

# Behind the Mind

the complete Cabaret Songs

Music by William Bolcom (b. 1938)

Poems by Arnold Weinstein (1927-2005)

Over the Piano

Fur (Murray the Furrier)

He Tipped the Waiter

Waitin

Song of Black Max (As Told by the de Kooning Boys)

Amor

Places to Live

Toothbrush Time

Surprise!

The Actor

Oh Close the Curtain

George

The Total Stranger in the Garden

Love in the Thirties

Thius King of Orf

Miracle Song

Satisfaction

Radical Sally

Angels Are the Highest Form of Virtue

Poet Pal of Mine

Can't Sleep

At the Last Lousy Moments of Love

Lady Luck

Blue

Jordan Rutter, countertenor

Jennifer Peterson, piano

Tuesday, May 16, 2017

The Duplex Cabaret Theatre

New York City

# What Is Cabaret Song?

by Arnold Weinstein

First, what it is not. It is not, like these notes, For Musicians Only. No piano tinkling unmerrily away out for an evening of no fun, especially for the words whose un-accented syllables are deftly fudged by accented accompaniment. As Lester Young said, "Play the words."

But what is cabaret song? Is it the long letter to *Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands* sung by sad Dylan or his commercial for psychedelics, *Tambourine Man*, or the John Wesley Harding dirge? Unh unh, them's western ballads sung in saloons of the Pecos, not in cabarets, though Jacques Levy's lyrics to Dylan's hymn *Durango* saunter easily into the cabaret spot.

Dylan's partners, the Beats, don't sit too well either in the cabaret's dopeless smoke. Ginsberg's blues remain cantorial, stoned. Maybe Kerouac's hip haiku joined Stan Getz in a successful debut of improvisational lieder that could be listened to in a kind of club. Jazz and poetry spent a lot of time hanging out in bars, but jazz and poems do not generally a cabaret song make. Fran Landesman is the huge exception, supernally talented writer of *Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most*, to be hoarsely incanted in the dark to all the Sad Young Men at the bar.

Cabaret stuff cannot be electrified to an audience of teary old timers at the Palace or the kids at the Palladium nor yet to Felt Forum throngs. Maybe in a small concert hall but not really; that's more an experience brought about by the heartbreaking wear and tear of cabaret life on its ill-paid performers who need the occasional lucrative airing.

So what are we left with? Well, *aimez-vous* Poulenc setting Apollinaire's *Hôtel*, not wanting *travailler* but *fumer*? What about Garcia Lorca's *Malagueña*, in which Death "enters and exits/in the tavern," like an O'Neill whore, sung in the long lines of flamenco? Or the Italian *Stornelli* sung table to table by wandering improvisors in Rome and Florence?

Despite Virgil Thompson's accusation that British ballads are ungainly, the snippy maestro and master critic might agree that certain poets certainly qualify as makers of the soft-sung poem that lends itself to cabaret rendering: Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Campion, Sydney, Blake. And Dryden gave Purcell plenty to sing about in the key of cabaret.

But it is in Germany that the rhinestone mantle of cabaret is worn most comfortably. Out of the Viennese café tradition that gave birth to Schubert's pop tunes, lieder in English, came the line from Oscar Straus to Brecht-Weill. Along the way, around the turn of our century, Schoenberg took time out from copying operetta scores to write a few dozen items called *Brettli-Lieder*—cabaret songs. (If you're lucky enough to find the record of Marni Nixon singing these you may be surprised.)

Brecht and Weill, vowing to "write for today, to hell with posterity," produced their immortal numbers under national conditions of stress, adumbrated in the stridency of their sound and image. The Brecht-Weill lyric rasping was played in all the Berlin clubs and has been played in all the theaters of the western world ever since; played and played since those fearful times because they wrote for that "today" that comes around again and again.

Cabaret likes such ideas. It was ears-on education for a Germany with an education limited to the few, and (even to those educated few) cabaret songs told much of what journalism left out. But the facts and notions taught in the sawdust classrooms of cabaret nite-life were collaged of poetry and flagrancy—not unlike the expressionist cinema of the day, nor the pre-postmodernism of Kurt Schwitters. And the lessons preached by Brecht of the preacher's family and the cantorial Weill were the doctrines of Einstein, Freud and Marx decked out in the lipstick and mascara of cabaret.

The idea of Ideas as kissing cousins of popular song might make some sense if you remember that Bacon, Harvey and Newton, Galileo and Copernicus were contemporaries of the same Elizabethan songmakers who gave us the innovations of sound and seriousness that characterize the lyric output of Dowland, Morley, Blow, Byrd. And though there were no cabarets at the time, there were taverns and street-corners and theaters where the small sound prevailed; folk and gentility met in the ballads that sang the news of the day.

The courtly and the popular were blended as early as the 15th century and wandered together with the *chansonniers* through the Renaissance. In *Marriage à la Mode* Dryden talks of notions "sung in cabarets," and Pepys in his diary (also of the 17th century) records walls that read "*Dieu te regarde*" in the French cabarets. So it seems that cabarets favored political salt and amatory sult back then too.

In our era Kaufman had a cabaret talent until it was gentrified by Moss Hart. Then the two emulated the courtly in their exclusion of the popular rawness and genius Kaufman had shown in his absurdist works 30 years before Absurdity. In our country Marc Blitzstein was solidly dedicated enough to have devoted serious musical energy to *Saying Something*. When asked why he tended to deploy his Schoenbergian background to sing of the unions, he answered, "Nothing is too good for the proletariat."

But the most daring moment in the history of cabaret occurred in Zurich in February 1916. On that day Dada was born; in the chintzy sleazy unartistic unintellectual atmosphere of the Cabaret Voltaire, the movement that was to transform modern art and lay the groundwork for the post-modernism was announced by a reading by Tristan Tzara, followed by "performance art" by Arp and Kandinsky, lyrics by Wedekind, Morgenstern, Apollinaire, Marinetti, Cendrars. Designs by Modigliani, Picasso. Simultaneous reading of three poems "showing the struggle of the vox humana with...a universe of destruction whose noise is inescapable." (Hugo Balls' Diary).

An intellectually starved America, coming out of its long Puritanical fast, welcomed the new imports. Cabaret quality writing moved off the floor and onto the stage, where the '20s saw Rice's *Adding Machine* and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, a kind of living newspaper that happened to star Clark Gable; in the '30s Rome's *Pins and Needles*, Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, Weill's *Johnny Johnson* all had the episodic, collagistic approach characteristic of cabaret. Even *Our Town* has the spare, loose quality of revue, with the cohesiveness of real theme that makes it cabaretlike in form.

In England Auden had begun his campaign against the uncouth refinement of political rhetoric:

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone...  
Let airplanes circle mourning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message HE IS DEAD.  
Put crepe bows round the necks of the public doves.  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

Clear and simple, but demanding that imagistic attention characteristic of the cabaret experience. Auden also wrote such wry songs (to Britten's delicious music) as *Tell Me the Truth About Love*:

*Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is  
Or soft as eiderdown fluff,  
Is it sharp or smooth at the edges.  
O tell me the truth about love.*

which, apart from the ironic (we hope) fluff/love rhyme, is like after-hours Cole Porter. But even the love songs of cabaret have a conspiratorial quality.

Thus, passing to the left, the Living Theater, the Open Theater, Caffé Cino; to the right, Bway and, off-right, Off-Bway; in between was the Artist Theater (Koch, O'Hara, Ashbery accompanied by New York painters rather than musicians). And in some political bunker of their own architecting, a couple of writers met and wrote the songs on this album.

Norse-American William Bolcom the composer studied with Roethke the poet, and before that, his feet barely hitting the pedals, Bill had played for the vaudeville shows passing through Seattle with such songs in the repertory as *Best Damn Thing Am Lamb Lamb Lamb*. Milhaud found Bill and brought him back alive to highbrow music, though he never lost his lowbrow soul (neither did Milhaud). Operas later, we wrote these songs as a cabaret in themselves, no production "values" to worry about. The scene is the piano, the cast is the singer, in this case Joan Morris, who inspired us with her subtle intimations of *Exactly What She Wanted*. We hope she got it. Nobody defines better than she this elusive form of theater-poetry-lieder-pop-tavernacular prayer called cabaret song.

– ARNOLD WEINSTEIN