

STATE OF THE ARTS Entertainment and expression

Two-Part Harmony

Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Donald Sutherland share a life in music.

BY RANDI HENDERSON

LAST FALL, IN A concert hall in Moscow, soprano Phyllis Bryn-Julson, an American with an international reputation, sang of a distinctively American scene.

"It was that time of evening," she sang, "when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and shifting the weight of their estimable bodies."

And as she sang the words of American writer James Agee, set to music by Samuel Barber in a piece called "Knoxville, Summer of 1913," she realized that there was not much chance her Soviet audience could relate to the image she was creating.

"Within the first three phrases of the piece I knew that they probably don't know what a rocking chair is and what a porch is, but that they would probably listen to me if I sang foul words for five hours," Bryn-Julson says.

The scene came to mind recently as Bryn-Julson and her husband, organist Donald Sutherland, drove through the small towns in the mountains of Maryland and West Virginia, on their way to a country inn where they spent their wedding anniversary. It was the couple's 20th and, as they paused a few days later to talk about their careers and their lives

together and how their paths converged, the comfortable give-and-take of 20 years together in music was evident.

"Okay, you may speak," says Bryn-Julson, the more talkative of the two, when Sutherland was asked how his interest in music developed. But she warned: "There are several stories that I'm going to squelch."

And then later, as she began recounting her biography, he leaned back, but not just to listen. "It's your turn," he says, "but only if I can talk all the way through it."

They took these pleasant forays into the past from the living room of their home in Potomac, Mary-

land, a Washington, D.C., suburb where they live with their two children, David, 19, and Kaaren, 15.

Bryn-Julson and Sutherland have lived in the Washington area since 1971 and are both on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory of Music in nearby Baltimore; he heads the organ department, she is in charge of the voice department. He also is organist at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland.

But each is more widely known for his or her performing career. Beginning at Syracuse University in the late 1960s—where they met—they have carved out careers for themselves that put them at the

forefront of modern classical music.

IT IS THE NATURE OF A singer to become more of a household word than an organist, a fact that Sutherland accepts with equanimity.

"Sopranos have careers that achieve recognition on a level that an organist never would," he says.

Bryn-Julson's career falls short of the superstardom of a Beverly Sills or a Luciano Pavarotti—"You need tee shirts and bumper stickers to be a superstar," she says—and superstardom is something she has never sought or desired. (Her husband wouldn't mind it, he allowed slyly: "Get the fees up so I could retire.")

Nevertheless, though Phyllis Bryn-Julson may lack some of the public recognition—and huge fees—of the top classical music performers, the top people in the field certainly know who she is and sing praises of her talent and ability.

"She's a marvelous artist," says composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, who has written pieces for Bryn-Julson to perform. Boulez, former music director of the New York Philharmonic and one of the most powerful figures in the world of classical music today, has worked with Bryn-Julson since the early 1970s, when she began her performing career.

"The physical qualities of her voice are strong," he says. "She has perfect pitch and reads well. And also, on the artistic side, she is quite quick to understand things and extremely valuable to a



Phyllis Bryn-Julson, renowned soprano, and husband Donald Sutherland, renowned organist, met while she attended SU.

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While in Russia last year, Bryn-Julson led master classes at the Moscow Conservatory.

composer and conductor like me.”

Composer Gunther Schuller, who discovered Bryn-Julson when she was a teenager spending her first summer at the Tanglewood Music Festival, agrees. “In my view, Phyllis is simply one of the two or three most talented and intelligent singers in the world,” he says. “I adore her for her uncompromising standards of perfection and continual growth as an artist.”

Music critics, too, have raved about her talent and artistry. She is a singer, one wrote, “whose range, clarity, pure timbre, perfect pitch and intelligence combine to make her a ‘natural’ interpreter.” “If there is anything that Phyllis Bryn-Julson can’t do with her voice,” wrote another, “it was not evident in the recital she gave last night.”

SUTHERLAND HAS ALSO earned accolades from the critics. “An organist of considerable stature,” he has been called. “In a stunning work,” another critic wrote, “Donald Sutherland demonstrated . . . that there are ways of bringing new life and excitement to organ recitals.”

And he has earned credit from another quarter as well. “Most

organists are so pale and wussy,” says a Peabody administrator. “Donald is very unusual as an organist. He’s so normal, so vibrant. He is a terrific role model for the students here.”

Role modeling and reviews were certainly something Donald Sutherland never thought about as a boy in Bloomfield, New Jersey, where he discovered at a young age that he loved music in general and the organ in particular. Both his parents were natives of Scotland, his father a mechanic, his mother an assistant to the dean of Bloomfield Seminary, a Presbyterian school. Recorded music at home and live organ music in the church on Sunday were a big part of his life. By age eight he was playing trombone in school; five years later he knew that organ was his instrument of choice.

His father, a thrifty Scot, bought a second-hand piano and it was soon evident to anyone who listened that the keyboard was no passing interest for young Donald. By the time he was fifteen he was earning \$7 a week as organist and choir-master at a church in Orange, New Jersey; the next year he also became an assistant organist at another church in Newark.

“Music was really it,” he says of his interests in youth, and he never doubted he would make it his career. “It’s like a calling. It’s just inevitable, just something you have to do. Even if you’re told you can’t earn a living at it, you have to be convinced of that.”

He turned down a scholarship to Julliard because he wanted to live away from home, and came to Syracuse University where, he says, “as far as the organ went, it was really the best place in the country, no question about it.” He got his master’s degree in 1963, stayed on to teach organ and music theory as well as playing organ in churches in the Syracuse community. And meanwhile, there was this pretty young voice major whose path crossed his path.

Phyllis Bryn-Julson grew up in North Dakota. The daughter of struggling farmers of Norwegian descent, she had a musical genius that was evident at an early age.

Family legend has it that baby Phyllis was playing the piano by the time she was two. Certainly by the time she was in elementary school she was learning the piano faster than anyone else in her hometown of Bowden could teach her. When she was eight her father died and

she moved with her mother to Concordia, North Dakota, where she played piano and trumpet, sang in the church choir and school choruses, and had no idea that everyone else in the world didn’t have perfect pitch and perfect rhythm and a three-octave range.

She started college in Concordia, but a summer in Tanglewood brought her to the attention of international musicians like Gunther Schuller and in her junior year she transferred to Syracuse. And there was this organ teacher she thought was kind of cute and by the time she graduated and moved into her master’s program she had married him.

Next thing you knew, even though they swore it wouldn’t happen, they

were doing concerts together, and he soon became her favorite accompanist. They continue to perform and record together frequently, breaking new ground in avant-garde classical music.

BRYN-JULSON AND Sutherland have both taught as well as performed throughout their musical careers, and they both express some reservations about the new generation of musicians coming up.

“They want to be where we are as soon as they get out of school,” Sutherland says. “They didn’t get music lessons. They arrive at school with a vibrato and they suddenly want to sing,” Bryn-Julson added. “They want the career to start the day they graduate, without the homework.”

Don’t be impatient, they advise young musicians. “Grow up, gain your repertoire,” Bryn-Julson counsels. “You’ll be a much more sellable product.”