

OPERA NEWS

EXCLUSIVE ESSAY

GOETHE'S OPERA IMPACT

BY WILLIAM R. BRAUN
P. 30

LYRIC
SOPRANO
SABINE
DEVIEILHE

P. 11

WHAT'S
YOUR
DREAM
OPERA?

P. 26

Amanda MAJESKI

TAKES ON SALOME

BY JENNIFER MELICK
P. 18

SUSAN
GRAHAM
PREPARES
THE NEXT
GENERATION
P. 12

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SCHORR: *New York Pretending to be Paris*



Gigliotti; Darden, M. Kelly; The 19 Mercer Ensemble. Texts. Albany Records TROY1899



Eric Schorr

New York Pretending to be Paris

Songs of
Remembrance and Desire

Eve Gigliotti *Mezzo-Soprano* | Jesse Darden *Tenor*
Michael Kelly *Baritone* | The 19 Mercer Ensemble



THE COMPOSER OF A HANDFUL of regional and off-Broadway musicals, including *Tokio Confidential*, from 2012, Eric Schorr has in recent years turned his attention toward art song. Subtitled “Songs of Remembrance and Desire,” this release features thirteen exquisite tracks set to texts by contemporary American poets. Schorr selected verses for their rich musical potentials: the daring directness of these writers’ language and forms (iambes and rhyme schemes!) is a welcome alternative to the alienating clichés of experimentalism. The same can be said of Schorr’s style, which is elegant and emotionally sincere, capturing the quiet moments of wistful reflection experienced by the figures in the lyrics. The melancholic beauty of his tonal world inhabits the same lonely spaces as Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper’s canvases. In a word, Schorr has mastered the art of bittersweetness. The composer has a way of unexpectedly pivoting to a pang-inducing minor or diminished chord that triggers waves of nostalgic longing. It’s never sappy or forced—he’s a first-rate tunesmith and earns these poignant passages. His

melodies are far more sophisticated than anything on Broadway today, harking back to Sondheim, Barber and Elgar. But I’m afraid that this inherent classicality may prove an impediment to a breakout success in musical theater, which in Schorr’s case is long overdue.

Given the thematic cohesiveness of the verses and their innate theatricality, *New York Pretending to be Paris* feels as if it could be the soundtrack to some imaginary stage work—especially the two song cycles that bookend the disc. For instance, the four poems by Cynthia Zarin set in the opener, *Flowers*, trace the trajectory of a love affair from infatuation to separation. Eve Gigliotti’s delivery is conversational and gracious, but the mezzo’s tone of subdued rapture betrays that her “character” secretly attaches ineffable importance to seemingly banal episodes. There’s a point in the third movement at which the morning sun illuminates a glass vase and awakens her sleeping lover, and Gigliotti’s gasplike expression of wonder and trickling portamento magnify the magic of this image.

Of the one-off numbers that occupy the middle portion of the disc are four songs on gay romance and belonging that could constitute their own cycle. At first listen, tenor Jesse Darden and baritone Michael Kelly sound strikingly similar, but the subtle differences in their instruments suit the roles that they take on. Darden’s reedy upper register and boyish air of bashfulness help to paint the naïve young man in Thomas March’s “Morning (After) Commute,” who hopes his one-night stand will develop into a relationship. Kelly, on the other hand, has a bit more smolder in his voice, and his well-placed shading conveys an experienced lover. I blushed at every suggestive turn of phrase he crooned in the sexy *bossa nova* setting of “Liquid,” Aaron Smith’s ode to a shirtless jogger. I also appreciated Kelly’s rendition of “Remodeling,” the second movement of the maternally themed cycle *Motherhood*, which rounds off the record. In hushed, campfire-tale tones, he recounts Susan Kinsolving’s childhood memory of her mom taking a sledgehammer to a living-room divider. The celesta intro and outro offer a comic yet creepy music-box effect—one of many charming touches in Nik Rodewald’s baroque-pop arrangements for the 19 Mercer Ensemble. —Joe Cadagin