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## Karyn Levitt

### Boston Singers' Resource News Bulletin, January 3, 2007

Lyric-soprano and Concord, MA, resident Karyn Levitt creates her own one-woman shows. By blending original music and works of the masters with writings and commentaries of well-known authors and of her own creation she engages her audiences in a unique musical/theatrical experience.

Presented to you for your consideration, the following writers and composers: William Shakespeare, Anthony Burgess, Giacomo Puccini, Leslie Shaak Hitelman, Sigmund Romberg, Emelia Bassano, George Bernard Shaw, Ottorino Respighi, Anton Chekhov, Eugenio Montale.

As an artist you may feel drawn to the work of each of these people. In some way, each of them, or what you know of their work, seems to have resonance for you; for what matters to you. As a performer you want, somehow, to try to express your understanding of them; your interest and your attraction to their words or their music.

Now consider that through the process of research, inquiry, and making your own connections you can establish threads of commonality among them, unrelated though they might seem; that you can create an organic unity which makes it seem inevitable that the works of diverse artists such as these should be on the same program. What effort might it take to make those connections? What sort of process might be required to find coherence in the disparate elements and, then, to give shape to them as a satisfying theatrical presentation?

The artistry of Karyn Levitt is something like that. In an ever-growing repertoire of original theatrical pieces that run between one and two-and-a-half hours, Karyn has sought to combine her gifts both as a singer and as an actress in a unique way. Her desire to learn all she can about music and theater has led her on a path of discovery in which the learning of a song, an aria, a scene, or a monologue, is just the beginning of her work.

To illustrate: In her show entitled 'Puccini and His Contemporaries: a Cabaret of Opera and Theatre' she has blended arias and songs by Puccini, and letters from Puccini to his librettists, with monologues from Chekhov plays, poetry by Eugenio Montale (in Italian and English), opera reviews, and songs by Respighi, Tosti, Verdi, Satie, and others. More than a mere presentation of parts, the program is designed to inform the viewer about who Puccini was.

As with the creation of her works, which are a mixture of songs, recitations, readings and original writings, there are many seemingly unrelated events in her life which have come together and given her direction and focus.

She began studying voice in her teens and after graduating from Oberlin College she continued her studies with Janice Giampa at the New England Conservatory. Several years later she began to feel drawn to swing music. But, as she says, she had never found popular music 'approachable.' It was difficult stylistically for her. "I thought of myself as a strictly classical singer who could sing legit Broadway and operetta, but not pop."

But there was a strong impulse to learn how to sing swing: "My sister-in-law had asked me to sing with a band at her wedding. The singer said to me, 'You know, you could do this.'" She started studying with a jazz band teacher and then, a few years later, with Boston jazz stylist Rebecca Parris.

Karyn has also been a student of acting and the theater for many years. One teacher's instruction made a particular impression on her. "We would do presentations where each of us in the class would have a monologue or a song or a scene. This instructor taught us how to work on any character, role, part, or dance from a thematic point of view. You create a thematic world in which you're in and you make choices based on that. We each would have an objective and an obstacle based on the theme. Then we would have to discover a way to knit them together in such a way that it became a theatrical 'whole'. As one person was finishing their last rhymed couplet from a Shakespeare sonnet the next person would come on stage with the music already starting for their song and the person who was doing the couplet would be speaking to the person who was just coming on stage. It would be seamless."

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In 1998 her friend, Westford pianist and composer Leslie Shaak Hitelman, had composed songs in assorted pop styles (Rock, Tango, Country, Klezmer) using her favorite Shakespearean sonnets for the lyrics. It was a way to help her learn them. At that point, Karyn says, "I loved listening to her songs but was incapable of performing them. I mean, I didn't see myself as ever performing them because of the attitude, 'I can't do that. I am a classical singer. I don't 'do' pop!'" Jump ahead to 2003. By this time, because of her work with Parris and others, she began to feel that she would be able to sing them. And, because of her theatre work, she could also envision a way to present them successfully.

The result was 'Lyrics by Shakespeare', with the music of Hitelman and Thomas Morley, and additional dialogue by Karyn Levitt. The show is described on Karyn's new website, <http://www.royalroad2000.com/>. "The sonnets enter the 21st century as contemporary songs: from pop to Broadway, from classical to blues, tango, klezmer, and even country western. These knock-your-socks-off tunes become the vehicle to explore Shakespeare's meditations on time, immortality, love, and other metaphysical themes."

As with 'Puccini and His Contemporaries', the process for developing 'Lyrics by Shakespeare' drew on Karyn's theatre training. "I decided to apply the principles that my acting teacher had used to create these incredible presentations that we did. I thought 'if a lot of different people could do completely different pieces but they could all become thematically threaded together why can't one person do different pieces by different people, threaded together under a unifying theme?'"

To hone this talent (or skill, or gift, take your pick) that Karyn has for developing and unifying disparate material, she seeks to recognize it in other performers. She feels that Ute Lemper, the cabaret singer, is one of the most successful performers in this regard. "She's a phenomenal actress. There's not a single moment when she isn't doing something. It isn't just 'the notes', ever. Everything she does on stage means something." Commenting on Lemper's show 'Blood and Feathers', which Karyn saw at the Cafe Carlyle in New York, she says, "There's a synergy to it. (The program) started with Weill and ended with Kander and Ebb. And in between there's Joni Mitchell, Sting, Tom Waits, and Edith Piaf. But it's all knitted together, there's a progression."

Similarly, she cites Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, calling him "the greatest singer-actor. Even though he performs in a recital format there's some sort of coherence that comes through. There's some reason why those songs are grouped together. And you feel it even though he doesn't ever break the form of 'recital.'"

In Karyn Levitt's newest work, entitled 'The Age of Romance', she directs her attention fully onto the Broadway stage. In this show she explores the music that was made popular by such performers as Nelson Eddie and Jeanette McDonald, with repertoire by Victor Herbert, Franz Lehár, Jerome Kern and, of course, Sigmund Romberg, who happens to be a distant relative of hers. She has already presented the program about a dozen times and has found a ready and enthusiastic audience at retirement homes. She laughs as she tells how, at one home, she found herself dancing to a Victor Herbert tune with a 96-year old resident. She also comments "What's great about this show is that it's rescuing the material from the brink of extinction. It's such wonderful material but the era has passed. The times have so changed. We live in such cynical times and this music is so romantic." Clips of this program and additional information will soon be available on the website.

Another work, still in development, returns to the theme of Shakespeare. Her 'Shakespeare and the Dark' explores his stormy love affair with a beautiful woman of unknown origin with dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark disposition who figures prominently in the later sonnets. In this show Karyn again interweaves the sonnets - spoken and sung - with narration, history, play excerpts, and music and writings by various composers and authors including Shaw, Burgess, Bassano, and Levitt herself.

Though the material for 'Shakespeare and the Dark' has been collected and written, there's still the question for Karyn of what will knit the parts together. "My conception of that piece is that every version of the Dark Lady (there are several found in the sonnets) has its own music. I found a ton of Renaissance music. But my strengths are somewhere between classical and jazz. So the whole question is about what the music will be; to find the structure of the piece where the text is honed into a music form."


Often during our conversation with Karyn Levitt the subject came back to her vocal training and the demands she makes on her voice now, compared to her early training. She discounts the opinion that certain singers should only sing in certain ways. "The world we're living in, people are becoming narrower, more specialized. There's a lot of emphasis on that for some reason. But I disagree with that. I think it's important to be adaptive and well-rounded. I have become a quite versatile, flexible performer because I cultivated these qualities in myself. It makes me useful. In a single evening I have sung Schubert lieder, Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, and Billy Strayhorn's jazz masterpiece 'Lush Life.'"

But having said that she remains grateful for her classical vocal training. "Basically if you have classical technique, you can sing anything. Singing pop, jazz, swing is not a matter of different techniques. It's a matter of style and musicianship."

#### Upcoming performances of 'The Age of Romance'

Karyn Levitt, soprano  
Tom LaMark, pianist

February 14, 2007:  
2:00 PM, RiverMead Retirement Home  
150 RiverMead Road, Peterborough, NH  
603-924-8611  
800-200-5433



February 14, 2007:  
4:30 PM, The Renaissance Room  
20 Depot St., Peterborough, NH  
603-924-7935

Karyn Levitt Website:  
<http://www.royalroad2000.com/>

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