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Reinventing the Classical Recital: Examining the Connections Between Performer and Audience

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Reinventing the Classical Recital: Examining the Connections Between Performer and Audience

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors

Spring 2011

Honors Capstone Project in _____ Music Education _____

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Reinventing the Classical Recital: Examining the Connections

Between Performer and Audience was a project intended to create a dialogue between the performer and audience about the kind of experience a classical recital typically is versus what it can be. Recitals given at Syracuse University, and in the classical music community in general, generally have strict guidelines for the amount, type, and quality of music to be performed. Certain composers or types of song are considered more appropriate than others, depending on the instrument and length of the recital. In creating a recital to evaluate in what ways the performer can connect to his or her audience, I carefully selected music that did not strictly meet typical guidelines for an hour-long senior voice recital. Instead, I selected a variety of music that appealed to me and that I thought my audience could relate to.

I began my recital program with multi-movement work by Beethoven for voice and piano (considered by some to be one of the first song cycles ever written). After a brief intermission, I continued the program with a set of five songs by Leonard Bernstein, another well-known composer. This set was meant to surprise and amuse the audience, and set the tone for the final group of songs, from musical theatre and operetta.

In creating a recital, a performer must first select music. Most performers make sure to have good variety of foreign language and English pieces, pieces of varying lengths and topics, and often add a collaborative piece where another performer (besides the pianist) is invited to play. Next, the performer is responsible for finding an accompanist and researching the music, filling out forms to reserve the venue and ensure the recital will be recorded, have the piano tuned, and practice often to make sure s/he is prepared. The audience's responsibility is to come to the performance, and pay attention throughout.

This project attempted to bridge the gap between those onstage and offstage, by including certain members of the audience in the steps leading up to and following the recital. Before the actual recital, I polled my students, friends, and family to find out what they found most interesting and most dull about classical concerts and recitals. The insight I received helped me to plan my timing and musical choices to help the audience feel included and interested. During the recital, as a performer I sought to include my audience by making frequent eye contact and facial/bodily gestures. Following my recital, I was able to celebrate my recital over a reception, but also to talk with the audience about which songs they liked and why. Classical music and performance can be enjoyed by all, not just those who are musically well educated or interested.

Table of Contents:

Preface	Pg. i
Acknowledgements	Pg. iii
Advice to Future Honors Students	Pg. iv
Reflective Essay	Pg. 1
Sources Cited and Consulted	Pg. 14
Appendices	Pg. 15
Summary	Pg. 16

Preface

In preparing to put on a recital at Syracuse University, there are a number of steps a performer must take in order to ensure that the performance will be successful. A senior recital is the culmination of four years of practicing and performing, but preparing for a recital in the spring semester requires a full year's worth of planning, starting in September of that school year.

The recital lottery is a system to ensure fair selection of recital dates and times. All available dates and times are listed. (These are all days that do not conflict with a basketball game in the Dome or other events in Setnor Auditorium, for example ensemble performances or days when a guest speaker/performer will be visiting.) Students are organized by major, second year graduates first, followed by first year graduates, seniors who need a recital to complete a degree, juniors who need a recital to complete a degree, and finally those who are choosing to put on a recital that is not a major requirement. The recital lottery this year was held on September 16, in the afternoon, and I was close enough to the front of the group to select my first choice recital date, April 16, 2011, at 5 PM.

Once a recitalist has selected his or her date, s/he must clear the date with advisors, professors, accompanists/collaborators, family, and friends. S/he must also select a recital committee (jury). The jury is a group of university faculty members who meet to approve the recitalist for the performance; they listen to a dress rehearsal and decide if the recitalist is performing at the level s/he needs to be. If not, the recital can be rescheduled or cancelled, and if so then the recital proceeds as planned. My recital committee consisted of two members (I was not required by my degree to give a recital, so I was allowed only two jurors): Eric Johnson, my voice professor and capstone project advisor, and John English, another member of the voice faculty. My accompanist, Jianan Yu, is a graduate student in piano performance. I made sure they would all be available for a jury before my recital date.

As the semester gets underway, the recitalist must then choose repertoire to perform at the recital; s/he can choose to use music from previous years of study, or can select new pieces to learn and perform. The music must have significance and authenticity, and all choices must be justified by the performer through research. A recitalist will also need to set up a regular practice schedule with the major teacher, in my case my voice professor, and an accompanist. Typically all three will meet once a week at a formal lesson, and the recitalist and accompanist can set up time to meet outside of lessons on their own. The recitalist and teacher usually also set up extra performance opportunities to "practice performing," for example at school of music weekly student convocations or other events.

The recital itself demands great attention to detail. The performer must have confirmed use of the hall, tuning the piano, and having a professional recording made of the performance, as well as the live-stream for those watching online. The performer must also prepare a program, with program notes, for the audience, and publicize the event with posters, emails, and Facebook notifications. S/he is also responsible for preparing a reception for the event (if s/he desires). The performer must make sure to be fully warmed-up and ready, and will often run the recital or parts of it earlier that day with the accompanist or other collaborators. Physically the recitalist must also prepare, by dressing up and eating/drinking well. Mentally, the performer must be focused, ready to enter the stage and know all words, cues, and cut-offs, while still being expressive and (hopefully) enjoying the experience.

Following the recital, a performer gets to relax and enjoy the company of friends and family who came out for support. S/he will also thank those who made the recital possible, clean up the reception, and leave the space so the next performer can prepare for his/her recital.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Eric Johnson, my voice teacher, for helping me take major strides toward being comfortable with performing. He has spent long hours working with me on my pronunciation of German, helping me find a deeper understanding to the text in my music, and believing that there was a true solo performer in me, yet to be discovered. He has helped me to see that I was only scratching the surface of what my vocal abilities could be, and together we tapped into that resource. Eric has helped me to become a performer (sometimes against my will), and finally, with his help, I now enjoy performing. For that and so much more, he has earned my respect and gratitude.

I would like to thank my accompanist, Jianan Yu, for performing in my recital. Aside from playing beautifully, she gave me emotional support and helped me to “just sing,” and my recital would not have been half as good without her.

I also need to thank my piano professor, Adrienne Kim, and the rest of the Setnor School of Music faculty for being so supportive and teaching me what makes a successful musician and person.

I'd like to give a very warm thank you to Eric Holzwarth and the Renée Crown Honors Program Faculty, for your excitement about my project and leniency with deadlines. You allayed all my fears of not completing the project because of my time limitations due to student teaching, and made this project a joy. I truly appreciate how understanding and helpful you have been.

Finally, I would like to thank all my friends and family for their continued and unconditional encouragement, support, and love. You are the audience that makes me want to perform, and the people I want to celebrate with after.

Advice to Future Honors Students

Dear Future Honors Students:

Completing this honors capstone project was one of the most proud moments of my undergraduate career. It was amazing to me that my emotional and academic output for this project could be so much greater than my input of time and effort (which were by no means lacking). I can honestly say that completing my honors capstone project was the greatest accomplishment of my academic life thus far, and that I grew as a performer, educator, student, and person because of it.

That said, do not underestimate the time it will take you to complete your honors capstone project! The amount of research and revision alone should be a good reminder to keep to your deadlines and not let the project get backed-up; don't forget that you will need to run around and get signatures and approval for your project as well.

Keep up with your work and don't get discouraged. Trust me – it's worth it!

“Reinventing the Classical Recital: Examining the Connections Between Performer and Audience” is a fitting title for the goals of my capstone recital. I wanted to perform a cultural experiment, so to speak, about how the conscious choices a performer makes impact his or her audience. My idea for the theme of the recital came from my personal habits as a performer and also my feelings toward a number of recitals I’ve gone to: although the performers are always very well prepared and talented, I only occasionally feel connected to the music. In light of the recent and very tragic bankruptcy of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, my project took on a second and equally as important significance. I began experimenting to uncover a way to draw mainstream audiences back to classical music.

I don’t flatter myself enough to think that I am the first or only musician to attempt to attract a wider audience for the sake of keeping classical music alive. In American culture today, classical music is considered “elite” and far removed from the typical citizen. Many people hear classical music only in T.V. commercials and movies, when scanning radio channels, or during a religious service. As a music educator, I have learned how to bring an appreciation for this music into schools, to students and hopefully those around the students (parents, family, friends). It is my responsibility to bring classical music into the lives of others in every way I can, by performing, teaching others how to perform and actively listen, and being an audience member to support other musicians.

For a creative project like a recital performance, even the slightest artistic choices made have a significant impact on the project. The first choice I needed to make once I decided to perform in a recital was the length of the performance. The Setnor School of Music allows for two variations on recital length. I decided to put on a full hour-long program, for three main reasons. The first reason was that I felt I needed my own time-slot (half-hour slots are paired up; many performers will pair up and work collaboratively for an hour) to accomplish my goal of connecting to the audience. I wanted to open a dialogue, between myself as a performer and the audience as active participants, about what a recital aims to do. I felt that sharing the stage would have ruined the consistent involvement of the audience in relating to the music I chose. The second reason was simple: I wanted to select more music than a half-hour slot would allow me. The third reason was the most personal. I wanted to perform for all my family and friends, to celebrate the culmination of four years of hard work. My voice has drastically changed in my four years at Syracuse University. I wanted an opportunity to share my excitement about the development of my voice with those I care about.

One of the more obvious choices a performer makes is selecting works to be performed. With the help of my teacher and accompanist, I chose three sets of music to perform.

I began my recital program with multi-movement work by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) for voice and piano, titled "An die Ferne Geliebte" ("To the Distant Beloved"). This work, composed in 1816, is considered by some to be the first song cycle ever written, although it is not typical of the genre. A song cycle is a larger work, made up of a set of songs, meant to be performed in a specific sequence. The songs are usually unified by a common narrative, persona, mood, or setting, which are then reinforced by musical themes. Beethoven's setting of this cycle of poems by Alois Jeitteles (1794-1858) was unusual in that the songs were connected by musical passages. Most often, each song in a song cycle will begin and end, there will be a small pause, and the next one will begin, giving the audience time to absorb the ideas and music before moving on to the next. Franziska (Fanny) Giannattasio del Rio (1790-1873), the daughter of the headmaster of the school where Beethoven's nephew Karl attended, helps to enlighten why the composer connected the songs. "He always presented a full picture of the piece he was performing; at least that was so with his piano accompaniment to 'An die Ferne Geliebte,' for he sat there full of emotion" (Bradford Robinson, 2005). The romantic implications of Beethoven sitting and performing this piece full of emotion were part of what drew me into performing the song cycle at my recital. Beethoven had a "distant beloved," the object of much speculation by researchers and historians, a person believed also to be the object of a letter he wrote in 1812, to the "Immortal Beloved." Scholars now believe

this woman was Antonia Brentano (1780-1869), and she was married to another man, and left with him to Frankfurt, although her feelings for Beethoven were reciprocated. “An die ferne Geliebte... with its intimations of lost domestic happiness and its heartfelt renunciation of love for art, was one step in that direction” (Bradford Robinson, 2005, n.p.).

Selecting this piece for my recital was an easy choice. I was drawn to the mysterious and romantic themes and history of “An die Ferne Geliebte,” much the way Fanny Giannattasio del Rio felt compelled to write about and question Beethoven’s motivations. Beethoven is also one of my favorite composers, and I was first introduced to his piano literature. As I gradually learned more of his music, I craved for a piece for voice. Beethoven rarely wrote vocal music, and the music he did write (for example the choral finale in his Symphony No. 9) was exceptionally physically trying on the singer. The words and music were difficult pairings (singing certain vowels in the highest part of one’s range is not easy nor vocally healthy) and, in the case of his ninth symphony, the sopranos stayed up in the highest part of their range for a very long time. When I discovered “An die Ferne Geliebte,” and realized how reasonable the range was and how nicely the words fell in with the musical patterns, I desperately wanted to perform it, despite the fact that it is typically sung by a man. I also felt that my audience would be more receptive to a “typical”

classical piece by a composer they are familiar with, and Beethoven is very well known and loved.

I wanted to open the recital with this piece for several reasons as well. The section of the audience that was musically educated would be expecting a piece or composer they recognized. For those audience members, I wanted to start my recital well within the comfort zone of what a classical recital typically is. I also wanted to get the longest, most vocally taxing piece out of the way first (the song cycle is about 15 minutes long), so that I wouldn't have to sing it at the end, after singing for a half-hour straight. It was the only foreign language piece on the recital, in German, and I used a copy of the music for the performance. In terms of my overall goal for the recital, I thought that starting with this piece would leave the audience open to hearing more music that they would not have been familiar with.

After a brief intermission, I continued the program with a set of five songs by Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), another well-known composer.

Bernstein is best known for writing *West Side Story*, among other things. This set, entitled "I Hate Music: A Cycle of Five Kid Songs for Soprano and Piano," was meant to surprise and amuse the audience. Each song has its own idea, and musically the set is challenging. When I stumbled upon this set, I first noticed the title song, which appears third in the sequence. "I Hate Music!" appealed to me because my relationship with

performing music at SU was love-hate. I sang in University Singers concerts and in the chorus of SU's Opera Theatre productions, but never felt comfortable as a soloist, although I have always wanted a lead. End of semester juries (performed finals) and auditions were mentioned with a sense of dread and met with what my teacher and I nicknamed my "deer-in-the-headlights" look. We could not pass up the opportunity to sing a song that accurately sums up my feelings; the main character of this song says that she hates music (because music is full of dark halls where people don't want to be, and putting on airs), but loves to sing. Eric (my teacher) and I used this song to help me express my stress about performing, and through it we made a break-through. This is the first piece I truly enjoyed performing. I found a connection to a few of the other songs in the set and decided to sing them all for my recital. The first song, "My Name is Barbara," I sang to my mother, whose name is Barbara. The last song, "I'm a Person Too," reminded me to connect with the members of my audience. The other two songs, the second "Jupiter Has Seven Moons" and fourth "A Big Indian and a Little Indian (Riddle Song)", were fun and silly, and a pleasure to learn to put together. I knew the audience would enjoy them because I did, and was proved right when they laughed after the fourth movement, the "Riddle Song." This set, besides being fun and accomplishing other goals, helped to bridge the gap between the first group of songs and the last: it set the tone for the final collection of songs from musical theatre and operetta.

The musical theatre pieces were ones I chose for aesthetic reasons, because I liked them, or because I could sing them well. The first, “Vilia” (from *The Merry Widow*, by Franz Lehár (1870-1948)) was a piece I had learned my sophomore year – I relearned it because it was always a favorite of mine to sing. It is also very well known, wonderfully lyrical, and although the original version of the operetta was in German (*Die Lustige Witwe*), it is commonly sung in English. I wanted to ensure I had a number of English songs, so the audience could connect with the text as well as with the music. This song has a distinct verse and chorus, and is easy to follow. The song tells the story of a wood-maiden named Vilia, and how she seduces a young huntsman and then disappears, leaving him love-struck in the woods. It is sweet, a little sad, and lovely; several of my audience members told me at the reception that this piece was their favorite of the whole recital.

The second piece in the musical theatre group was from *The Mighty Casey*, and opera by William Schuman (1910-1992), called *Kiss Me Not Goodbye*. This opera was written in 1953, based on Earnest Thayer’s *Casey at the Bat*. I felt that this would appeal to those in my audience who are more athletically driven, and thought it would serve as a nice reminder that music is inspired by all activities, feelings, and acts. The song itself is a love song, a presentation of a desire and longing for that person not to leave nor question jealousy but rather to kiss them often and never

goodbye. Musically, this piece was the hardest of the musical theatre group for the audience to digest. It is a beautiful sentiment, but the harmonies and meter were atypical. I placed this piece second in the set of four so I could introduce the music in a manner that was not shocking or threatening. The piece was short, and gave me a moment after the opening number and before my two larger, more extravagant ending pieces, to catch my breath and thoughts.

The second to last piece on the recital was “Fair Robin I Love” (from *Tartuffe*) by Kirke Mechem (b. 1925). This piece was one I had originally selected for my recital, when I had thought I would be researching the theme of story-songs, or songs with a clear narrator, who speaks dialogue or tells a story to another character. I realized that this song would fit on my recital well because it is upbeat, is easy to follow, and is silly and scandalous at the same time. The character who sings this song, Dorine, is a maid. She sings to her mistress, Mariane, about love and how to manage, particularly when the one you love is away. Instead of imparting to Mariane to be faithful, Dorine says that she and her love (Robin) only love each other when they are together “He’s fickle and false... and there we agree: for I am as false and as fickle as he!” This upbeat song is funny but also allows the performer to take a few liberties. I felt free to move around the stage and act this song out, and modified two higher musical runs in the song so I could show-off a bit.

The final song in the set, and of my recital, was “This Place Is Mine,” from *Phantom* by Maury Yeston (b. 1945). It is a true musical theatre piece, sung by one of the villains of the show. The show was based on Gaston Leroux’s novel *The Phantom of the Opera*, but was overshadowed by the success of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical of the same name. This piece is sung by Carlotta, a diva and the wife of the new head of the opera house, about how she feels about owning the opera and being the new star opera singer. I chose this piece for last mainly because Eric and I could not help but notice that I begin the English section of my recital hating music and by the time I finish the recital I feel that I own the hall. In a grander way, that order of ideas represents my experience growing to be a performer and realizing the full potential of my voice.

At the reception for my recital I did research about my audience. I took note of who was there: my family, who appreciate music but never studied it, a large number of my sorority sisters and friends from school who had also never studied music, and a small group of my friends from the School of Music who were well versed in classical recital procedure, repertoire, and etiquette. When I asked each person what song s/he liked best, there were no themes. Answers varied widely regardless of those three groups, age, and gender. I was glad that I had selected a program that appealed, at least parts of it, to every member of my audience.

If I had to create another recital or re-experience this one, there are two things I would do differently to help reach my goals. I would write program notes for the audience. I chose not to because it is my experience that program notes are a distraction. Instead of listening to the music, audience members prefer to follow along, word for word, through any translations given, or will read the synopsis of the piece of music while it is being performed. I was concerned that the audience would not be actively listening, but rather passively listening as they actively read whatever I gave to them. The reason I would provide them, given the opportunity to do my recital over, is to give background information on the shows (minimal – not a full synopsis) and to explain the German piece (lyrics and romantic history). Through doing research myself I understood the pieces better, and I think any information, presented in the right way, could have given my audience more of an edge to understanding and connecting with the music. I wish that I had also asked the audience to write down thoughts, either by handing out a questionnaire at the reception or by having a book that people could feel free to write in. I think that would have given me more data and more concrete information about what pieces were well liked and which were harder for the audience to connect with. Despite these things, I still feel the recital went well and accomplished at least one of my goals, to provide an enjoyable performance to my audience.

I experienced two major challenges through the process of putting together this recital. The first is time. I chose to put on this recital during the semester. I was student teaching, and had to put in a lot of time at night in order to learn all the music and prepare for the recital. My accompanist also had little time to rehearse outside of lessons (she had two performances the weekend before mine), so putting it together came right at the very end, the week of my recital. The second challenge was a personal battle I've been fighting for four years: how to be onstage, solo, and enjoy performing. Performance can be stressful – trying to remember all the words, entrances and cut-offs, strange jumps or key changes, or lining up irregular meters all present a challenge to the performers.

Remembering that performance should be enjoyable, trusting that the preparatory work was enough that I would be successful, and making myself vulnerable to the audience, was hard for me. I admire the work and performances of Audra McDonald and Kristin Chenoweth, two American singers and actresses who clearly enjoy their work. Putting on this recital, coming to a performance with a different attitude, helped me to finally free myself of performance anxiety. Now, I love the sound of my voice, and I cherish opportunities to sing for other people.

I drew a couple of conclusions about my project at the completion of my recital. An audience loves variety – as a programmer or performer you

never know which pieces will connect with which audience member. By providing variety, I was able to reach every member of the audience in at least a small way. Providing background material to my audience would have helped them to understand the significance of each piece, and my reasons for choosing it. It also provides a roadmap for what they will be hearing, and audience members can look forward to the piece they think they will enjoy the most. Having a personal connection to the audience members will help them pay attention and feel that they are actively involved in the recital rather than passively sitting in the auditorium. It is unrealistic in a larger-scale performance, that every member of the audience will know personally some member of the orchestra or opera, or the conductor. By including people, having pre- or post- concert talks, blogging about the work or musical experience, or giving program notes, people feel more connected and are more likely to come out for a performance, even if they don't know the music or performers.

As people start showing more interest (or disinterest) toward classical music, I'm sure there will be a number of adaptations performers will make to keep classical music in the hearts and culture of America. In a TED Talk, Benjamin Zander shared his thoughts about music and passion, and performed an experiment on how to connect people to classical music, by educating them and playing a piece by Chopin (this can be viewed at http://www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.html).

He used humor and examples of small children playing piano to connect on a more personal level, explained musical impulses, and then performed a piece. He first educated the audience about his subject, and was very successful as a performer (the audience gave him a standing ovation). Zander leads me to believe that education is key for people to understand and appreciate classical music (or really any subject, for that matter).

As a music educator, my goals are to instill a life-long love of music in my students. I strive to help them become better musicians and people. Through this recital I have become a better educator and now that I understand how to perform, and why to perform, I feel much more confident that I will be able to teach my students the same. By creating informed musicians and appreciators of music, I can do my part to make sure there is always an audience for the symphony, opera, and choral performances. This recital was key in forming my music philosophy, and reminded me why I chose the field of music education.

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Appendices

See Kimberly DiNicola Capstone Recital video and audio recordings.

Capstone Summary

“Reinventing the Classical Recital: Examining the Connections Between Performer and Audience” was a project intended to create a dialogue between the performer and audience about the kind of experience a classical recital typically is versus what it can be. Recitals given at Syracuse University, and in the classical music community in general, generally have strict guidelines for the amount, type, and quality of music to be performed. Certain composers or types of song are considered more appropriate than others, depending on the instrument and length of the recital. In creating a recital to evaluate in what ways the performer can connect to his or her audience, I carefully selected music that did not strictly meet typical guidelines for an hour-long senior voice recital. Instead, I selected a variety of music that appealed to me and that I thought my audience could relate to.

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This project attempted to bridge the gap between those onstage and offstage, by including certain members of the audience in the steps leading up to and following the recital. Before the actual recital, I polled my students, friends, and family to find out what they found most interesting and most dull about classical concerts and recitals. The insight I received helped me to plan my timing and musical choices to help the audience feel included and interested. During the recital, as a performer I sought to include my audience by making frequent eye contact and facial/bodily gestures. Following my recital, I was able to celebrate my recital over a reception, but also to talk with the audience about which songs they liked

and why. Classical music and performance can be enjoyed by all, not just those who are musically well educated or interested.