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Lots of Anger, All in Fun

Naomi O'Connell at Weill Recital Hall

By Vivien Schweitzer

There were no gentle, swooning maidens on the program presented by the Irish mezzo-soprano Naomi O'Connell at Weill Recital Hall on Tuesday, with neurotics, sirens and kleptomaniacs the stars of the evening.

Ms. O'Connell presented "Witches, Bitches & Women in Britches," a lively, unusual program of English, French and German songs, under the auspices of the Concert Artists Guild, a promoter and manager of young soloists and ensembles.

Ms. O'Connell, who recently finished graduate studies at Juilliard, proved a natural in the recital format, winning over the audience with her rich, silvery voice and charming stage presence.

The first songs on the lineup were grouped under the heading "Women of the Woods" and included an ardent rendition of Charles Villiers Stanford's "Belle Dame Sans Merci." Her expressive phrasing illuminated the subtleties of Hermann Zilcher's "Musikanten" ("Musician"), with Brent Funderburk, her excellent pianist, deftly playing the colorful piano part. This section also included a flirtatious romp through Hugo Wolf's "Zigeunerin" ("Gypsy") and "Ich Hab in Penna Einen Liebsten Wohnen" ("I Have a Lover Living in Penna"), featuring a heroine who catalogs her sexual conquests.

Mr. Funderburk provided nuanced accompaniment throughout the program, which continued with songs grouped under the heading "In the Ocean's Embrace." Ms. O'Connell offered a compelling rendition of Poulenc's "Dame de Monte Carlo," her impassioned delivery of the final line embodying the bitterness of the faded female gambler. Her control, shadings and elegant vibrato rendered Arthur Honegger's "Trois Chansons de la Petite Sirène" a delight. She elicited plenty of laughs during her portrayal of the murderous lass in Tom Lehrer's comical "Irish Ballad."

The program's second half featured cabaret-style songs, including the premiere of Christopher Berg's engaging "Saints or Witches." Mr. Berg drew this song's lyrics from poems Ms. O'Connell chose, with Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" unfolding against a bluesy, syncopated piano part. Philip Hobsbaum's "Can I Fly, Too?" was set with spare, enigmatic lines, and Sophie Hannah's "Don't Say I Said" was rendered as an alluring show tune.

"German is such a fun language to be angry in," Ms. O'Connell said before performing selections that included Friedrich Hollaender's "Kleptomanin" ("Kleptomaniac").

The program concluded with three songs by American composers, including Marc Blitzstein's wry "Modest Maid," whose lecherous heroine Ms. O'Connell had fun enacting.