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## A Debut Recital, and a Voice Made Manifest

By PAUL KWAK

In a brave new world where broadband technology eradicates traditional vestiges of gentility, and the triumph of television often results in the pre-eminence of celebrity (or notoriety) over craft, the idea of a debut recital can seem just as quaint and anachronistic as a debutante ball. Indeed, the New York musical scene has evolved to the point where debut recitals are less likely to generate the press coverage they might have 50 years ago. Even—or, perhaps, particularly—at a school like Juilliard, the boon of frequent performances in esteemed halls such as Alice Tully, Avery Fisher, and Carnegie makes the idea of a debut seem entirely a relic, if an enchanting one, of a long-extinct era. Nevertheless, the tradition continues, and by its very persistence provides insight into the changing worlds of opera and art song and their practitioners.

This month, soprano Sarah Wolfson joins the ranks of those making their "debut" in this shifting musical and cultural landscape, as the winner of the Alice Tully Vocal Arts Debut Recital. By some happy coincidence, it happened that right before I was scheduled to talk with her for this article, I was also scheduled by the Vocal Arts Department to play for her coaching with Russian-diction coach Gina Levinson. Unexpectedly, I found myself for nearly two hours observing, collaborating with, and talking to Wolfson. Her coaching with Ms. Levinson and our conversation revealed a dynamic communicator with an intelligent sensitivity to the difficult Russian language, a sympathetic and constant attention to character, a penetrating beauty of tone and appealing musicality. In talking with her after the coaching, I found that this enthusiasm and intelligence informs not only her music but her views on this upcoming debut recital, and her work in general.

Wolfson is a curious and broadly interested musician who has already forged an impressive and promising career in opera and art song. A Juilliard alumna (M.M. '01, *voice*) and a recipient of the William Schuman Award upon graduation, she studied with Cynthia Hoffmann and is currently a student of Edith Bers. Wolfson spent a summer at the Florida Grand Opera and subsequently appeared at Opera North in Leeds, England; her roles have ranged from Susanna in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* at Juilliard to Alexandra in Marc Blitzstein's *Regina* at Florida Grand, and Bacchis in Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* and Zerlina in *Don Giovanni* at Santa Fe Opera. In 2004, she created the role of Celia in John Musto's new opera, *Volpone*, presented by the Wolf Trap Opera Company. She is scheduled to sing Papagena in *Die Zauberflöte* at Lyric Opera of San Antonio in 2006.

Wolfson reflected on these experiences, noting the pitfalls that can accompany even a highly successful career on the opera stage. "As a light lyric soprano," she said, "one often plays sweet roles. These characters have similar personalities and psychologies." Wolfson discussed the expected gamut of roles that a voice of a



Sarah Wolfson  
Photo by Peter Konerko

particular type might play, and with great respect for the tradition, she noted nonetheless that she perceives its limits in contrast to the blank psychological canvas that the recital provides. "I never got to play 'manipulative,'" she added with a grin.

The opportunity for more expansive exploration of the human psyche draws Wolfson to the recital stage. "In choosing the repertoire for my debut recital," she explained, "I wanted to present different personalities that reflect my eclectic interests in music." Indeed, for Wolfson, the simultaneous challenge and delight of a debut recital such as this is the opportunity to present other facets that the opera stage might not afford to one singer. "In some ways, opera is, in this sense, easier than a song recital because on the opera stage, a young artist can inhabit a character that is already conceived and envisioned by the composer and librettist," Wolfson explains.

"On the recital stage," she continues, "all that you can offer is honesty. There are no theatrics, and all that you have is a great intimacy with the audience. It's a way to synthesize music and text into character building." As Wolfson writes eloquently in her introductory program notes: "One of the greatest challenges in an artist's career is to find her voice, her true source of expression. The recital stage has the amazing power to make that voice manifest."

Her experience on the recital stage is already vast: having appeared on the Vocal Arts Honors Recital twice during her time at Juilliard, she has also performed at the Miami Museum of Contemporary Art in a recital of 20th-century American song and is the 2004-05 winner of the Vocal Arts Society Recital Competition. In 2000, she participated in the Steans Institute for Young Artists at the Ravinia Festival.

Recognizing the changing significance of the recital as a contemporary art form, Wolfson acknowledged the unique presentational aspect of a debut recital by programming songs that, in her words, "are home to me." From the *Nursery Songs* of Mussorgsky to selections from Wolf's legendary *Italienisches Liederbuch*, from songs of Turina and Bolcom to Folk Songs by Berio, all of her selections are ones for which she has special affinity, whether emotional or musical, and which represent "the many parts of who I am as a singer."

The Berio resonates in particularly special ways in Wolfson's life and career, and its placement on her recital is historically and musically auspicious. The Folk Songs for Seven Instruments will be conducted by Jeffrey Milarsky, who conducts at Juilliard and around New York City and, as it happens, is Wolfson's husband. The performance will furthermore constitute the debut of the Juilliard Chamber Ensemble, a new student group dedicated to the performance of new, large-scale chamber works written in the 20th century. The performance also bears historical significance, as Berio's songs were premiered by the Juilliard Ensemble (a precursor to the current New Juilliard Ensemble), conducted by Berio himself.

The special resonances this program has in both her musical career and her personal life extend to include Wolfson's longtime collaborator, Lydia Brown, her pianist for the debut recital and, as Wolfson says, "another person who is home to me." It seems as if the debut for her—and for the upcoming generation of song recitalists and opera singers—has become in many ways the antithesis of a traditional debut concert. No longer is it the moment when an artist first appears on the New York stage (for Wolfson has already appeared in recital at Alice Tully Hall, the Kennedy Center, and Weill Recital Hall), but the opportunity for an artist to present herself as, indeed, at home on the stage. It is not simply an opportunity for artists to say, "This is who I will be, or might become," but—as Sarah Wolfson intends with her November 29 recital, "This is the artist I have become, and above all, this is who I am."