

Krannert Center
Frederica von Stade, Mezzo Soprano
Jake Heggie, Piano
February 11, 2010

Frederica von Stade's repertoire choice for this recital is not only a panoply of superb vocal music from the last 200 years, but also a reflection of her brilliant career that has enriched us for three decades. If this recital is a "farewell," no better goodbye could be made.

The program also represents a broad sweep of national identity. For the analytical among you, consider this: eight American composers (Ned Rorem, Jake Heggie, Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Lee Hoiby, Carol Hall, William Bolcom, and Stephen Sondheim); five French composers (Maurice Ravel, Francis Poulenc, Marc Berthomieu, Jules Massenet, and Ambroise Thomas); one Italian (Louis Guglielmi); and one lonely but great Austrian (Gustav Mahler). Another interesting observation is that only one of the fifteen composers represented on the program, Ambroise Thomas, wrote only in the 19th century. The rest is bravely and distinctly 20th and 21st century.

Let's take a brief look at the composers and works as they appear on the program:

For all his wonderful symphonies, instrumental pieces, and choral music, **Ned Rorem** is arguably best known for his some 500 art songs including his full concert-length cycle *Evidence of Things Not Seen*. He lived in Paris from 1949 to 1958, and from those years came the humorous "I Am a Rose" (1955) with text by Gertrude Stein and the jazzy "Early in the Morning" (1955), with text by Robert Hillyer. As Brian Ziegler of Minnesota Public Radio commented on the latter song, "The delicate, nuanced harmonies that Rorem drank in during his years in France create a haze around the melody, like a flattering filter on a camera lens, to transport the listener to a dreamy recollection of youth." Both songs are an essential reminiscence for anyone who loves Paris.

"La Vie en rose" was first popularized in 1946 by Edith Piaf who wrote the lyrics. Since then it has become a standard representation of things French. Its composer, **Louis Guglielmi** (pen name **Louigy**), has written dozens of film scores, yet "La Vie en rose" remains his signature piece with "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White" being a close second. The elaborate picture of life through rose-colored glasses offered in "La Vie en rose" is much in contrast to the "things as they are" approach taken by Ned Rorem and Gertrude Stein in "I Am a Rose." One can probably safely assume that Ned Rorem played on that contrast. "La Vie en rose" has been treated by singers as disparate as Aretha Franklin and Luciano Pavarotti. Frederica von Stade, of course, will lend her own singular interpretation.

The lyrics for "Paper Wings" and "A Route to the Sky" were written by Frederica von Stade and are the second and fourth songs of **Jake Heggie's** cycle, *Paper Wings*, commissioned by Frederica von Stade in honor of her daughter Lisa Elkus. Jake Heggie adds *Paper Wings* to his impressive list of songs and song cycles that have been championed internationally by many distinguished singers. John Henken of the *Los Angeles Times* spoke of the "sly quotations, musical games and a genuine sense of wonder and affection" of *Paper Wings* and commented that the work "soared as art and autobiography." The cycle was first performed on September 30, 1997 at Zellerbach Auditorium at UC Berkeley. With good humor, no more loving tribute could be from mother to daughter. The texts obviously trace a character trait common among Frederica von Stade, her own mother, and her daughter.

Maurice Ravel's "Tout gai" is the fifth and last song of his cycle *Cinq mélodies populaires grecques* composed between 1904 and 1906 and later orchestrated, as was Ravel's habit. The text is by Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi, a composer and music critic of Greek descent. The second, "Nicolette," which we hear in the second half of this program, is the first of *Three Songs for Unaccompanied Mixed Choir* which Ravel composed in 1914-1915 and also transcribed for medium voice and piano. The ironic lyrics are his own.

Virgil Thomson's vast contributions to the music world include not only his significant book, *American Music Since 1910*, but three operas (two in collaboration with Gertrude Stein), some seventy songs, and two song cycles including *Mostly About Love*, a 1959 collaboration with New York poet and playwright Kenneth Koch that produced the "Prayer to Saint Catherine." In the spirit of the New York poetry group with which Koch was associated, the song is not an agonized plea but rather a work with spirit and clarity and even a hint of humor.

Aaron Copland's "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?" comes from his cycle *Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson* composed in 1949-50 and published in 1951. Both humor and a hint of pathos pervade this song which laments Dickinson's womanly limitations in her society. Copland takes the logical liberty of changing the word "say" to "sing" in the line, "But I can sing a little minor." He artfully repeats the line, "Did I sing too loud," and makes it the final one in this wonderful song that challenges the soprano and delights the listener.

Among **Lee Hoiby's** some eighty songs, "The Serpent" is arguably the most famous, so much so that Jay Nordlinger, in his liner notes to Hoiby's *American Classics* recording, notes that a voice coach once told Hoiby, "If you throw a brick out of a window on the upper West Side of Manhattan, you will probably hit a soprano who has learned "The Serpent." Those sopranos include Leontyne Price, Renée Fleming, and, of course, Frederica von Stade. When you hear the song, you will understand why other composers such as Ned Rorem and William Bolcom have also treated Theodore Roethke's humorous text. You will enjoy the wonderful musicality of Lee Hoiby's 1979 treatment. Do listen for the "horrible note/That practically split the top of his throat."

Both "Voyages à Paris" and "Hôtel" come from **Francis Poulenc's** cycle of five songs, *Banalités*, with texts by Guillaume Apollinaire, originator of the term "Cubism". Though they are very different in nature, both songs epitomize Paris, as only Poulenc can. In this case, they come from 1940, the darkest period of World War II, and one wonders if the gaiety of "Voyages à Paris" and the indolence of "Hôtel" are merely Poulenc's way of handling the tragedy. After all, Poulenc's works often reflect one foot in the salon and one in the grave. Apollinaire himself had died in World War I, and Poulenc held a long attachment to his poetry and used it also for his first song cycle, *Le Bestiaire*. It is tempting to picture the soprano with a cigarette in "Hôtel" and to feel ourselves encircled with its World War II smoke. The Parisian air is cleared, in this program, by Ned Rorem's "Early in the Morning."

We are still in Paris in **Marc Berthomieu's** "Square Georges-Cain" and "Bois de Boulogne," from his 1979 song cycle *Les Jardins de Paris*. While composer, poet, and dramatist Marc Berthomieu is relatively unknown, Frederica von Stade's performances of his songs are not. Concerning her recital at the Cleveland Institute of Music in May of 2009, Dan Rosenberg of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* commented, "Who couldn't respond to von Stade's affectionate odes to Paris, especially her journey through two fragrant Marc Berthomieu garden songs and Ned Rorem's lovely 'Early in the Morning'?" The Square George-Cain is one of the beautiful and lesser-known spots in the Marais district of Paris. The Bois de Boulogne is one of the better-known and largest parks in Paris located at the edge of the 16th arrondissement.

After the intermission, Frederica von Stade leaves French music briefly for "Lob des hohen Verstands" (Praise from a lofty intellect), a song from **Gustav Mahler's** famous collection, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn) based on German folk songs. The song concerns a vocal competition between a cuckoo and a nightingale. The "lofty intellect" who serves as their judge is, in this case, an ass who is confused by the nightingale's complex approach to music and chooses the cuckoo, who keeps time beautifully, as winner. Mahler treated German folk songs throughout his life, and "Lob des hohen Verstands" is the tenth in a set of twelve songs published in 1899.

French composer **Jules Massenet** is best known for his operas, specifically *Manon* and *Werther*. He is best-remembered as a superb melodist as indicated by such famous works as his "Meditation" from *Thaïs*. "Va, laisse couler mes larmes" comes from his opera *Werther*, a tragic lyric drama with libretto by Edouard Balu, Paul Miliot, and Henri Grémont Hartman based on Goethe's 1774 novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. "Va, laisse couler mes larmes" (Please let my tears flow) comes from Act III when Werther dies in the arms of his beloved Charlotte who responds with the famous and heartbreaking "Song of Tears."

Premiered at the Paris Opéra Comique in 1866, **Ambroise Thomas's** *Mignon* established his fame. With libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier, the opera is based on Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and tells the tale of Mignon, a girl kidnapped by Gypsies and later bought by the student, Wilhelm Meister, as his servant. Two of the best-known arias from the opera are "Me voici dans son boudoir" and "Connais-tu pays." In the former, Mignon finds herself in the boudoir of the actress Philine and, in jealousy, dons one of Philine's gowns. Frédéric, a young nobleman (buffo tenor or contralto) and admirer of Philine, enters the boudoir and sings of his joy at being near his beloved. In

“Connais-tu pay,” which occurs earlier in the opera, Mignon recalls an idealized country from which she was taken.

Texas-born **Carol Hall**, composer of “Jenny Rebecca,” is best-known for her Broadway musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, but her song, “Jenny Rebecca” is a close second, having been recorded by such singers as Olivia Newton-John and Bobby Gosh. Barbra Streisand first recorded it in 1965, and it was that splendid recording that brought the touching song to the attention of Frederica von Stade.

William Bolcom’s humorous “Amor” is part of his vast collection of *Cabaret Songs* with lyricist Arnold Weinstein. Together with his wife, mezzo-soprano Joan Morris, William Bolcom has brought the cabaret song to a new level of artistic achievement. “Amor” joins a host of other songs such as the well-known “Love in the Thirties” and “Toothbrush Time” as part of the repertoire of distinguished singers better-known for their strictly classical works. William Bolcom was named the 2007 Composer of the Year by *Musical America* and has won multiple Grammy Awards for his setting of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*.

This year marks **Stephen Sondheim**’s 80th birthday. No better tribute could be made to him than by Frederica von Stade’s performance of arguably his best-known song, “Send in the Clowns,” arranged by Jake Heggie. Named Song of the Year in 1975, “Send in the Clowns” is so well known to us that we sometimes forget its context, which is Sondheim’s 1973 Grammy-winning and Drama Desk Award musical, *A Little Night Music*. The play takes us back to turn-of-the-century Scandinavia where, as Larry Brown says in his thesis on the production, “love, laughter, and music float through the air on evening breezes where the sun never sets.” Although Sondheim and Prince disagreed on the level of darkness the work should express, they did agree to use Ingmar Bergman’s 1956 film *Smiles of a Summer Night* as source material, immediately casting the production on the dark side. This, in turn, fed Sondheim’s admiration of Swedish dramatist August Strindberg and his love of writing in dark colors. In Act II, Desirée has suffered rejection from her former lover Fredrik, and, in a solitary moment, expresses her feelings about life’s ironies in “Send in the Clowns.”

“Primary Colors,” with which Frederica von Stade ends her “farewell recital” is the fourth and final song of **Jake Heggie**’s 2002 song cycle for mezzo-soprano, flute, and piano, *The Deepest Desire*, commissioned by Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival. Texts are by Sister Helen Prejean, author of the prize-winning novel *Dead Man Walking*, which Jake Heggie turned into an opera with libretto by Terence McNally. The opera was premiered in 2000 by the San Francisco Opera. The song cycle offers new texts by Sister Prejean which underscore her heroic fight against the death penalty.

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