

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

POP Goes the Classical!

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I CONSIDER IT A UNIQUE BLESSING that I was reared by two parents who happened to be professional musicians and singing teachers in New York City in the mid-1940s. I consider it an even greater blessing that they both enjoyed and taught many styles of singing. For example, my father's résumé included a stint in the early touring production of *Barney Google* where nightly, he stopped the show with his rendition of "Yes, We Have No Bananas."

Opera, oratorio, art song, sacred song, music theater, jazz, pop, and folk all had a place in their studio at the Ansonia Hotel, where they shared a floor with Met opera stars, Lauritz Melchior and Bidu Sayao. To paraphrase a Rodgers and Hammerstein classic lyric, "the hotel was alive with the sound of music," and I was one of the beneficiaries of those sounds.

Throughout my professional career I have attempted to find art, truth, and entertainment in all the music I sing and teach. The challenge has been to delineate the technical and performance requirements for each style. In March of 1997, I wrote in my then "Bach to Rock Connection" column in the *Journal of Singing* a piece called "The Alternative Recital" in which I described performances where I programmed most of the aforementioned singing styles and brought them all under one roof. In the article I said, "Aside from exploring my own musical diversity, I'm trying to get classically focused people to hear classical influences in popular music, and to lead those people who prefer popular music to recognize the musical roots which lie in classical repertoire."

In recent years, pianist and accompanist Joseph Krupa and I have been exploring the classical/CCM connection with a recital called "POP Goes the Classical!" In a nutshell, Mr. Krupa, a gifted and passionate musician, plays select classical piano pieces. Mr. Edwin then sings the popular songs those piano pieces inspired. With the potential to bring two very diverse audiences together to celebrate their own and each other's musical aesthetics, the project had its premiere on April Fool's Day in 2006 at Calvin Hall in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Both artists were garbed to reflect the classical and pop disciplines: tux jacket, shirt, and bow tie over jeans and sneakers.

Although there is a vast collection of pop songs that owe their genesis to classical composers (e.g., the musical *Kismet* borrowed from Borodin, Elvis's hit "Can't Help Falling In Love" born of Martini's "Plaisir d'amour," as well as the countless tunes shooting out from Pachelbel's Canon in D), Joseph and I decided to adhere exclusively to piano-based pieces. Since he had played most of them and I had sung most of them, preparation time was dramatically reduced.

Our current program starts with Joseph playing Petzold's "Minuet in G major." I join him later as the piece becomes "A Lover's Concerto" by Linzer and Randall, a big hit for The Toys in 1965. Without a pause, Joseph segues into J. S. Bach's Prelude in C major which, in turn, segues into the Bach/Gounod "Ave Maria."

Next comes the Rondo from Clementi's Sonatina, Op. 36, No.5 in G major which produced The Mindbender's hit, "A Groovy Kind of Love" in 1966. Two Chopin pieces follow, the first being Chopin's Prelude in C minor, Opus 28 which spawned the 1970s Manilow/Anderson hit, "Could It Be Magic." Chopin's Polonaise in A^b major, Opus 53 is the source for the Kaye/Mossman 1945 hit, "Till the End of Time," but Joseph and I opt for its use in the Stahlhuth/Edwin musical comedy, *The Saga of Sam's Saloon*, in which the character, Lucretia, who believes she is the deserted wife of Chopin, sings the passionate (and very funny) lament, "Frederic" to her lost love. I don a large hat and shawl, and vocally shift to M2 (i.e., head voice, falsetto, upper register, loft, cricothyroid-dominant vocal fold posture) to capture the essence of Lucretia.

Tchaikovsky makes his first and only appearance in the Concerto No 1, 1st movement, which led to the 1941 Worth/Austin/Martin classic, "Tonight We Love." Rachmaninoff is up next as Mr. Krupa plays the 2nd movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2, Opus 18. The pop songwriter, Eric Carmen found inspiration in that melody to create his 1970s hit, "All By Myself." We segue into Rachmaninoff's third movement of that same concerto which inspired the aforementioned Kaye and Mossman to write "Full Moon and Empty Arms."

Angst needs a break in the program, so we choose the characters Schroeder and Lucy to play out a scene from the Clark Gesner musical, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Joseph, as Schroeder, plays the Beethoven Sonata No. 2, Opus 27, Adagio Cantabile, aka "The Moonlight Sonata," and I, as Lucy, intervene with a most annoying persona and voice. The hat and shawl return, but I stay in M1 (i.e., chest voice, lower register, modal, thyroarytenoid-dominant vocal fold posture) because Lucy is a belter.

We revisit Chopin as Joseph plays the Fantasy Impromptu, Opus 66. That exquisite piece moved

McCarthy and Carroll to develop it into the similarly exquisite, "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows."

Our program comes to an end with a blending of Debussy's "Clair de lune" and Porter's "In the Still of the Night" that we borrow from a Sergio Franchi live nightclub recording. Fortunately, this final song always triggers an encore, and we turn the tables a bit as I sing the timeless Gershwin brothers pop song, "I Got Rhythm." Joseph then plays a classical rendition of the song arranged by the composer himself. A big kick step ending brings the pianist, the singer, and the program to a rousing ending.

When I first started presenting my Alternative Recitals, NATS was still struggling with an "us versus them" mentality that was more divisive than inclusive. It put classical at the top of a food chain that did not need to exist and that, in fact, was not historically correct. The music of primitive cultures always predated "classical" music. Many of our cultures have evolved to embrace an enormous number of sounds and styles that feed off of each other. What a delight to acknowledge that early folk music has fathered and mothered classical repertoire which, in turn, has fathered and mothered popular music.

Today's NATS, as evidenced by our last several national conferences, is willing and able to celebrate the diversity of vocal music as the circle of inclusivity gets wider and wider. My hope, expressed in my 1997 JOS column, still resonates today: "Traditional classical recitals need, of course, to be presented and supported. Yet, it is unrealistic to think that they will ever gain wide spread popularity with the general public because the gap between nonclassical (CCM) and classical music is so wide. However, a bridge, much like the Three Tenors concerts created, can be built that will allow greater numbers of listeners to participate in both musical arenas. May I suggest, fellow NATS members, that you consider an alternative recital of your own? If your singing styles are limited in scope, perhaps you can engage the services of some nonclassical (CCM) singers to share the venue with you. Would audiences in your area be willing to see and hear a Bach to rock connection come to life on a recital stage? Judging from the reactions to my alternative experiments, the answer could be a resounding 'yes!'"