

The Sun

A Rare Bird Spreads Her Wings

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By FRED KIRSHNIT

Serena Benedetti, who presented Four Songs by André Previn on Saturday at the Weill Recital Hall, is that rare bird, a natural *Zwischenfach*—that is, a singer whose vocal range hovers somewhere between that of a soprano and a mezzo-soprano. These voices are unusual and need to be nurtured. She seems aware of her tessitura and has already sung *Musetta*—a soprano role with deep underpinnings—in Florida.

The Previn songs are written to words by Toni Morrison and run the gamut from sweet to saucy. Accompanied by the plangent sounds of New York Philharmonic cellist **Evangeline Benedetti**, the featured artist's mother, this developing singer put over "Mercy" with solid intonation and savvy husbandry of vocal power. "Stones" is the risqué piece of the quartet and Serena Benedetti sold it with such force and inflection that she received a mid-cycle ovation. Here the cello morphs into a blues guitar and pianist **Kiyoshi Tamagawa** provided just the right off-kilter grounding. "Shelter" presents some pantonal challenges for the singer, but Ms. Benedetti handled them with ease, and "The Lacemaker" reprises the heartfelt nature of the opening song. Overall, this was a very affecting performance.

Stanley Drucker is principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic. He has held this post since the Eisenhower administration. In 1998, he was feted on his 50th anniversary in this position and thus has another milestone year on the horizon. As if surviving Bernstein, Boulez, Mehta, Masur, and Maazel were not enough, Mr. Drucker has proved to be one of the greatest woodwind players of recent times. Not only has he distinguished himself repeatedly as a soloist with orchestra and as a chamber musician, but many of the finer performances of the Phil have been graced with his internal strength. I

certainly would not want to hear Mahler's Sixth, Bruckner's Ninth, or Brahms's Second without him in the chair. Mr. Drucker joined Ms. Benedetti and Mr. Tamagawa in a charming version of Schubert's "Der Hirt auf dem Felsen" ("The Shepherd on the Rock"). Here the clarinet was infectiously exuberant and suitably sprightly. Ms. Benedetti demonstrated superb diction and enviable emotional projection, although it seemed obvious that she was much more comfortable in the lower register than the high. Upper tones were either clipped or shrill, and this detracted from the smooth, lyrical flow. When she descended to the conversational range of the shepherd, however, the voice was rich and creamy, full-bodied and sensual. I hear a Brangaene in her future. She is at a crossroads at present and needs to make a decision as to what she is, mezzo or soprano. Many of her age and malleability are ruined by coaches who try to shove their students' square pegs into round holes. Only she can ultimately decide which range to pursue. My only advice: If you and your coach disagree about where you belong, find a new coach.

Cellist and pianist presented the Sonata of Claude Debussy, and the program ended with the Trio in B Flat Major for clarinet, cello, and piano of Vincent d'Indy. This is a very clever work, including such complexities as 7/8 time intermixed with 4/4, but, to modify Edison, it is really 99% perspiration and only 1% inspiration. Still, the piece was well-played, Mr. Drucker especially nimble in the *Divertissement*.

Not to get all "Sunrise, Sunset" on you, but what is more satisfying than a concert that combines experience and potential? For our beloved art form to survive, we all need to support the passing of the torch.