

Music review: 'Songs for Soprano'

BY GENE HARRIS Special correspondent

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Ever been to a chamber concert that began with a performer whistling “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”? Well, neither had I until violist Paul Neubauer, pianist Anne-Marie McDermott and soprano Susanna Phillips strode onstage Sunday evening at the University of Richmond’s Camp Concert Hall. Neubauer, with a smile, pursed his lips and launched into that popular World War I tune. It set the tone perfectly for a lighthearted and charming, yet often dramatic, evening of world-class music making.

The program was titled “Songs for Soprano,” but it was really a performance that showcased the talents of all three of these fine musicians. Although they’re all highly acclaimed solo performers who’ve appeared on stages throughout the world, they’ve also performed this repertoire of salon-style songs together on numerous occasions — and it showed in their refined sense of ensemble and unity of artistic vision.

They started with a set of well-known songs from the British Isles circa 1902-1916. Through this set and throughout the evening, Phillips exhibited a strong yet flexible and warm lyric soprano, Neubauer showed expressive and effortless obbligato playing, and McDermott demonstrated the ultimate accompanist’s sensibility in controlling her dynamics, never overpowering the others even with the lid of the Steinway grand fully open.

A particular high spot in the first half was McDermott’s and Neubauer’s rendition of Robert Schumann’s “Märchenbilder” (“Pictures from a Fairy Land”) for piano and viola. Although ostensibly written to be performed by amateurs at home, this four-movement piece, sometimes sonorously sad, sometimes frenetic and extroverted, is technically formidable. It takes players of the caliber of McDermott and Neubauer to bring it off, which they did masterfully.

Phillips then rejoined the other two for a set of songs from Russia, three by Sergei Rachmaninoff — the melancholy “Oh, Cease Thy Singing, Maiden Fair,” the short gem “How Fair This Spot!” and the turbulent “Spring Waters” — and one by Anton Arensky, the sweet “Das Maiglöckchen” (“Lily of the Valley”).

The second half began with the “Ave Maria” by J.S. Bach/Charles Gounod. Unfortunately, this was the weakest showing for Phillips, whose middle register tended to be a shade under the pitch in some passages. She can be forgiven, however, having sung the role of Fiordiligi in Mozart’s “Cosi fan tutte” at the Metropolitan Opera the night before. And she acquitted herself nicely in two other songs by Gounod, especially showing off her coloratura skills in “Sing, Smile and Slumber.”

The evening highlight was “Widmung” (“Dedication”) for voice and piano by Robert Schumann, coupled with Franz Liszt’s transcription of the same piece for solo piano. Phillip’s passionate rendering of the text by Friederich Rückert was splendid, and McDermott had her own shining moment as her stunning virtuosity exploded in the all-too-brief Liszt transcription.