

Lyric Fest's Paris Festival

The Fest and the Festival

Tom Purdom

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Evrard: Up and coming.

From my viewpoint, the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts is a bottom-up happening. The Festival's classical music schedule is crowded with events, primarily because our local music organizations have responded to a call. Most of them would normally be presenting concerts this month in any case. They've fitted their regular programming into the festival by scheduling concerts with French themes” as most of them could do at any time.

In that respect, the Festival's main virtue is the spotlight it shines on the riches that Philadelphia's classical music organizations deliver throughout the season, year after year.

Lyric Fest's contribution to the citywide gala is a good example.

Many of the best works in the art song repertoire stem from composers who worked in Paris during the first third of the 20th Century. You can't go wrong with an art song program that includes songs

by Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc, Stravinsky and Milhaud, along with a few choice bits by Cole Porter and George Gershwin.

The scholarly, good-humored talks that ran through the program should have pleased any Festival committee members lurking in the audience. The talk on Eastern influences on French music included some data on the Japanese influence that I wasn't familiar with, and the program followed it with two well-chosen soprano pieces that reflected that encounter with Asian culture.

Non-American Christmases

An up-and-coming French opera diva, Manon Straus Evrard, sang three settings of Japanese poems by Stravinsky. Randi Marrazzo did a beautiful job with Maurice Delage's setting of an Indian text on the birth of the Buddha" a touching reminder that other cultures have their own versions of our Christmas songs.

Much of the modern flute repertoire originated in the Paris of *La Belle Epoque*, and the program included two of the era's best works for voice and flute: Ravel's *La Flute Enchantée* for mezzo-soprano and flute, and his *Chansons Madagascar* for mezzo-soprano, flute, cello and piano.

The Madagascar Songs constitute one of the 20th Century's masterpieces. Ravel's opening and closing movements create a sensuously orchestrated picture of languid island life, and his volatile middle movement evokes a victorious struggle against invading white colonists.

I heard the *Chansons Madagascar* for the first time more than 20 years ago, when I was still overcoming my American bias against art songs. It was one of the pieces that convinced me that the genre contained just as many treasures as the orchestral and chamber music repertoires. I look forward to hearing it every time anyone schedules it. Mezzo Clara O'Brien didn't disappoint me.

Scarlata's Hasidic chant

The cast's only male vocalist, Randall Scarlata, was in very good form. He opened the afternoon with Debussy's flowing evocation of *Le Faune* and closed it with Cole Porter's humorous tale of a social climbing oyster. In between, he ranged across material that included Porter's *Let's Do It* and Maurice Delage's setting of Baudelaire's daydream of a former life, *La Vie Anterieure*.

I was particularly impressed with Scarlata's delivery of Milhaud's *Chant Hassidic*. The chant begins like a nursery rhyme ("Seven is for the Sabbath, six for the parts of the Talmud") and turns into a powerful statement of faith when it reaches "And one is for our God... our only God."

Unsung heroine

Every review of a Lyric Fest concert should mention pianist Laura Ward, the one member of the cast who's on stage from the beginning to the end. Her accompaniments always add emotional overtones that embellish everything the vocalists do.

Some of the pieces on this program were originally performed with full orchestras. When Laura Ward plays the piano version, you don't notice anything is missing. ♦

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ARTICLE OVERVIEW

The Lyric Fest art song series made its contribution to the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts with a program it could stage at any time.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Lyric Fest: Songs by Debussy, Poulenc, Stravinsky, Delage, Ravel, Satie, Weil, Porter, Gershwin *et al.* Manon Strauss Evrard, Randi Marrazzo, sopranos; Clara O'Brien, mezzo-soprano; Randall Scarlata, baritone. Lois Herbine, flute; Lynne Beiler, cello; Laura Ward, piano. Developed and produced by Suzanne DuPlantis, Randi Marrazzo, and Laura Ward. April 10, 2011 at First Presbyterian Church, 21st and Walnut Sts. [\(215\) 438-1702](tel:2154381702) or www.lyricfest.org.

ABOUT TOM PURDOM



Tom Purdom (tompurdom@verizon.net) is a science fiction writer and general freelance writer who has been writing about music since 1988.

