

Today's Spotlight

YOUR DAILY ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE



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■ The 1946 Howard Hawks classic "The Big Sleep" with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, screens 10:30 a.m. Monday at the Maurice M. Pine Free Public Library, 10-01 Fair Lawn Ave., Fair Lawn; Free. Call (201) 796-3400.

REVIEW

French connections

Poetic art songs evoke powerful emotions, then leave 'em laughing

CLASSICAL

BY BRADLEY BAMBARGER
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

After an evening devoted to the subtleties of classical art song, the nearly capacity crowd Friday at Princeton's Taplin Auditorium rolled with laughter. It wasn't the sort of culmination usually seen at such a recital, but soprano Dominique Labelle and pianist Yehudi Wyner had shrewdly placed Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden's four "Cabaret Songs" at the end.

Labelle has a way with a party trick, and the Montreal native conveyed the English wit of "Tell Me the Truth About Love" — "Some say it makes the world go round, and some say that's absurd / And when I asked the man next door, who looked as if he knew / His wife got very cross indeed, and said it wouldn't do" — with winking charm.

The occasion was the final weekend of the third Golandsky International Piano Festival. Wyner, a composer who won a 2006 Pulitzer Prize for his piano concerto "Chiavi in Mano," devised a program devoted to French and Francophone songs. The genuine articles were by Gabriel Fauré, Camille Saint-Saens, Reynaldo Hahn and Maurice Ravel, with the latter a particular influence on Britten and Wyner.

Thanks to Labelle's strong, shapely voice and flavorful way with the language, the French



KIRA HORWATH FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Pianist Yehudi Wyner and soprano Dominique Labelle kicked off the Golandsky International Piano Festival's final weekend with a well-conceived program of French songs, plus some composed by Wyner.

songs came off beautifully, especially as she and Wyner warmed to the stage. The Taplin, an intimate lecture room, has a dry, somewhat closed acoustic, leading to Labelle being a bit loud and Wyner brittle in the first Fauré songs. They soon adjusted, though, so that even the dramatic outbursts in his "Fleur Jetée" seemed caressed.

In an avuncular pre-concert

talk, Wyner compared sifting through Saint-Saens' song output to "panning for gold," only rewarding to those prepared for the labor. His finds included "Danse Macabre." Unlike the composer's symphonic poem of the same title, it wasn't demonic but rather as catchy as a good pop tune. A bit better known are Hahn's exquisite songs, with Labelle's creamy voice

ideally attuned to the languid swirl of "Pumée."

Although Wyner's lecture stressed the deep, sensitive connection of French composers to the language of their poets, it was hard to judge for the nonfluent French speakers in the house. There were no texts and translations provided to the audience, an irritant due to a production snafu.

At least Ravel's magical settings of three symbolist poems by Stéphane Mallarmé are more about the music of the words than their meaning. One of the poet's peers even quipped that Mallarmé's verses are "untranslatable, even into French." In Labelle's phrasing (more intense than sweet like Dawn Upshaw), the vocal lines were especially sensuous, fully evoking the "infinite languor" referenced in "Soupir" (sigh).

Wyner, born in 1929 in western Canada but raised in New York, contributed a piano reduction of his own "Second Madrigal: Voices of Women," a sequence of songs originally composed for Labelle to be accompanied by five strings, five winds and percussion. The English texts to these songs, many translations of ancient poems from the East, are often grim depictions of aging women.

Refuting a charge of "misogyny" leveled at him by a woman in another audience, Wyner said he was drawn to these poems for their "frank emotions, the way they expose feelings not usually exposed." The pungently lyrical idiom — reminiscent of Schoenberg's early cabaret songs — did reinforce the crueler aspects; the lament in "Cosmetics Do No Good" was as bitter as ash in the mouth.

After Wyner's work, which Labelle sang with coiled restraint, the fun of the Britten/Auden tunes was a balm.