I get in a phone booth on a corner
like a space ship
I like the people passing noisily by
blasting off
"I love you"
"I love you too"
then I open the door the sounds rush over me the people
but I am in the air
yet I follow 57th
meeting Roy and Bill I drink Vermouth
we talk about the pleasantness distractions of New York
you're almost there
57th Street

Song

Is it dirty
does it look dirty
that's what you think of in the city
does it just seem dirty
that's what you think of in the city
you don't refuse to breathe do you
someone comes along with a very bad character
he seems attractive. is he really. yes. very
he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes

that's what you think of in the city
run your finger along your no-moss mind
that's not a thought that's soot
and you take a lot of dirt off someone
is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly
you don't refuse to breathe do you

— Frank O'Hara

Poem

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

— Frank O'Hara

To You

What is more beautiful than night
and someone in your arms
that's what we love about art
it seems to prefer us and stays
if the moon or a gasping candle
sheds a little light or even dark
you become a landscape in a landscape
with rocks and craggy mountains
and valleys full of sweaty ferns
breathing and lifting into the clouds
which have actually come low
as a blanket of aspirations' blue
for once not a melancholy color
because it is looking back at us
there's no need for vistas we are one
in the complicated foreground of space
the architects are most courageous
because it stands for all to see
and for a long long time just as
the words "I'll always love you"
impulsively appear in the dark sky
and we are happy and stick by them
like a couple of painters in neon allowing
the light to glow there over the river

— Frank O'Hara

Song

I'm going to New York!
(what a lark! what a song!)
where the tough Rocky's eaves
hit the sea. Where th'Acro-
polis is functional, the trains
that run and shout! the books
that have trousers and sleeves!
I'm going to New York!
(quel voyage! jamais plus!)
far from Ypsilanti and Flint!
where Goodman rules the Empire
and the sunlight's eschato-
logy upon the wizard's bridges
and the galleries of print!
I'm going to New York!
(to my friends! mes semblables!)
I suppose I'll walk back West.
But for now I'm gone forever!
the city's hung with flashlights!
the Ferry's unbuttoning its vest!

— Frank O'Hara