

Audiences growing for song recitals

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Could anything be more basic than song? A singer, a piano, great words, and a fine melody?

Nonetheless, classically inclined Philadelphians historically have found song recitals perfectly resistible, except for starchy vocalists - Jessye Norman, Thomas Hampson - performing in large auditoriums. Too intellectual? Solemn? Rarefied?

But anyone who has been away from Philadelphia might have a Rip van Winkle moment witnessing small but packed halls for brainy artists such as baritone Gerald Finley, who sang Schubert's *Winterreise* in February for a rapt house that a decade ago might have used winter weather as a reason to stay home.

High-caliber singers who could easily fill larger venues are now opting for the Kimmel Center's smaller Perelman Theater. Among them is mezzo-soprano Susan Graham, who appears April 2. "I was amazed that we were able to do it," said Tony Checchia, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society founder. "Naturally, there has to be some kind of compromise . . ." He's talking about fees, an artist's willingness to take less from an organization whose top ticket price for Graham is \$24. Though many singers try out programs in Philadelphia en route to New York, Graham's recital tour (scheduled between blue-chip opera and symphony dates) has no other major cities.

That's exactly the kind of commitment needed to will a niche-y medium into a slow-motion renaissance. Or maybe classical song has always been with us, just under the radar, says composer Daron Hagen, who has written nine operas and 350 songs. "Singers are really hungry. They discover songs and pass them on to each other," he said. "It's churn. It's fun."

And it's a haven for operatic refugees. "The lights, curtain, costumes, orchestra . . . everything [in opera] is set up so that it's hard to reach across to flesh-and-blood human beings," said mezzo-soprano Suzanne DuPlantis, who gave up a viable opera career and joined soprano Randi Marrazzo and pianist Laura Ward to form Philadelphia's Lyric Fest, which has given enterprising song concerts since 2003. No surprise that Lyric Fest's subtitle is "Connecting people through song."

"In opera, everybody is telling you what to do," said retired soprano Benita Valente. "In song recitals, you have the least company when you're standing on that stage. But you have the most to say about what you want to present."

Another key distinction: "In opera, voice rules," DuPlantis said. "In the song world, words rule." Especially at Lyric Fest, which rejects traditional European formats by building programs around a particular idea ("*Love With a Twist*") or biography of figures such as Benjamin Britten, with music augmented by the composer's letters and related commentary.

Its most enterprising program yet is "Dear March - Come In - American Women Poets in Song" on March 28 at Bryn Mawr College and March 30 at the Academy of Vocal Arts, featuring

newly composed songs to words by female poets. "I would have done it for free," said composer Hagen, who contributes songs based on Emily Dickinson and greatly admires the organization.

However late it was in blooming, Philadelphia's art-song community can trace its lineage directly back to Vienna: The idolized soprano Lotte Lehmann, who was Richard Strauss' muse and an avid recitalist, retired to teaching in Santa Barbara, Calif., where one of her students was an impressionable Valente. But after graduating from the Curtis Institute and making a still-classic Schubert song recording at the Marlboro Festival, Valente found that her opera career, which eventually led to the Metropolitan Opera, was slow to develop. Living in Philadelphia, she had no platform for concerts.

By creating one - in the unlikely venue of the funky Theatre of the Living Arts on South Street - her husband, Tony Checchia, in 1986 formed what is now the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, which became better known for presenting string quartets. However, PCMS statistics on song-recital attendance have risen steadily, from an average of 306 to 440 listeners in the last five years.

DuPlantis came to Lyric Fest from the opposite direction: She readily worked in opera. "I was singing at good houses, sang every role I wanted . . . but I was never home." Other Lyric Fest co-founders were at an age when they were zeroing in on what was more artistically important to them. Marrazzo has a resumé including New York City Opera and currently teaches at Temple University. Laura Ward, one of the most respected pianists of her kind, edits major publications of Strauss, Fauré, and Brahms songs and has recorded 2,000 accompaniments.

Perhaps no U.S. organization has the literary bent of Lyric Fest, but it has joined a larger zeitgeist of song recitals at which almost anything can happen: The 25-year-old New York Festival of Song has explored all manner of theme programs. Met star Stephanie Blythe constantly devises recitals of newly composed songs and now refuses to have the words printed in the program to better command the audience's attention.

Such enterprise doesn't always work out. A war-themed Lyric Fest program had spoken portions that brought its running time to three hours. One of the April program's quirks is that the new songs honoring female poets are mainly composed by men (Hagen, James Primosch) because the women they asked were either unavailable or uninterested.

And the money isn't great. Young singers sometimes slight Lyric Fest rehearsals for more lucrative gigs. "There's not enough glory," DuPlantis said. "They sometimes come to the first rehearsal without the music memorized and singing wrong notes. But I can't think of one occasion when singers haven't embraced the whole thing by the time it was over."