

BW Art Song Festival: soprano Joan Rodgers with pianist Roger Vignoles (May 20)

by Timothy Robson



For the past 22 years George Vassos, retired chair of the voice department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, has labored mightily to ensure the preservation of that rarified musical event, the art song recital. In 1985 Vassos established an annual Art Song Festival at CIM; since 2004 it has been resident at Baldwin Wallace University in Berea and is now biennial, with occasional special events in the off-years.

The 2014 festival is underway at BW this week and features several masterclasses with auditioned singer/pianist teams coached by guest artists, as well as recitals by the guest artists and a final recital by the teams themselves. On Tuesday evening, May 20, British soprano Joan Rodgers and pianist Roger Vignoles gave the first of this year's artist recitals.

Joan Rodgers is relatively unknown in American musical circles except through her numerous recordings, including an acclaimed performance as The Governess in Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. In the UK she has maintained a very distinguished career in opera and concert spanning three decades, including appearing as soloist at The Last Night of The Proms in 1988. She was awarded the CBE in 2001. So this concert was a rare and welcome opportunity to hear her live in what was a very traditional lieder recital, featuring some unusual repertoire. The composers were Austrian (Schubert and the early 20th century Joseph Marx) and Russian (Rachmaninov, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Tchaikovsky).

Joan Rodgers opened her recital with eight songs from the "holy canon" of German song by Franz Schubert, beginning with the buoyant *Fischerweise* (*Fisherman's Song*). One of the keys to success in lieder singing is being able to portray the meaning of the poetry as "little dramas" with minimal means, just the text and music. Unlike opera or oratorio,

there is nowhere to hide; every word and note can be scrutinized, and there is an ongoing question of text versus music.

Rodgers's diction was impeccable. Her performance of *Im Abendrot (At Dusk)* had a sense of timeless stillness and beautiful legato; in *Die Männer sind mechant (Men Are Faithless)* she went from almost a whisper to exasperation. Rodgers ended the set with a charming reading of the familiar *An Silvia (Who is Silvia)*. At the beginning of the set, she seemed a bit uncomfortable, with a dry voice; at times the songs seemed to be pitched in keys lower than she was comfortable. As the recital progressed, however, her voice gained strength and expressiveness. The Russian songs that closed the program were much more effective and played upon Joan Rodgers's dramatic and vocal gifts.

Joseph Marx had the misfortune of composing in a lushly Romantic style at the same time that Arnold Schoenberg and his associates in Vienna were divorcing themselves from traditional tonality. Although he composed numerous instrumental works, it is his 120 songs upon which Marx's reputation now rests. They are alluring, with beautiful melodies and quirky harmonies.

Of the six-song set performed by Rodgers and Vignoles, the melancholy *Die Verlassene (The Forsaken One)* and *Venezianisches Wiegenlied (Venetian Lullaby)* with its barcarolle-like piano accompaniment were especially beautiful. Marx favored long, lyrical vocal lines, with accompaniments that illustrate the texts. Here, as elsewhere in the program, Roger Vignoles, one of the most acclaimed accompanists on today's musical scene, was simultaneously virtuosic and subtle, actively collaborating with the singer.

Joan Rodgers has a very apparent affinity for the Russian song literature. Her group of 14 songs by Rachmaninov, Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky were the highlight of this recital. Especially effective was Rachmaninov's *The Soldier's Wife*, the lament of a woman who marries a soldier, but spends her life separated from him. The song ends with a gorgeous, wordless vocalise. Rimsky-Korsakov's *Thou and You* is a play on the formal "you" and the intimate "thou." (The song is, of course, in Russian, and the English translation distributed did not capture the subtlety of the language.) But the essence of the song, with its rustling, allegro piano accompaniment is that outwardly the singer is speaking formally to "you," but inwardly she is saying, "I love you" (using the informal version of the pronoun.)

The Tchaikovsky songs were all winners, including a substitution announced from the stage, *My friend, not a word*, about sorrow and lost happiness, giving the opportunity for the singer to express torrents of emotion. The familiar *None but the Lonely Heart*, was likely the most well-known of the songs. After her performance, Joan Rodgers acknowledged her debt to Frank Sinatra's performance of the song, which she encouraged the audience to look it up on YouTube. The last song on the program, *The*

Cuckoo, was a satire about opera singers always wanting to know what is being said about them.

For an encore, Joan Rodgers and Roger Vignoles performed the Scottish/Irish folksong *I Know Where I'm Going* in an affectingly simple arrangement. After all the Russian emotion, it brought the program to a beautiful, quiet conclusion.

A comment to the concert organizers: although English translations for all of the repertoire were distributed, it would have been more helpful to have the complete original texts side-by-side as well as the translations. Also, the dim lighting in the auditorium rendered the printed texts useless; could the house lights be left up a notch or two? Both of these things would enhance the listeners' experience.

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