

Play On: Give Me Excess of Hampson

By Janos Gereben—October 2, 2008

Humans, in general, mellow with age. Thomas Hampson doesn't. Au contraire, he is more intense, dramatic, overwhelming, multitasking, brilliant than ever. Beyond the simple excellence of his other master classes, such as the one in Wigmore or in the old S.F. Conservatory of Music, his six hours over Thursday and tonight went beyond all expectations.

Here he was, in the new Conservatory building, at the first "LIEDER ALIVE!" master workshop, singing duets of traditionally "single-voice" lieder, massaging skulls (his own and those of others), discussing music, literature, psychology, anatomy, the transporter beaming process in "Star Trek" (more about that later), and other subjects too numerous to list.

The two evenings were reminiscent of what was going on in the nearby War Memorial: the amazing excess, surfeit, dazzle of "Die Tote Stadt." Another similarity: above all, both events are about music, other factors - however numerous - be damned.

And yet, sometimes it was difficult to remember that main theme, watching Katherine Tier surrounded by Hampson phantoms - one pressing in on the mezzo's cheekbones, the other singing "Kindertotenlieder" with her, the third in throes of the grief and resolution she should convey, and the fourth thundering an interpretation of the text speaking of the eyes of dead children becoming stars of future nights:

"It happens. Your children will not stay with you. And guess what: you will die too. It's OK." And suddenly, instead of crumbling under that manifold "attack," Tier sang "Nun seh'ich, wohl, warum so dunkle Flammen" beautifully, with an understanding of its subtle catharsis, rather than sentimentally.

Perhaps Hampson's greatest triumph was the transformation of Heidi Melton's interpretation of "Frühlingsfeier." This truly exceptional young singer (Hampson: "I have never heard a 27-year-old soprano like you!") first belted out the frantic Richard Strauss song as if channeling Ethel Merman at her loudest.

Hampson never told Melton the simple truth: it was loud and wrong. Instead, he spent almost an hour, urging the soprano to "help Strauss out," explaining that "legato is a function of resonance," asking her to "keep the sound buzzing," showing Melton how to breathe through nose and mouth at the same time, exhorting her to sing without vibrato, pointing out - perhaps most importantly - that "voices do not project, they resonate... do not sing at the audience, sing for them" and so on and so forth - and then had Melton sing the climaxing "Adonis!" again and again... until, miraculously, the song soared on that great big voice with understanding, technical skill, vision, and beauty.

There were lengthy and fascinating mini-lectures about the origin and nature of several song cycles Hampson has "studied and sang for 30 years." Other participants were baritone Ferris Allen, soprano Marcelle Dronkers, and baritone Kittinant Chinsamran.

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LIEDER ALIVE!

By Fani Garagouni—October 5th, 2008

What a tour de force the first LIEDER ALIVE! master workshop program was! For two evenings exclusively devoted to German Lieder, Thomas Hampson, the master teacher, captured the audience at the Concert Hall of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and reminded us what an honor, fun, and hard work a master class can be. It is not just the power of music. And it is not just the poetic, romantic nature of the German Lieder. It is the privilege of witnessing and taking part in a unique learning experience where music, poetry, anatomy, and discipline are intertwined and inextricably bound together. It is about the master teacher's generosity of sharing years of musical experience and passionate work with the younger peers. It is about the openness, the availability, and the empowering vulnerability a student possesses while being coached in public. It is, finally, about the indescribable conspiring intensity and collective gratification that is formed among the participants, master teacher and audience when a singer like Katherine Tier removes each one of the blocks that prohibit the air moving through her nasal passages reaching the potential she has. And miracolo, miracolo! – she becomes a cylinder where all ribs are facilitating legato. Don't forget, "voices resonate, do not project."

Hampson, like the wizard he is, tricks, entertains, puts his nervous students to ease while working on their posture and assisting them to unlearn physical pre-established patterns. He broke the habitual breathing through the mouth of the baritone Ferris Allen by offering him a glass of water. "Sniff it, it is a very good wine." "Now hear the music, breathe (sniffing the wine) into it and then sing." He approaches German Lieder through a deep understanding of the text and bombards the student with anecdotal information regarding the poet, the composer and the epoch. "It is not so much about what the German Romantics have to say to us today, it is rather about whether we are able to understand them."

Hampson is a great teacher to work with, an inspiring coach, and a man of many words. His unprecedented energy and seductive presence on stage combined with the artistic sincerity and unpretentious erudition unsettled the notion that “a lazy tenor is a very rich baritone” and replaced it with that of a scholar, musicologist, literary critic, singer, uninhibited performer and most importantly a giving teacher who affirms that “discipline is getting rid of crap.”

And let’s not forget the LIEDER ALIVE! Program Director Ms. Bernstein, the untiring and impeccable force behind this remarkable event, who no matter what — to paraphrase Hampson’s words — “keeps Lieder buzzing.” Bernstein’s artistic vision was evident in the brilliant selection of all five participants: Heidi Melton (soprano), Ferris Allen (baritone), Marcelle Dronkers (soprano), Kittinant Chinsamran (baritone) and Katherine Tier (mezzo-soprano). Her passionate belief in German Lieder and the need of a specialized master workshop program devoted exclusively to this important artistic genre offers a unique opportunity — in the United States — to the public and enhances San Francisco’s reputation as an international cultural center. As Hampson ended the night, “Maxine, you did a good thing. Thank you.”

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May 5, 2009

Music News

BY JANOS GERE BEN

Horne Master Class Coming to S.F.

Lieder Alive! is following up its fall workshop with **Thomas Hampson** by sponsoring a June 11-13 series of master classes led by **Marilyn Horne**. The mezzo will instruct advanced young singers in "Romantic German Lieder" in the series of public lessons at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, each beginning at 6 p.m.

June 16, 2009

Music News

BY JANOS GERE BEN

Horne: Looking Good

Mezzo **Marilyn Horne**, Zheng Cao's fellow pancreatic cancer survivor, held a three-day master class here last week, at the Conservatory of Music, under the aegis of Maxine Bernstein's **Lieder Alive!** organization.

A remarkable group of young singers participated, including tenor Eleazar Rodriguez, baritone Eugene Brancoveanu, sopranos Heidi Melton and Heidi Moss, and mezzo Kindra Scharich. There should be a report in next week's column.

Horne, 75, now appearing in excellent health, underwent experimental cancer treatment two years ago.

When she was declared cancer-free last year, she talked about **her illness** publicly "to help others facing the same illness," which had killed her friend and fellow opera star Luciano Pavarotti (and 30,000 Americans each year).



Marilyn Horne

Melton—warning to New York and Berlin

By Janos Gereben—October 2, 2008

A most promising San Francisco (musical) Treat is heading to the Met ("Elektra" Second Maid, and a cover so far) and the Deutsche Oper Berlin (for "real roles"), and—beyond that, to a big career.

Initially, Heidi Melton arrived on the music scene here with a huge voice and irrepressible personality. Tonight, after five years of Merola-Adler incubation, she sang first-class, gorgeous Brahms and Wagner at a farewell recital.

Unlike Thomas Hampson and Anna Netrebko, who couldn't wait to get through 10 weeks of the Merola Program (and still turned out OK), Melton worked through two Merola terms and an unprecedented three years of Adler—by choice.

Who would have thought there was such steely determination underneath that crooked smile and hearty laughter. The investment paid off. No longer does she blow the walls down, just because she can. Melton today is a singer and an artist—precise and exactly right, serving the music above all, going to its heart. A true

soprano, but with mezzo-dark undertones, Melton is ready for big roles, regardless of fach; and she is only 29 (30, tops... :).

The recital in the SF Conservatory Concert Hall, given by Maxine Bernstein's LIEDER ALIVE! featured Melton in three Brahms songs, and the Wagner "Wesendonck-Lieder" on a program shared with the (very young) lyric tenor Eleazar Rodriguez, singing Beethoven's "Adelaide," and—somewhat surprisingly—Schumann's "Dichterliebe." John Parr was the sensitive, supportive accompanist, contributing mightily to the evening.

Although Rodriguez—in his first Merola year—seems born for Donizetti at this early point of his promising career, he did handle the rather "heavy" music well, giving a mature, fine performance of the Schumann.

Melton's Brahms was a delightful surprise. "Wie Melodien," "Nicht mehr zu dir zu gehen," and "An die Nachtigall" were full-bodied, with just the right sheen (not calling attention to itself), communicating music and text fully.

In the Wagner, the opening and closing ("Der Engel" and "Träume") were luminously beautiful, everything right, the danger of oversinging nowhere in sight. Melton gave just a taste of the power of her voice in "Stehe Still!" and "Im Treibhaus," offered a gorgeous, unsentimental "Schmerzen."

Locally, we all have known of the Voice, but it was only tonight that we realized what mature, accomplished artistry Melton now possesses. It's too bad that for some years coming, we won't have a chance to hear her in San Francisco. Enjoy her elsewhere, wherever she goes.

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October 21, 2009

Heidi Melton at Lieder Alive!



Last night [Lieder Alive!](#) presented a recital featuring soprano [Heidi Melton](#) and tenor Eleazar Rodríguez accompanied by John Parr at [SFCM](#). Rodríguez started the evening with Beethoven's Adelaide, which he sang with great enthusiasm. This was followed by a technically clean and very sweet rendition of Schumann's Dichterliebe. He only had the slightest bit of strain singing one top note and a couple of low notes that did not project as well as the middle of his voice. Otherwise, his voice is lovely and his breathing very much under control.

Heidi Melton sang *Wie Melodien zieht es mir, Nicht mehr zu dir zu gehen,* and *An die Nachtigall* from Brahms. These were quite pretty, but the Wagner's *Wesendonck-Lieder* that followed were incredible. Melton's creamy but powerful voice suits Wagner and one cannot help but look forward to hearing her as Sieglinde in a few years. The emotional content of each song was perfectly apparent, and she never sounded constricted anywhere in her range.

* **Tattling** *

There was some coughing, but almost no talking, and no electronic noise.