

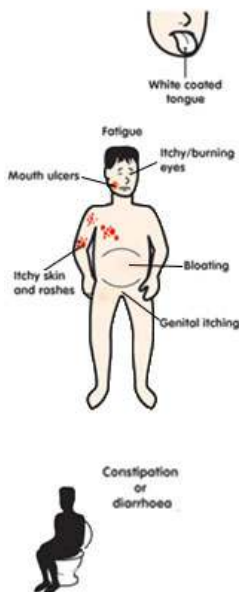
Lyric Fest tips a musical hat to 1912

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Soprano Meagan Miller of Delaware was a crowd-pleaser at Lyric Fest's centennial program of songs and opera from 1912.

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David Patrick Stearns **INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC**

POSTED: March 27, 2012

Anniversary mania is so prevalent in classical music that any landmark year ending with a zero or a five will be celebrated and marketed - and, with luck, will help focus the attention of a public faced with a millennium's worth of music to choose from.

With immense wit and perhaps tongue in cheek, Lyric Fest, the Philadelphia art song collective, unveiled the program titled "A Very Good Year: Happy Birthday to 1912" last weekend. Why not? Not only was 1912 a hundred years ago - two zeros! - it was the year the song "Happy Birthday" was published. More than in most anniversaries, the net was cast wide. As mezzo-soprano Suzanne DuPlantis pointed out, any given moment in art is full of things dying, birthing, and flourishing. It was in 1912 that we said goodbye to Jules Massenet and hello to Gene Kelly, followed by John Cage but preceded by Perry Como (according to the program booklet).

With DuPlantis joined by Zach Borichevsky, Meagan Miller, Randi Marrazzo, and Randall Scarlata, the program ranged from the ultralight "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" to a scene from Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*, with composers from Irving Berlin to Cage.

Discoveries began in the very first song. Simple arpeggios have rarely been more eloquent than in "Orpheus With His Lute" by the little-known Ivor Gurney (and as elegantly sung as Borichevsky). Reynaldo Hahn was represented by "Song at the edge of the fountain," which was uncharacteristically spare, had little time for superficial charm, and, as sung by Marrazzo, emerged as one of the composer's most distinctive creations. Among the composers who died young: Lili Boulanger, whose choral work *Spring* had conversational nattering amid long-breathed lines, and the Finn Toivo Kuula, whose "The Wood Sprite" found the dark heart of a fairy-tale text.

DuPlantis had some choice items such as "In the Garden" by Ottorino Respighi, often imprinting the music with her personality as deeply as

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Ian Bostridge a few weeks back, but with infinitely greater emotional underpinning - a quality that turned Cage's potentially meandering "The Wonderful Widow" into a winding emotional journey.

The crowd pleaser was Delaware-raised Miller, in her first area appearance since re-debuting as a Straussian soprano. "There is a realm where all is pure" from Strauss' Ariadne auf Naxos fit her voice and linguistic abilities beautifully. The acoustically dry Academy of Vocal Arts (Sunday's venue) prompted some oversinging. The Chamber Singers of Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges - on hand for short choral works by Edward Elgar and others - suffered more from the acoustics, which revealed even the slightest pitch problems.

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