

by Daniel Hathaway

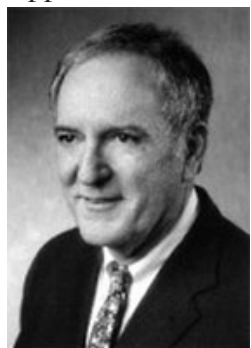


Solo vocal music has been around since our distant ancestors began cultivating singing. The tradition of Art Song recitals -- where usually only a single vocalist and pianist hold forth “on stage” -- is a later invention, dating back to the performance of songs by Schubert, Mendelssohn and their

early Romantic compatriots in private houses, or to Franz Liszt's public recitals in London in 1840.

Early public recitals often comprised operatic arias and sometimes solo instrumentalists. At the beginning of the 20th century, such opera singers as Marcella Sembrich and Frieda Hempel established the tradition of the “serious” Art Song recital, and John McCormack and Marian Anderson brought that form of concert to prominence between the World Wars, with not a little help from European refugees who fled the Nazi regime in the 1930 (Elisabeth Schumann, Lotte Lehmann) and the new infrastructure of the Community or Civic Concert Series, whose impresarios disseminated artists all over the country.

By 1985, when conditions had changed and it appeared that Art Song recitals were on the brink of extinction, George Vassos (left), then head of the Voice Department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, decided to take steps to keep the tradition and its vast repertory alive for future generations. He convinced Grant Johannsen, CIM's Director at the time, to lend his support to the first Art Song Festival in Cleveland, and established a format that still prevails today.



Mr. Vassos proposed to bring two well-

known vocalists and their pianists to Cleveland for a week for performances and master classes in which the seasoned veterans would work closely with ten teams of singer-pianists chosen by audition. “The art song recital is a close collaboration between singers and pianist and so it was planned from the very beginning that the young singers would come to the Festival with an accompanying pianist with whom they had worked for at least a year”. The week would culminate in a recital performed by the ten teams, “featuring the best of the works that they had worked on during the week”.

The bar was set high at the beginning. This would not be a seminar for neophyte vocalists, but for singers and pianists “who had acquired a vocal technique, has learned the necessary languages, and acquired a certain basic repertoire. The artist-teacher can then show the student how best to get across the message expressed in the song and how to catch and hold the attention of the audience”.

And choosing to begin with a bang, Mr. Vassos invited two famous luminaries in the Art Song world to launch his new enterprise: the French baritone Gerard Souzay and the Dutch soprano, Elly Ameling, who performed and taught with their joint pianist, Dalton Baldwin.

Basking in the success of the first edition, Mr. Vassos continued the Festival on an annual basis, bringing in such artists as Elizabeth Söderström, Maureen Forrester, Håken Hagegård, Tom Krause, Arleen Auger, Benjamin Luxon, François Le Roux, Olaf Baer, Sarah Walker, Marilyn Horne, Barbara Bonney and their collaborators Warren Jones, Thomas Muraco, Mikael Eliassen, Irwin Gage, David Willison, Richard Goode and Rober Vignoles, as well as many reappearances by previous singers and pianists.

In 1989, the Festival was suspended for a year due to financial pressures and relaunched in 1990 as a biannual event, adding a lecture, with a guest recital scheduled in the off years which has featured such performers as Dawn Upshaw, Håken Hagegård and Dmitri Hvorostovsky.

Following George Vassos' retirement from

CIM, the Festival moved to the Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory beginning in 2006, where this year's event, which runs from May 17-22, marks the Art Song Festival's twentieth anniversary.



In 2010, the two professional teams will be soprano Christine Brewer with pianist Craig Rutenberg and tenor Lawrence Brownlee with pianist Martin Katz (above, L-R). Ms. Brewer and Mr. Rutenberg will perform on Tuesday evening at 8 and Mr. Brownlee and Mr. Katz on Thursday at 8 (both are ticketed events: see the ClevelandClassical.com concert listings for repertory and prices).

The masterclasses, really the heart of the Festival, are an excellent opportunity to see artists at work coaching young performers. Mr. Rutenberg's classes are on Monday at 3 and Tuesday at 10:30. Mr. Katz leads sessions on Tuesday at 3 and Thursday at 10:30. Ms. Brewer's coachings are both on Wednesday, at 10:30 and 3, and Mr. Brownlee will work with student teams on Friday at 10:00 and 1:30 (master class admission is \$5, or 8 for \$25). The results of the week's work will be on display in a free recital by the ten singer-pianist teams on Saturday evening at 7:30.

Finally, Lenore Rosenberg, who is associate artistic administrator of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, will give a free lecture at 3pm on Thursday.

All events are held at the Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory of Music. Call 440.826.7664 for tickets or more information. Dinner and concert packages are available for Tuesday and Thursday evening.

Thanks to Richard K. Gardner, whose "Cleveland's Art Song Festival: Its Origin and History" formed the basis for this preview, and from which passages are quoted above.

Lawrence Brownlee

Tenor Lawrence Brownlee will be one of the featured artists at the Baldwin-Wallace Art Song Festival, singing a recital with pianist Martin Katz on

Thursday, May 20 at 8 and teaching master classes on Friday, May 21 at 10:30 am and 3:00 pm. A native of Youngstown, Ohio, his career has taken him all over the world and most recently to the Metropolitan Opera in New York where he's appeared as Count Almaviva in Rossini's Barber of Seville and as Rinaldo in Armida, sharing the stage with Renée Fleming. We reached him by phone in New York.

Daniel Hathaway: First of all, congratulations on your recent roles at the Met. Have you had the opportunity to work with James Levine?

LB: I've never had the great privilege of working with him. But of course the music staff here is world class -- tremendous coaches and musicians, so the level here is very high and it's just a great privilege for me to be working here.

DH: We're looking forward to having you at Baldwin-Wallace, and we're so glad you were available when someone else fell by the wayside.



LB: I was already planning to go home and be with my wife in Atlanta for a few days -- we're expecting our first child. The Art Song Festival fell right before I was to go to London to make my London recital debut, and it's a great chance to do the recital another time. The main thing is getting to come back home to perform for family and friends who will probably make the trek from Akron and Youngstown.

DH: You've got a very interesting program which straddles the operatic and art song genres. There are not that many people who keep a foot in both worlds. How does that work for you?

LB: I tell people all the time that singing art songs is a different animal from being on the opera stage. There's a lot more responsibility to be expressive with art songs, to really communicate. On the opera stage, you're part of a spectacle. On the recital stage, you're one person. Of course, as a man, you don't have the luxury of changing costumes or hair styles the way women can.

DH: You should try that.

LB: I could come out every set with a different wig on! But you really have to grab someone's attention and be expressive and try to make music. It's not necessarily about being perfect -- of course we strive to sing as perfectly as possible, but we're living, breathing human beings and I think it's important more than anything else to make special moments. So I think in a recital the chances you can take are infinitely increased. You can sing as piano as possible and not worry about carrying to the last row -- of course usually the venues are smaller. But it's possible to sculpt the words and the phrases in a way that sometimes the music won't allow you to with a 50-60 piece orchestra and conductor. It's like chamber music with a pianist, and of course, I'll be doing it with the great Martin Katz. He's someone who's so responsive and so attentive that I feel like I'll be given the space and opportunity to be as expressive as possible.

DH: Have you worked much with Martin Katz?

LB: I've had the great privilege of working with him for six years or so. The recital we're doing now is one we've performed before. I think maybe two years ago we were doing a recital together and we looked at each other and thought, wow, we've really found each other in the sense that we know that we gel. He can feel me instinctively. He can feel the intercostal muscles expanding and he knows the phrase is going to be this long, and he provides that carpet underneath me that I can always just float on. We enjoy a special relationship.

DH: Tell me about the John Carter Cantata that you'll be singing.

LB: The Cantata is a piece that Martin presented to me. It's kind of a classical take on some Ameri-

can Negro spirituals. John Carter was an artist in residence at the National Symphony for years and a composer and conductor. His setting sounds very classical rather than what we understand as these very stately, noble, march-like spirituals. He makes them very interesting. The piano part is virtuosic and Martin does a wonderful job on it but you can still feel the yearning and the pain, the aching that spirituals provide, but I think in a different way.

DH: The last movement is titled Toccata. I've never seen a Toccata on a vocal program.

LB: That's all about the pianist!

DH: Is this the same program you're doing in London?

LB: Yes it is. Martin can't make it, so I'll be performing with Ian Burnside. It'll be at St. John's, Sloane Square on the Rosenblatt series. It's a great venue.

DH: You're also doing a master class at Baldwin-Wallace.

LB: Yes. Those are always fun for me. When I retire from singing all the time -- I'm not going to do this forever -- I definitely want to be a father who's home and able to go to the ballet recitals and the baseball games. When I'm in academia I get a real joy out of teaching. Having performed in some of the most important theaters in the world I have a different take than some of the teachers who performed in the 60's and the 70's. I think I can provide them with the excitement and give them the tools that they need to be an opera singer today. When I do master classes, I always challenge them. I tell them exactly what I think it took me to be lucky enough to do what I'm doing. It takes some fortune and luck, but when you think about fortune and luck, you have to be prepared with the product so you can take advantage of the opportunity or be the lucky person. If you don't have your things in place, if your i's are not dotted and your t's are not crossed, some of those ships will sail. It's always fun to see them -- to see myself in them -- and to see their excitement for music growing.

DH: How did you get to where you are now? Were you always thinking of being a singer?

LB: No -- early on I wanted to be an attorney. I remember watching law shows on TV -- Perry Mason and other things -- and I just thought that it was such a prestigious thing to be a lawyer. They dressed so well, and they talked well, and they got to lead a glamorous life. I thought that could be me and I could wear suits all the time. Being one of six children, I was pretty good with negotiations and talking my way out of things, so I thought those lessons learned could serve me well in the court of law. No, I didn't want to be a singer, but it kind of found me. I was involved in singing in church and high school, and one day somebody told me 'You have the voice for opera and you should pursue it'. That's the way it was birthed, and from there I still thought I was going to be a lawyer for a while, but eventually I went to a competition of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and they told me, 'You've got what it takes, you really need to pursue this'. So I thought, hmmm, let's see what's out there for me in this opera business.

DH: Where else can we find you singing in the next six months?

LB: After Cleveland and London, I come home for about two and a half weeks. My wife and I will be in our new home so I'll be putting up pictures, getting the furniture moved around, and pretty soon we'll find out what the sex of the baby is, so we'll start preparing the room. After that, I'll go to La Scala to do Barber of Seville, then I'll go to Rome to do a recording with Antonio Pappano, and then I'll go to Pesaro to the Rossini Festival for the summer, doing La Cenerentola, then I'll go to Paris until the beginning of October. Then I'm supposed to go to Switzerland, but that's when the baby's due.

DH: Well, it's been lovely talking to you and we're looking forward to hearing you in Berea.

LB: My pleasure. That's my old stomping ground, and that won't be too far away from my old place of employment at Cedar Point.

DH: What did you do at Cedar Point?

LB: I worked in live shows for four summers. I had a good time there and I've got a lot of friends and

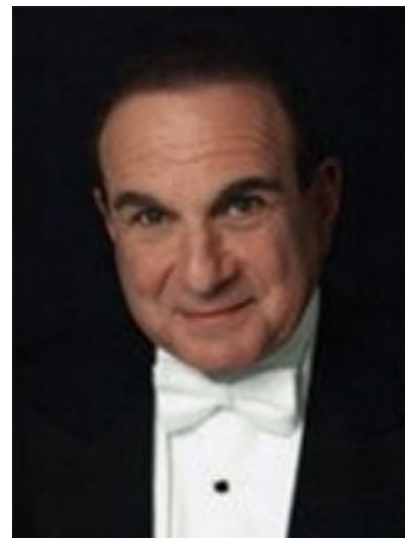
colleagues in that area, so hopefully some of them will come to the recital as well.

Martin Katz

The celebrated collaborative pianist Martin Katz, who currently teaches at the University of Michigan, will be one of the featured artists at the 20th anniversary edition of Baldwin-Wallace's Art Song Festival this week. We reached him at his studio in Ann Arbor.

Daniel Hathaway: Larry Brownlee spoke very highly of his partnership with you when we talked last week.

Martin Katz: I'm not the only pianist he works with but I'm pleased to be the one who does most of his work with piano.



DH: He said he discovered an important chemistry between the two of you.

MK: That's a nice thing for him to say. I love working with him -- he's the real deal, no fuss and all the right values about music and words and singing.

DH: He's an Ohio native, too!

MK: I remember we did a concert in Akron a few years ago -- there was a terrible blizzard, in fact it was even postponed a day because nobody could get there from anywhere. When we finally did the concert, the entire state of Ohio was in the auditorium!

DH: The last thing he said to me is “this is my old stomping grounds” because he was in the live shows at Cedar Point amusement park for four years. So he hopes all his friends are going to come to this.

MK: Oh wow, I didn't know about that. That's great.

DH: What is the ratio of your collaborations between singers and instrumentalists?

MK: That's an easy question. I'd say 95% of my career has been with singers. I studied both repertoires when I was a student in college, and now that I'm a professor I teach both repertoires. I'm pretty glad I studied both because otherwise it would be pretty hard to teach it! But in terms of being hired outside anything academic, for professional engagements, it's been almost all singers.

DH: Do you prefer working with singers over working with instrumentalists?

MK: I enjoy both of them. I love languages, so maybe I gravitate more to the vocal repertory, but I've been doing it so long now that I can't imagine not doing it. I think there's something to be learned from both sides of the coin.

DH: Where did you receive your training?

MK: At the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

DH: And how many students do you have at the University of Michigan at the moment?

MK: As far as pianists go, people who come here to do graduate study with me, I have about a dozen -- but then I teach classes that involve singers, so the numbers go up to about fifty singers a year. Once in a while I conduct an opera here, in which case the number goes up even higher because then you're talking about chorus and everybody else.

DH: How did you become involved with opera?

MK: Really by working on that repertory since I was 20. It's a pretty natural trajectory for somebody

to go from coach to assistant conductor to conductor. I think probably half the opera conductors you know have done that same thing. I had never conducted an opera until I came to Michigan, but it was a nice laboratory to learn how to do it, and after fifteen years, I'm comfortable doing it here and elsewhere. I really enjoy it.

DH: How did that first opportunity to conduct an opera arise?

MK: Our dean just said, Would you like to do this? and I said, Sure, I'd love to. And it was scary the first time. I had done concerts as a conductor with various singers that I play the piano for -- Marilyn Horne, Frederica von Stade, Kiri Te Kanawa -- you know, people who are used to having Georg Solti and Riccardo Muti conduct for them, so it was a little bit intimidating for me for me to get on the podium after them, but it got better and better like anything else you do if you're suited for it. It's a lot of work but now it's something I look forward to enormously. Actually, as you were calling me this morning, I was marking parts to do an opera this summer in San Francisco, so these are very timely questions.

DH: What piece?

MK: I'm working on The Elixir of Love of Donizetti for the San Francisco opera.

DH: And what was your debut opera at the University of Michigan?

MK: Don Pasquale, another Donizetti piece. They tend to give me Mozart and bel canto pieces most of the time. I think it's because a lot of the singers I play for have a great deal of that music in their repertory -- like Larry.

DH: Larry has chosen a program for his recital that puts one foot in the operatic and art song worlds. Tell me about the John Carter cantata -- which I believe is a big piece for you.

MK: It has a lot of piano music in it. It's very difficult to find much information about Mr. Carter. He was the resident composer at the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. George Shirley is on our faculty here at Michigan, and I knew that he had

known Mr. Carter, but even in talking to George Shirley there was precious little information he could tell me about him. Writing program notes was no fun! I remember researching it so I didn't look stupid, but I didn't come up with anything. Anyway, the piece takes four spirituals that are pretty well known, "Let us Break Bread Together", "Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child" -- those are the slow, profound ones, and there are a couple of fast ones as well, and binds them together in a non-stop -- I guess in the pop world it would be called a Medley -- but it's a little more elevated than that. The piano part is very elaborated. Different keys are playing at the same time and he uses wonderful rhythms that you would not associate with just the average spiritual arrangement. It's pretty difficult for both people (laughs). I think the audience has a pretty good time with it. But we're working mentally and technically while we're doing it. The "Toccata" is an energetic, perpetual motion thing. I think people who love pure, unaccompanied spiritual singing would hate this because it's brought into the concert hall in a sophisticated way. It's not for everybody, but it's nice to do something other than the handful of arrangers of Black spirituals that get done over and over. Larry's the first man I've heard sing it. It's often done by sopranos. In fact I think what's curious is that Christine Brewer, the other singer they're featuring in this art song festival, has a recording of the Carter which I think may be the only professional recording out there. And here Larry's coming to the same festival and singing two nights after her.

DH: You'll be doing master classes as well.

MK: Oh, yes. It's always intriguing. I do a lot of it and I always enjoy it.

DH: What's on your schedule for the next few months in addition to San Francisco Opera?

MK: The opera takes up seven weeks of my summer, so I don't need a whole bunch of other work besides that. Just before that I have something in Los Angeles that I've been doing for ten years. It's called SongFest, and it's a two week institute devoted to everything that has to do with singing and playing. There's a little opera, there's a little oratorio, there's a lot of art song, folk songs, pop songs, everything. I'm just one of many faculty members

-- I'm just there for half of it. Graham Johnson is coming from England, Margo Garrett is coming from New York. It's really a fun thing to do!. First of all, it's in Malibu, so the beach is right there -- it's not a bad view to have every morning when you wake up. I'm from Los Angeles, so it's nice to go home, even if I don't have much family left. At least the ten days that I'm there is unbelievably intense, two or three classes a day, performances going on all the time. People usually leave there in ambulances when the whole thing is over! But we do accomplish a lot, and I've been very gratified to hear from people who come back two or three times and get a lot out of it. So that's the only other gig I'm doing this summer.

DH: How do you feel about the future of Art Song?

MK: Those of us who love it are frankly very concerned about it. It doesn't seem to be on the public's radar screen and therefore it isn't on the impresarios' radar screen because how can they make any money or even break even if people are not interested in it? What worries us is that this immense repertoire could become a museum thing as opposed to a living thing. That's why I'm so glad that this Art Song Festival can keep this going every other year. I think that every artist who's interested in recitals needs to do whatever he or she can do to keep them going. If you have to subsidize your own performances by using opera fees to pay for recital fees that aren't so big, or create little venues -- like here in Ann Arbor we have a tiny concert hall that maybe holds 60-100 people, but it's an ideal place to introduce people to lieder who don't know anything about it or who want that personal relationship with the singer which you can't get in a humongous auditorium. So we have to be evangelists about this and try to spread the word about this much as possible. I believe in talking to the public during the concert, anything you can do. Some people are experimenting with surtitles or subtitles during recitals -- that hasn't been a route that I've gone, but I understand why they're doing it, because fewer and fewer people in the audience are comfortable with foreign languages. As the immigrants die, foreign languages die. Maybe more and more American songs need to be on concerts, anything at all to resuscitate this ailing patient. You know that Marilyn Horne started a foundation for the underpinning of the vocal recital,

but even that has now gone the way of all flesh because donations were dying out and expenses were increasing. It just seems a really tough sell right now -- the combination of what the public likes and the recession. Everything is not happening very well for art song right now.