About the Music.

by Steven Blier, *Artistic Director*

My year — like that of many people— falls into two distinct sections. From Labor Day until Memorial Day, I am a denizen of Manhattan. I trundle up and down the Upper West Side wearing deep grooves in the pavement between home and the places I work: Juilliard and Merkin Hall. I am never far from a body of water, though. I can see a sliver of the Hudson River from my apartment. And in the summer, I am reborn. For the last number of years I've rented a house on the North Fork of Long Island. I live for these summer months when I am ninety seconds away from both the Long Island Sound and the Peconic Bay. After the rigors of this past winter, why not look forward to summer with a musical party of songs about oceans, rivers, and shores?

As broad a subject as "To the Sea" opens up so many possibilities of repertoire that it is extremely daunting to choose a program. The song repertoire abounds with barcarolles, shanties, and every variety of of water music. Bénédicte Jourdois and I, adapting a 2009 New York Festival of Song (NYFOS) show called *The Welcome Shore*, grabbed what we loved from that program and added some numbers we thought would flatter our new crop of singers. We were somewhat amazed at the end to find that we had included neither French- nor English-language songs, our normal song geysers. Still, we had covered the waterfront with material in seven languages, the cast was happy, and we knew the audience would be as well. (And after all, our April show is entirely in French and English.)

Some years ago I wrote an article for *Opera News* about the Swedish composer **Wilhelm Stenhammar**. I listened to about forty of his songs, and was struck over and over again by his gift for melody and his sensitivity to poetry. Stenhammar can be folky and rugged or ethereal and tender, but even his brashest songs are written with great delicacy of detail. His piano writing looks and sounds like keyboard reductions of string quartets, and it's little wonder: he was best known for his chamber music. Most of his songs, like **"Det far ett skepp,"** are quite short — lightning flashes of emotion lasting only two or three pages, shy but piercingly honest confessions from a gentle soul.

Sweden is famous for its tenors; Torsten Ralf, Jussi Bjoerling, and Nicolai Gedda set the standards for combining beauty, flowing tone, and squillo. **"Till havs"** by **Gustav Nordqvist** became a standard tenor showpiece on mid-century concerts, due primarily to performances by Jussi Bjoerling. Nordqvist was a one-hit wonder — "Till havs" is his only contribution to the song canon. But he went on to lead a long, satisfying career as a music teacher and composer of sacred music.

If our Swedish composers seem obscure, our Russians are household names: Sergei Rachmaninoff and Piotr Tchaikovsky. The songs we've chosen encapsulate something essential about each of these artists.

Rachmaninoff's "The Storm" juxtaposes the unruly force of a storm with the calm, otherworldly figure of a woman. The image of a turbulent ocean as a symbol for the "sea of life surging with vain tempests" is a customary trope of early nineteenth-century Russian poetry. Above the maelstrom, Pushkin places a Muse-like figure, oblivious to the fierce forces that surround her. This show of indomitable strength in the presence of roiling nature appears in other Rachmaninoff songs, bringing to mind the man-versus-orchestra battles of his piano concertos. Spoiler alert: the piano always wins.

Tchaikovsky's duet from Op. 46, **"In the Garden, Near the Ford,"** reverses the equation of the Rachmaninoff/Pushkin "The Storm." Here, the water is calm and the woman is heartbroken. She weeps by a narrow bend in the river, while a young man, ostensibly the object of her desire, laughs at her. The original poem was written in Ukrainian by Taras Shevchenko; Ivan Surikov translated it into Russian. Honoring the poem's original provenance, Tchaikovsky borrowed a Ukrainian folk tune for the vocal line. But the music seems ironic — a breezy, silky waltz lacking any hints of dark tragedy. Shevchenko's poem brings to mind the story of Eugene Onegin, which Tchaikovsky had premiered the year before. In the opera, a heartless young man also dashed the hopes of a vulnerable girl, but Tchaikovsky's sympathies were clearly with his heroine, Tatyana. The elegant, urbane Op. 46 duet seems to be written from Onegin's point of view: her tears are portrayed as a tempest in a teapot. Perhaps his disastrous marriage to the unstable, manipulative Antonina Miliukova turned Tchaikovsky's empathy into sarcasm.

Brahms was twenty-seven when he composed **"Die Meere,"** drawing on a German translation of an Italian folk poem. No doubt the lyric's southern roots inspired the duet's barcarolle rhythm. It concludes his Op. 20, three duets he began in the summer of 1858 when he was in a serious relationship with a young woman named Agathe von Siebold. As they exchanged rings and began to discuss marriage, Brahms wrote the first two songs, both entitled "Weg der Liebe" ("The Path of Love"), here portrayed as an unstoppable force for good. But the composer abruptly broke off the relationship, and the two never saw one another again. When he returned to Op. 20, he finished it with the rueful "Die Meere," where the pain of love now takes center stage.

The question I encountered most often when planning tonight's program was not "Are you going to do any Schubert songs?" but "Which Schubert songs are you going to do?" I understood the point. Water is a repeated motif in the 600-odd Lieder of **Franz Schubert,** and the allure and depth of his music is an irresistible siren call for lovers of song. I settled on two contrasting pieces: "Auf dem See" and "Der Zwerg," sunlit sweetness vs. Gothic horror. The tripartite **"Auf dem See,"** set to a poem by Goethe, has the feeling of a mini-cantata. Goethe's original title was "Auf dem Zürcher See" ("On

Lake Zurich"); in 1775 the poet had spent the summer in Switzerland to put some needed distance between himself and a budding love affair. Schubert captures the poet's cautious optimism and philosophical approach to romance in a progression of short musical sections, ending with two parallel phrases of pure magic.

"Der Zwerg," written in 1823, is powered by an insistent four-note motif with the same contour as the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Schubert elevates Matthäus von Collin's tale of a queen and her court-jester dwarf into a tragic encounter. Rarely does a major chord sound as queasy and doom-laden as in this song, when the young woman realizes her death is nigh. The development of the four-note Leitmotif and the shifting tonality hint at techniques that Wagner would utilize decades later. In his short lifetime, Schubert may not have yet possessed the dramaturgical savvy to write stage-worthy operas. But the daring, bizarre "Der Zwerg," gives a sense of what his music would have become if he had not left us so young.

It is no secret that I can't live without Spanish music. If we're going to the beach, we've got to ask our Latin friends to join us. The first invitation went to Basque composer **Jesús Guridi,** whose **"Mañanita de San Juan"** is among the most beautiful songs I know. Much of Guridi's vocal music is written on Basque texts, which makes it inaccessible to all but the most intrepid interpreters. In addition, Franco's repressive regime did its best to suppress Basque culture for many decades, further marginalizing the composer from maintream acceptance. As a result, *Seis canciones castellanas* has become Guridi's calling card. Written in user-friendly Castilian Spanish, these songs open the world of this gifted, neglected artist to singers daunted by the near-insuperable challenges of Basque poetry.

Joaquín Turina was born in Andalusia, the most Arab part of Spain. Like many Spanish composers, he later went to Paris to put the final, and most fashionable, touches on his musical studies. The resulting blend of flamenco fire with impressionist harmony gives Turina's songs their unique magnetism. His extroverted vocal lines are bold and operatic, and his piano writing doesn't spare the horses either. **"Olas gigantes"** is typical of Turina's extravagant approach to song. He'd spent some time composing scores for movies, and you can practically hear someone shout "Roll tape!" when this cinematic song begins.

Before heading to Barcelona, we're taking a quick trip to Venice, courtesy of **Reynaldo Hahn.** This long-underrated musician came back into prominence in recent years due to a lovely recording of his songs by mezzo-soprano Susan Graham and pianist Roger Vignoles. Hahn quickly rose from a footnote in musical history to star status; many of my students, who had never heard of better-known composers like Chabrier or Satie, were suddenly bringing in songs by this worthy

petit maître. At the age of 19, Hahn met the novelist Marcel Proust and the two men fell in love. During their honeymoon period, they took a trip to Venice, where Hahn wrote the song cycle *Venezia*. Hahn had a magic touch with words and music, and in **"La barcheta"** his spell is at its most potent. Hahn's secret lies not just in the seductive power of the song's melody, but in the subtleties of rhythm. In the verse, the singer's line is in 6/8 time, like a barcarolle, while the piano is in a square 2/4. The gentle battle of these two meters evokes a unique combination of languor and urgency that soon melts into a seductive, wordless refrain.

The gentle colors of Catalan music have a unique appeal. You'll find none of Turina's bold Technicolor strokes here. The palette of Barcelona-based composers used a great deal of French color—not just the jazzy, Parisian harmonies of Ravel and Poulenc, but also the folky cadences of southern France. Provence was once part of Catalonia, and its musical influence remained alive when Barcelona became an important musical hub in the early twentieth century.

Xavier Montsalvatge and Eduardo Toldrà are Catalan icons, forging a unique blend of gentle, impressionist sounds with fierce, creative independence. **Xavier Montsalvatge** was as committed to his native Catalan culture as he was to exploring the larger musical world around him. His career flowered in the years after the Spanish Civil War, when a number of composers tried to rebel against the musical conservatism favored by Franco's government. Montsalvatge boldly mixed French, Catalan, Castilian, and Cuban elements. Throughout his sixty-five year career, he continued to develop and experiment. I think of him as the Picasso of music, constantly delving into new styles as the decades rolled past. **"Cançó amorosa"** presents Montsalvatge at his sweetest — and therefore his most quintessentially Catalan. This gentle song about an August boat ride always brings me to tears. In August, summer is at its height, but it is also starting to wane. Every day becomes precious. If you hear me lingering over this song's last three chords, you'll know why: I don't want to let go of it too quickly — or of those August nights.

The unique melodic charm and rhythmic verve of **Eduardo Toldrà** first seduced me many years ago. **"Cançó de grumet"** was on a Victoria de los Angeles LP I heard when I was just a bar mitzvah *bocher*. When I encountered the song again as a middle-aged man, I felt as if I were finding a very old friend after many years. For me, Toldrà is the Renoir of song, a purveyor of joy, but the vivid energy of "Cançó de grumet" bumps his status up from Renoir to Monet.

The last group of songs dips into the bel canto era, beginning with a virtuoso duet by Spanish mezzo-soprano and composer **Pauline Viardot.** A towering figure in the nineteenth century, Viardot inspired Berlioz to write *Les troyens* and Saint-Saëns to compose *Samson et Dalila.* Brahms begged her to premiere his "Alto Rhapsody" and Meyerbeer

created one of his greatest and most challenging roles for her, Fidès in *Le prophète.* Viardot was also a composer, having studied with Franz Liszt when she was young. She left five operas (three with libretti by Turgenev) and fifty songs, including the theme-and-variations "Havanaise": a trifle created by a genius.

With such a gifted tenor and soprano in our cast, it seemed like the right time to include a NYFOS rarity: an old-fashioned love duet. Song repertoire usually pairs sopranos and altos, or tenors and baritones. For a hearty "¡Te quiero!"— ("I love you!") — we go to a work by Spanish composer **Pablo Sorozábal.** He was a master of the hugely popular genre known as *zarzuela,* Spanish operetta, which dominated Iberian musical culture from the mid-nineteenth century until the Second World War. Zarzuelas came in all sizes, shapes, and types, from half-hour sketches like sitcoms to three-act costume extravaganzas like TV specials. Sorozábal brought the genre to its highest level of musical sophistication and dramatic depth — just as Francisco Franco was doing his best to extinguish it from Spanish theaters, falsely claiming that it promoted regionality, not nationality. ***La tabernera del puerto*** ("*The Tavern-keeper of the Port*") was one of his masterpieces, and how could we resist this short, gorgeous duet from a work whose subtitle is "A Seaside Romance"?

The three **Gioachino Rossini** songs that conclude our program come from a large collection of salon pieces written during the final decades of his life. He called these 150 piano pieces and songs *Péchés de ma vieillese,* or "Sins of my old age." Earlier on he had enjoyed one of the most spectacular careers in opera, from his debut at age eighteen in 1810 (*La cambiale di matrmonio*) to his last stage work in 1829, *William Tell.* In a mere nineteen years, he turned out thirty-nine operas and established a much-imitated musical style in both comic and dramatic works. After *William Tell,* he abruptly left the world of opera, and came out of retirement only for the last ten years of his life, from 1857 to 1868, when he tossed off music for his friends to perform at his weekly salons. Everyone has a theory on why Rossini suddenly turned his back on the legendary success he was enjoying as a composer. But the charm and elegance of his *péchés de vieillesse* make it clear that his wit and melodic facility remained undiminished.

I know that the summer isn't all sweetness and light; life goes on, and there can be rough moments even when you're at the beach. (Slews of jellyfish sometimes invade Peconic Bay in July.) But the promise of summer always fills me with joy and optimism. All of us at Caramoor and NYFOS wish you happiness and peace as spring approaches, and as summer holds out its annual promise of renewal.