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Neubauer Trio Well Frothed

by GIGI MITCHELL-VELASCO



Susanna Phillips

Like a generously filled éclair or a well frothed cappuccino, this was a conglomeration of tidbits and unusual arrangements put together in a salon concert style to entice and delight. On paper, it read like an entire concert of encores with a few familiar standards thrown in. The trio entered informally, waving to the crowd packed into the four-tiered Calderwood Hall. Violist Paul Neubauer began with a knowing smile as he whistled the first few notes of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” Pianist Ann-Marie McDermott soon joined in with the tune and Neubauer then began a little gigue of an obbligate reminiscent of the piccolo solo in “Stars and Stripes.” Soprano Susanna Phillips began the first verse as he continued his gigue, and when the second verse came around he surprised us all by singing it himself in his throaty bari-tenor. This completely won over any of those who were not so keen on an afternoon of fluff versus substance, and set the tone for the next hour and a half. This little ditty was followed by a beautiful lullaby, “Sing me to Sleep” of Edwin Greene. Neubauer’s sound was sexy and beckoning; it would be Heaven just to have

him lullaby one to sleep every evening. From the beginning, he established himself as a big personality, even in this understated opening. His lines were long, drawn and hushed, spinning a beautiful sound for Phillips to sing with. This was early on one of her best songs on the program. Her instrument is luminescent and feminine, and she crooned in the same drawn-out long lines as the viola. The stillness was mesmerizing, making for great hopes for this afternoon delight of a program. "Roses of Picardy" closed the set.

Neubauer then announced a change in the program. Originally, the Schumann set had two "Widmungs," the original voice-piano setting and the Liszt piano transcription, separated by a viola piece from *Märchenbilder*. Instead, the two "Widmungs" would come together, as a comparison, etc. He also mentioned that the program was constructed as a nod to how record companies once introduced new recordings with gala assortments of their artists: They would record and tour unusual combinations of people which he named as perhaps, Marian Anderson, John McCormack and even Bing Crosby paired with the likes of Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz and other unlikely combinations. He said that in some cases these were the exact arrangements. Indeed, the program carried on in this fashion with various program notes being filled in by the artists themselves. I felt the true diva moment was McDermott's brilliant playing of the Liszt transcription. Through her fluid technique and flowing musicianship, the piece literally spilled out of the uncovered 9-foot Steinway. Phillips' rendition was pleasantly musical, but stopped short of Schumann's youthful exuberance or any hint of Rückert's spirituality that is present in every one of his poems.

The group of Rachmaninoff songs perhaps missed the mark most of all. This should have been Phillips' moment to show her serious side. Instead, "Ne poj krasavica" (O cease thy singing) seemed hurried, with no real savoring of the rich Russian language or Rachmaninoff's angst. The obbligato, arranged by Fritz Kreisler, was played with passion and dug in deep like a wailing gypsy violin—unusual to hear on the viola. The next two songs were not familiar to me as pieces with obbligato. "Zdes khorosho" (How fair this spot) surprisingly worked with the viola's filigree, and perhaps "Vessenije vody" (Spring Waters) would not have really been as successful had it not been for Neubauer doing the 'convincing' with his virtuosic viola interjections. Phillips opted for the alternate B-flat interpolation for the penultimate note which I was happy to hear, but the whole thing seemed so rushed through, that when the famous line "Vyes na idiot" (Spring has come) came, it lacked excitement and made little impact. To hear this song this way was quite disappointing, as it should have rung the rafters.

After a brief intermission they resumed with a set of songs by Gounod. McDermott showed all afternoon that she was capable of suspending the longest line in order to slip gracefully along the musical intentions of her partners while creating a color for each artist to paint on top of. This was most evident in the famous Bach/Gounod "Ave Maria" where Neubauer's line was flawless. Set in what seemed to be an odd key for Phillips she seem to struggle a bit to sing simply and delicately. She caught her stride again in "Evening Song" set in English and charmed us in "Sing, Smile and Slumber," this time sung in French, "Quand tu chantes."

The Italian set is where Phillips showed she was most comfortable in terms of language and style. These were romantic and sentimentally Victorian. She emoted certain sounds and colors that showed she was truly a part of this music. I began to hear a bit of bloom in the sound that I hadn't heard before, and wondered how she was on the opera stage as the beautiful Mozart and Puccini divas listed in her biography. Braga's "Angel's Serenade" was the most enjoyable of this set; in a rather low key, with her warm mezzo-like low notes coming as a pleasant surprise. A great *klavier* partner is someone whom one never notices, until that exquisite moment when one *does*. There came one such moment in the last group of songs from Italy – Tosti's "La Serenata" where her *chitarra*-like pluckings sounded like velvety fingers in a moving stream.



Paul Neubauer and Ann-Marie McDermott

Overall, the set-up did nothing to help Phillips, and although it was more or less a lovely performance, there was much missing for me. I overheard an audience member complaining that the soprano had her back to him the whole time, and the excuse given was that they were making music together amongst themselves, and only in a hall like this could this be done. They were all turned in toward each other

as this little hall presented a concert 'in the round,' or in Calderwood's case, in the square. There was an attentive chamber music feel to how they paid attention to each other; this is all well and good, but with this set-up comes the difficulty that less than half the audience will get the eyes and facial expression that are so important in any vocal performance, and most especially in a song recital. I kept thinking that the two who were standing might move their focus around the hall. At the end Phillips did make mention of this and made a quarter turn, saying she wanted to look at that other half of the room for the encore. This was too little too late since the majority of us only gotten her back. And what was the encore piece on this program of encores? American Song Book, of course, in the form of a delightfully jazzy arrangement of Gershwin's "Our Love is Here to Stay." Neubauer tweaked out a little homage at the end with a *Rhapsody in Blue*-like clarinet slide. Having had the first word, he also got the last.

All three of these musicians had staggering bio credits that truly set them as luminaries. It was interesting to watch them as they 'played their music to each other' that we got to 'listen in' on a Sunday afternoon. When the concert was over, it was then the proper hour for tea.

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