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MUSIC

MUSIC; A Couple Of Outcasts Get to Shine On CD's

By BARRY SINGER

THERE are many ways a songwriter today can be unfashionable. Choosing to write for the American musical theater is merely one of the surer routes. Though even here, different songwriters go about being unfashionable in entirely different ways.

What does unfashionable mean for a musical theater composer? Often, simply, that your music and musicals are more difficult for audiences to embrace than a comfortable, familiar show tune.

Take Michael John LaChiusa and John Bucchino. Both write songs in the classic (some would say outmoded) Broadway manner as descended from the American popular songbook. Beyond this commonality, however, their work is strikingly dissimilar. Where Mr. LaChiusa's music flouts tradition with incendiary rebelliousness, both lyrically and melodically, Mr. Bucchino's teases it with reassuring gentleness. Mr. LaChiusa made news last season on Broadway with two new musicals, "Marie Christine" (produced by Lincoln Center Theater) and "The Wild Party" (the Public Theater). Mr. Bucchino quietly labors on the cabaret circuit, offering up songs derived, in part, from his own unproduced musicals. Where Mr. LaChiusa has lately enjoyed working on broad canvases, Mr. Bucchino is very much a miniaturist.

Both, however, find themselves similarly ignored, dismissed or worse by a Broadway musical theater culture that prizes regurgitation over originality. Both also have new CD's that rescue them to some degree from this ignominy.

Mr. LaChiusa's are original cast albums. Though the pundits generally savaged "Marie Christine" and "The Wild Party," these discs (RCA Victor CD 09026-63593-20 and Decca Broadway 012 159 003-2, respectively) are much more than souvenirs of shows that closed quickly. Liberated from their own onstage pretensions (to say nothing of the attendant critical hostility), both musicals stand revealed on CD purely for what they are: fine, often ambitiously original, musical theater scores.

This is an accomplishment not to be taken lightly. Compositional originality remains quite an appreciable achievement for any musical, particularly following a Broadway season of revivals ad nauseum and a Tony Award-winner, "Contact" (also produced by Lincoln Center Theater), that got by without a note of original (or even live) music.

As the records demonstrate, both "Marie Christine" and "The Wild Party" had music of ambition and

originality in abundance. Interestingly, "Wild Party" also had a competing version last season, produced by the Manhattan Theater Club, that received similarly mixed reviews and now has been issued on CD (RCA Victor 09026-63695-2). Its eclectic, contemporary pop score -- by another talented young composer named Andrew Lipka -- strives for that very fashionability that Mr. LaChiusa's eschews. Both scores are unmistakably set in the musical theater tradition, but with purposeful twists. Where Mr. LaChiusa audaciously tried to recreate and reinvent authentic period songs of the 1920's with a contemporary bite, Mr. Lipka opts more ingratiatingly for of-the-moment power ballads and trendy pop grooves, everything from R-and-B to Latin to swing.

"Marie Christine" was even more iconoclastic musically than Mr. LaChiusa's "Wild Party." Yet "Marie Christine" had the magnificent Audra McDonald giving a performance many critics judged to be the production's only redeeming feature. How fascinating, then, to hear how little Ms. McDonald dominates "Marie Christine" on disc. Rather, her vocal and dramatic brilliance blend felicitously with the show's more underappreciated charms: the ingeniousness of Mr. LaChiusa's all-American, pan-operatic gumbo of a score and the exquisite orchestral settings concocted for that score by the arranger Jonathan Tunick, to say nothing of the show's many powerful supporting performances. All emerge on this record as integral contributors alongside Ms. McDonald.

In fact, the only question finally left unanswered by this CD is not Marie Christine's Medea-esque conundrum (how will she murder those babies come curtain?), but rather what in the world was this show's crime that so many saw fit to convict it out of hand?

The widespread critical vituperation that greeted Mr. LaChiusa last season, both for "Marie Christine" and for his fiercely imagined, often electrifying "Wild Party" score, reflected a disturbing backlash against a younger composer who dared to confound critical expectations.

An intriguing contrast to Mr. LaChiusa's bold, in-your-face method and the often nasty reactions it engendered is the widely neglected work of Mr. Bucchino, whose more retiring approach is lustrously displayed on his new album, "Grateful" (RCA Victor 09026-63594-2).

Mr. Bucchino writes in a style that might be described as Sondheim defanged. His melodies occasionally reveal astringent colors, yet they are painted with a harmonic palette significantly less complex -- and therefore more approachable, perhaps -- than Mr. Sondheim's, or Mr. LaChiusa's, for that matter. Moreover, as a lyricist, Mr. Bucchino, while aiming for tart-tongued pith, often ends up unrepentantly sweet. His polished, if self-consciously literary, lines delineate an emotional terrain best summed up in a phrase borrowed from Mr. Sondheim: "sorry-grateful," wistful reflections on what is most precious in life.

Not exactly Top-40 material nor the cutting edge of hip-hop cool. The realm of ambiguous emotions expressed without the armor of irony is a dangerously exposed place, and Mr. Bucchino exhibits a great deal of courage venturing there.

On "Grateful," an impressive range of singers take the trip with him -- from musical theater's Kristin Chenoweth and Patti Lupone to cabaret's David Campbell and Michael Feinstein to elder popsters like

Judy Collins and Art Garfunkel and even a couple of singing composers, Jimmy Webb and Adam Guettel. All of them deliver Mr. Bucchino's deeply reflective compositions with luminous, open-hearted sincerity.

The result is a record nearly as valuable, in its way, as the recordings that have preserved "Marie Christine" and "The Wild Party" for posterity. Like Mr. LaChiusa, Mr. Bucchino possesses a singular voice and an absolute integrity of expression. Of course, the musical theater stages of Broadway once had room for many such voices. Now, sorrowfully, one must be grateful simply for CD's that allow songwriters this diverse to at least leave something beyond fashion behind.

Photos: The cast of Michael John LaChiusa's iconoclastic musical "The Wild Party," at the Joseph Papp Public Theater. At right, the CD of John Bucchino's polished songs, "Grateful." (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times); (RCA Victor)