

## Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

### June Anderson, come home to 'bel canto'

As much as I thank the Washington Performing Arts Society for bringing my favorite soprano June Anderson to the Kennedy Center on March 24, her choice of programs hit me almost as a betrayal. Someone has to stand up and say it now: Miss Anderson, please stay with the *bel canto* repertoire.

Starting with a few Bellini and Rossini pieces doesn't help, when 85% of your program is music with no moral content or purpose whatsoever. Why waste that incredible voice (and musicality) on the vocal erotica of Franz Liszt, Henri Duparc, and Leonard Bernstein? Sure, their extreme difficulty gave you a chance to show your pianissimo and other technical skills. And sure, you concluded with the best performance of Rossini's "Bel Raggio" perhaps yet sung.

But that didn't make up for the torture of hearing those beautiful tones lavished on such lousy music for the preceding hour. You could probably make Brunhilde sound almost like music—but why bother?

### A rough decade

I owe you a lot, June. Back in 1981, it was you who turned my husband, a confirmed ice hockey fan, into a true opera lover, with your wonderful *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the New York City Opera. Those Lucias are still burned into our memories as the best ones we've ever heard, and we've heard a few. We were so angry when the New York City Opera wouldn't give you the roles you deserved that my husband even marched up to New

York City Opera chairman Beverly Sills one night in 1983 or '84 and told her she was letting the voice of the century slip away.

We think it was outrageous that you were forced to spend the next 10 years in Europe flying from city to city, braving jet lag, insane schedules, and every cockamamie director who came along with some new-fangled production to make you trip while singing impossibly difficult *coloratura*. If the music world were sane, you'd have walked across the plaza from the New York City Opera to the Met without 10 years hard labor in the galleys.

But just because the music world is insane, doesn't mean you have to give in, especially now, when you may be one of the last real *bel canto* singers left on the face of this poor, tired, aching Earth. Okay, so the Met itself, which should have helped you 10 years ago, added insult to injury at your debut this year by strewing a dozen coffins across their *Lucia* set, the better to trip and strangle you with, my dear. Anyone would be angry after all you've been through, but please try not to let it get to you.

### 'Bel canto' and beauty

No one is saying that you have to stick to the same 10 Italian operas year in and year out. Want new material? There are two dozen operas by Schubert and Schumann, not to mention another two dozen by Haydn and Handel, which no one ever gets to hear. Champion those! Art songs? Certainly! But don't waste your time with French fluff and modern junk, when

there's no one left alive who can sing Schubert's hour-length song cycles, or the major cycles and wonderful songs of Schumann, Beethoven, and Brahms. You could do it!

The point is, there's a reason *bel canto* is beautiful, and it's not just because it's in Italian, or makes pretty noise. Those "German" composers mentioned above were *bel canto* composers, too. The famous "long line" of the *bel canto* voice carries the *intellectual content*, ideals, and convictions of mankind's greatest civilizations. Whether it's Mozart or Rossini, Schubert or Donizetti, Brahms or Verdi: The only reason they were able to produce such beautiful sounds, is that the inspiration came from their *minds*, from their love and hopes for humanity which, as St. Paul says in I Corinthians 13, is the only source of all real artistic creativity.

Remember the performance of Beethoven's Ninth you did in Berlin in 1989, when the Wall came down? In your heart you know that that's the necessary state of mind for real singing.

These men wrote music in short from "above the belt," which is why it sits so well in the head when you sing, as opposed to the cretins of the Lizst-Wagner school, who wrote from below the belt, so as not to leave a dry seat in the house. That's why it led ultimately to the "can belto" school of shouting.

Please sit down and have a good, long talk with Gaetano (Donizetti) and your other 19th-century friends, and try to work this out, won't you? Forget what most morons alive today have to say, and listen to what the best composers have told you, and you'll know that this is right.