

# Dalton Baldwin: His Personal and Musical Legacy

Margo Garrett



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**B**Y THE TIME YOU READ THIS, the cherry blossoms will be blooming in Japan, a place Dalton Baldwin deeply loved and returned to for sixty years since his first performances there with the great French baritone Gérard Souzay, his partner in song and in life. There already have been many beautiful tributes made to Dalton, whose last master classes were held in Tokyo just prior to his death on December 12, 2019 only a week before he would have celebrated his 88th birthday. Many more remembrances will come after these late December days in which I now write, before this article's spring publication in cherry blossom time. Still, I feel compelled to devote this column to him now, not because I knew Dalton Baldwin well or have anything more to add than you probably have already read in the last months, but because I really honored him. We have just lost one of the truly great ones of our time. I want us to stop and really drink this in, like Dalton would do; and I want us to listen to at least some of the treasure that is his vast recorded legacy. Dalton Baldwin was a living legend as *pianist*—the single and simple word he wished used in description of himself as performer—to a large roster of many of the world's finest singers. He also was a deeply devoted and articulate teacher of art song to generations of singers and pianists across the world whose own passions for art song performance were informed and inspired largely by his own.

I have loved Dalton's recordings since first I heard them in my youth. In fact, his were some of the very first *accompaniments* I ever heard, certainly the first recorded *mélodies* I knew. Only Gerald Moore's name loomed larger than that of Dalton Baldwin, but my preference was always for Dalton's playing. No matter the repertoire—Schubert, Schuman, Strauss, and all the twentieth century song of France for which he is so known and respected—his playing seemed to touch me most. In high school and in college, I remember frequent gatherings with my friends in which we compared recordings of pieces we loved or those we were currently studying. Each of us would take turns setting up the recordings without having the others see the performers names on the LP label. When we listened to song accompanying, I almost always recognized Dalton's playing, admittedly sometimes by association with the more easily identified partner, the singer; but I always chose his playing as my preferred one in any comparison. Dalton knew how to get out of the way of the music. That is the best way I can explain it. His playing was selfless yet ever interesting. Critics have often mentioned, especially in reference to live

performances and recordings with Souzay, the *oneness* of the duo. In fact, I think that was one of the strongest recommendations of Dalton's art. He so strongly supported all his partners that there was only one audible interpretation, *theirs*. His desire was to be at one with his partner. Ensemble, an all too often neglected aspect of accompanying these days, was of critical importance to Dalton. He often played modestly by today's standards, but when the drama of a poem and the composer's response to that poem demanded it, Dalton came alive with rhythmic drive and dramatic verve that bordered on the orchestral. He had no sense of personal flashiness or ego, yet he embraced the flamboyant, extroverted composition with real zeal and *élan*. But it was never about him. He had a naturally beautiful tone, but soft in stroke and, often, dynamic. He never threatened with even a hint of overbalancing, but seemed to enjoy gently daring his partner to sing even more softly and intimately by virtue of his own fine ability to control and color dynamics. I have always felt that surely he was drawn to *mélodie* because so much of its style is like his: without *façade*, refined, elegant, modest.

Indefatigable as a recording artist and curator of countless recital programs, Dalton leaves a legacy of more than 100 important recordings with some of the greatest vocal recitalists of the past century. A huge number, almost three decades worth, of both German and French art song recordings (mostly on the Philips label) are with Gérard Souzay, many with Elly Ameling, Jessye Norman, José van Dam, and a precious few with Arleen Auger, Mady Mesplé, and many others. Dalton recorded the complete songs of Debussy, Fauré, Poulenc, and Ravel. I have read that he also recorded all but two Duparc songs and all those of Roussel, but I have not been able to find the recordings, if indeed they exist. Certainly both composers are well represented in his known recordings. All of Dalton's recordings are important stylistic performance practice lessons for both singers and pianists. His vast knowledge of *mélodie* informs tremendously a style, a language, and a repertoire that is still often misunderstood or avoided this side of the Atlantic because of lack of performance practice knowledge. Dalton Baldwin went to Paris, after all, in the early 1950s to study with Nadia Boulanger, herself a student of Gabriel Fauré. Dalton's performance style, and that which he always taught, is the most closely aligned to

French style in the time of the composers themselves. His entire discography is also relatively easily found online (Discogs), and many of even his earliest recordings can still be bought.

From the first recording I ever heard, the 1960 Philips Souzay/Baldwin all-Fauré recording, which included my first hearing ever of that which is still my favorite performance of *La bonne chanson*, to the last recording I personally know of Dalton's, the 2008 Albany Records release of *Flores Argentinas: Canciones de Carlos Guastavino* with the superb mezzo Désirée Halac, the constants in Dalton's playing were always his perfect soul to soul ensemble, his tonal allure, and his elegant modesty as pianist. So beautiful was this Guastavino recording, that after listening to it for a month or so in pretty much in all my free time and while driving and cooking, I did something I should do more often when something thrills me: I called Dalton to say that I was hopelessly in love with this recording. In true Dalton style, he received my thanks enthusiastically but modestly, and quickly put Désirée in the spotlight by telling me how wonderfully she sang these pieces and what a treat it had been for him to do them with her. When I protested that this recording had become my new favorite and that I could not stop listening to it, he went on to tell me how sweet and kind I was and that he was very flattered. So then, I was in the spotlight. It was just his nature to place others first.

Lorraine Nubar, beautiful soul, beautiful singer, and brilliant (and modest) teacher at many lucky schools, including The Juilliard School, New England Conservatory, and Bard College, has surely known Dalton better than anyone. She says she studied with him in his early and her earlier days in France, but these two have for many years been professionally and personally deeply connected. Musically and personally, they have been friends of morning, noon, and night phone calls and have been connected by profound love for a repertoire and the sharing of it, as well as a love of each other. Before I ever knew Lorraine, I knew how deeply Dalton felt about her. Whether speaking of his great admiration for her effectiveness as a teacher, her gentleness and deep caring, or her keen powers of observation as a person, he made me sure that I wanted to know Lorraine Nubar!

Dalton's death has laid a great weight of responsibility squarely on Lorraine shoulders. At this writing, she

is at Dalton's Antibes home in Provence on the Riviera handling his affairs there, and, surely, trying to come to grips with her own huge loss. And yet, when I reached out to her for her thoughts as I approached this article, she responded with enthusiasm and willingness, despite her grief and her obligations on both sides of the Atlantic to her dear Dalton. Her knowing and loving remarks to me about the private man he was, reminded me almost exactly of who I knew him to be as a public person, whether at the piano in concert or on recording or as a teacher to generations of art song loving singers and pianists. He was an honest and good man.

Lorraine described for me the enthusiasm with which Dalton returned so often to Japan. As she herself saw in ten trips of her own there with Dalton, the Japanese deeply love art song and have loved and embraced Dalton since his earliest days there with Souzay. Their singers have been gifted not only by Dalton's rare expertise and artistry, but also by the fantastic recital programs he created just for them. Lorraine reminded me of Dalton's quick wit and his uncanny ability to take even less well trained singers or pianists, give them an artistic impulse and grow it through provocation and that wonderful wit of his, turning the performance quickly into something of real substance and interest. I saw this often in his classes, but most vividly at a master class Dalton gave at the University of Minnesota's School of Music in the mid-1990s. A first reading of Fauré's "Au bord de l'eau" proved naïve technically and musically for both singer and pianist, much too slow, and completely without emotional understanding of—or even focus—on the poetry. Ever kind and respectful, without any overt or harsh criticism, and after only a few minutes of clear and detailed description of what he, Dalton, felt about this poem and how he related that to the music and rhythm of the song, he *loved* that young, nervous duo into a touching, straight through performance of the song. Not only did they make the song work, but Dalton had helped the singer and pianist find more real connection to each other as a duo. And he never mentioned ensemble or technique. Yet, the song and its performers had been magically transformed. Lorraine says, "He always supported singers with love."

When I asked Lorraine in our conversation what was most important to Dalton in his teaching, she said that he insisted that singers and pianists really develop

the skill of *pianissimo* and asked for it often. He never complained about diction. He was interested in truthfulness and he pushed singers to take the poem in as deeply as they possibly could. His own descriptions, offered in aid of this goal, were always most acute and very effective in getting his charges to reach deeper than they perhaps ever had in personalizing texts. Dalton's own public expressions of the depths of his feelings were always startling, Lorraine said, to the uninitiated, those who had not previously experienced his disarming and surprising "baring of soul" in classes. She added, "His inner world was full of mystery."

Lorraine told me that no matter where Dalton traveled, he wanted to go to museums, be in nature, visit gardens, and find beauty wherever it was. Dalton told Lorraine to find something of beauty in each day. When Lorraine was with him in Venice, his hunger to see everything and to share it with her, pushed her to exhaustion while he excitedly wanted to keep going to see and do more. Dalton could sit for hours, she said, looking at one Caravaggio. "He wanted to see it, understand it, heart and soul. He needed beauty."

Dalton Baldwin was, Lorraine said, very disciplined. When in Antibes, he swam two or three times daily. In the early morning he would swim, have breakfast, and practice. He started every day with Bach—for its architecture, its spirituality, and its technicality. He would again swim after practice, then cook lunch, walk to church for prayer, garden until twilight, and then dine. "He loved to garden. He was creating beauty. He believed in beauty and in nature. He planted 200 bulbs in his own garden." And then Lorraine said the thing that touched me most: "Dalton *lived* poetry through nature."

These two great artists taught together for many years and in distinguished venues across the world. At the Académie Internationale d'Été de Nice alone, they taught for 33 years. Their impact on singing and on French art song performance practice cannot be overstated. They met over the precious song of Ernest Chausson, "Le colibri." Dalton loved the song, played it often, and I am *sure* he loved Lorraine's singing of it. It is a rhythmically treacherous little gem of a song with elusive tempi and tempo markings, the need for long breaths, and a perilous (to the singer) *accelerando* and *ritardando* combination over the entire middle section of the piece. In the song, to the poetry of Leconte de

Lisle, the *colibri* (hummingbird), hungry for love as its food, finds a beautiful hibiscus from which he drinks so much love that he dies, never knowing if he could have drunk more.

Having finished three weeks of coaching, classes, and performances in Tokyo, Dalton made a side trip to Myanmar to see the treasures there, perhaps the National Museum in Rangoon or maybe the Buddhist temples there, before flying back to Tokyo and from there to the U.S. and his home in New Jersey. On the return flight from Rangoon to Tokyo, however, Dalton collapsed and was found unresponsive. The plane made an emergency landing in Kunming, the capitol of Yunnan Province, where Dalton was taken to the hospital and pronounced dead. Lorraine told me that all the Chinese could say afterwards was that his heart stopped.

How much like the little *colibri* then, was Dalton, Lorraine wondered to me; he drank in so much love, so much beauty. He needed beauty. So I will always now think of Dalton when I hear, play, or coach this treasured song. But it will not be a sad thought, for Lorraine also told me that Dalton needed and loved *joy*. He created his many, many recital programs always to end upbeat—*avec joie*! He loved joy! Lorraine repeated that to me several times and each time increasingly with a lilt, an uplift, in her voice. The sound of her voice still rings in me. *À la joie*!

How happy is the little Stone  
That rambles in the Road alone,  
And doesn't care about Careers  
And Exigencies never fears—  
Whose Coat of elemental Brown  
A passing Universe put on,  
And independent as the Sun  
Associates or glows alone,  
Fulfilling absolute Decree  
In casual simplicity—

Emily Dickinson,  
"How happy is the little Stone"



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