

A Spectacular Recital; All it needed was an audience

by, Craig Smith

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I've always wanted to start a review with, "Ha, ha, we were there and you weren't," and soprano Christine Brewer and pianist Craig Rutenberg's Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival recital on Tuesday provided the perfect opportunity. The relatively few audience members (the house was less than half full) heard glorious singing, magnificent piano playing, unusual 20-century American repertoire, and a creative collaboration that defined what chamber music is all about. This one will be talked about for years.

Anyone who has heard Brewer in Peter Grimes at the Santa Fe Opera this summer, or on one of her many recordings, knows that she uses her big opulent voice with skill and sensitivity. She also can command amazing volume -- St. Francis Auditorium literally rang when she and Rutenberg let loose. But Brewer was more than a vocal machine. Her clear diction and poetic sensitivity brought to life such different but dramatic works as Menotti's moody, telling *Canti della Lontananza* and Charles Ives' 1916 war-memorial song, "He is there."

Other showcased composers, all equally well served, were Richard Hundley whose "Come Ready and See Me" is a recital staple for many singers. John Carter, whose spiritual-inspired Cantata enjoyed passionate singing from Brewer and staggeringly virtuosic yet clear playing from Rutenberg, and Harold Arlen, represented by three songs from the musical *St. Louis Woman*. Unlike some opera singers, who swoop and swoon through this kind of repertoire as if they're trying to do a "Liebestod" crossover, Brewer sang the ditties as if born to the life, woes and hopes of a nightclub chanteuse.

The concert ended with four pieces I know well, but hadn't heard in years. The great Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad always closed her U.S. recitals with them -- A. Walter Kramer's "Now Like a Lantern," Samuel Barber's "Rain Has Fallen," Mildred Lund Tyson's "Sea Moods," and "Night" by longtime Flagstad accompanist Edwin McArthur. They fuse the kind of fervid poetry and ornately purple music now out of fashion, but all are deeply felt and well worth attention -- especially when as superbly performed as here.

The standing-against-adversity tone of the Tyson and McArthur is a reminder that Flagstad faced vitriolic (and false) accusations of Nazi sympathies when she returned to the United States after World War II -- she had gone back to Norway in 1941 to be with her husband, who later died in prison, accused of collaboration. Her personal stolidity, buttressed by what was one of the century's greatest voices, saw her through difficult times and back into a full career.

There were two excellent encores: Celius Dougherty's "The Review," a hysterically funny setting of a Carnegie Hall voice recital critique; and "If I Could Tell You," the luscious opening theme song for the old Voice of Firestone radio and TV show, with music by Idabelle Firestone herself.

Looking back, I wish Brewer had been on hand to sing Thomas Ades' *Life Story* at the festival's August 4 concert. Soprano Susan Narucki is a brilliant musician and an accomplished singer, but her tight, tense vocal production didn't do much for the sexy Tennessee Williams poem.