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MUSIC

MUSIC; A Neglected Master's Haunting Consolations

By BARRY SINGER

THERE is something so improbably consoling about the sadness at the heart of the best Vernon Duke melodies. This redemptive afterglow could be a consequence of sheer melodic sophistication. Duke knew how to construct a song, elegantly, with surpassing craft and harmonic flair. Yet the earned wisdom behind the sadness in his music transcends flair and craft and goes beyond sophistication.

It's not that the songs are even inherently unhappy. "Autumn in New York," "April in Paris" and "I Can't Get Started" -- to name Duke's most identifiable trio -- inhabit an emotional realm uncommon in the American popular song canon, that of dry-eyed ballads of unusual poignancy. The melancholy induced by these songs, while hauntingly seductive, is never glum.

Nor was Duke remotely a sad kind of guy. An aristocratic White Russian emigre turned Broadway songwriter, he seems to have had a rather good time of it all, dressing with notorious dash and, in a polyglot of languages, charming chorus girls and theatrical producers alike. Duke knew everybody, from his dearest friend, the Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev, to Picasso and Chanel, Balanchine and Jean Cocteau, and even an antic young serviceman whom Duke discovered during World War II, Sid Caesar.

Moreover, alongside his prodigious Broadway output, from the 1920's into the 1960's, Duke enjoyed a parallel career as a classical composer. Under his given Russian name, Vladimir Dukelsky, he turned out ballet scores, concertos, sonatas, art-song cycles and at least three symphonies for the world's most celebrated orchestras and conductors.

Yet he never caught on as a brand-name composer, certainly not in the sense that Prokofiev did, nor was he even on a par with his grandest Broadway peers. This misfortune is attributable in part to Duke's personality -- he could be a difficult collaborator and a less than ideal promoter of his classical work. Duke was also just plain unlucky, though he does seem to have chosen projects badly.

Ultimately, though, Vernon Duke wrote music for grownups. His songs sang most majestically about ambivalence, not the uplift that Tin Pan Alley consumers overwhelmingly preferred. His probing melodies brought out wonderfully melancholic resonances in lyricists who were by nature, if only on the page, rather jolly -- Ira Gershwin, Ogden Nash and even Yip Harburg. As a result, these songs speak perhaps more directly to our own self-doubts and longings in 1999 than they did in a 1930's

culture that looked to its songwriters for escape.

This year, a small flurry of Vernon Duke ventures, both live and recorded, offers an opportunity to reflect on this neglected yet somehow essentially contemporary composer who, like his other close friend George Gershwin, pioneered a "crossover" career before the concept even had a name.

Most illuminating is a just-released album of familiar and obscure Duke melodies exquisitely sung by the opera singer Dawn Upshaw. In March, City Center's "Encores" concert series will revive "The Ziegfeld Follies of 1936" with its legendary Vernon Duke-Ira Gershwin score. The kick-off to the current Duke boomlet, though, came on Jan. 10 with the world premiere of a long-lost Dukelsky piano concerto performed at Carnegie Hall by the pianist Scott Dunn and the American Composers Orchestra, led by Dennis Russell Davies.

The piano concerto resurfaces like some kind of Chekhovian keepsake; the story of its genesis is in fact a microcosm of the cycle of aspiration and disappointment that defined Duke's life and career. Duke was born in a Minsk railroad station on Oct. 10, 1903. He attended the Kiev Conservatory with Vladimir Horowitz, among others, wrote revolutionary arias (under duress) for the newly ascendant Communist Party and escaped with his family on the last ship out of Odessa in 1919 just ahead of the Soviet cavalry. After a stint playing cocktail piano in Constantinople, Duke arrived in New York in 1921, hoping to pursue a classical career but hungry to learn more about American popular music.

Composed at the instigation of the pianist Arthur Rubinstein in 1922, Duke's concerto was, in his words, "a one-movement, pianistically grateful, not too cerebral" piece. Rubinstein, upon hearing the finished work in New York, suggested that the 20-year-old Dukelsky take his concerto and "go to Paris," where a premiere would be easier for Rubinstein to mount. Dukelsky took this suggestion to heart; Rubinstein did not. The concerto was never performed.

Once in Paris, though, Duke did gain an introduction to Serge Diaghilev, the exalted Russian ballet impresario. Diaghilev listened to Duke's concerto and promptly commissioned a new ballet score from him. Dukelsky, the classical composer, was in business.

Vernon Duke, the Broadway songwriter, also found success after he returned to New York in 1929, but in sporadic bursts. Even his biggest Broadway hits were inconclusively received at first. "April in Paris," written with Harburg for a 1932 revue called "Walk a Little Faster," bombed so badly initially that Harburg harangued his collaborator in a Times Square restaurant, raging that Duke's melody for the song was only "all right for decadent Europeans." "Autumn in New York," composed on a whim by Duke in 1934 (both the music and the stunning, pensive words) as a "pendant to 'April in Paris,'" was interpolated later that year into a flop revue titled "Thumbs Up." Finally, even Duke's peerless "I Can't Get Started," an old unused "trunk tune" refurbished with an ideal Ira Gershwin lyric for the 1936 "Follies," was dismissed by Duke himself as just one component of "a dead score," until the jazz trumpeter Bunny Berrigan put "I Can't Get Started" on the Hit Parade to stay.

On her album "Dawn Upshaw Sings Vernon Duke" (Nonesuch), Ms. Upshaw restores to "April in Paris" and "Autumn in New York" their sly original verses, each an understated contrast to the heights

of rapture and depths of ennui that the songs present. In fact, Ms. Upshaw may be Duke's ideal interpreter. The only opera diva on the scene today with a classic pop singer's gift for phrasing and a torch singer's emotional fearlessness, she possesses the craftsmanship and the soul to take on the full range of Duke's songwriting talent. His bittersweet chromaticism, unexpected key modulations and dense harmonies are all sung with a crystalline simplicity that eloquently illuminates Duke's darker side.

Welcome as they are, these Vernon Duke standards are not the true stars of Ms. Upshaw's album, however. Far more revelatory are the obscure and even unpublished Duke songs that she and her producer, Tommy Krasker, have unearthed. It is a sad fact of Duke's career that following his greatest Broadway success, the joyous score he composed for "Cabin in the Sky" in 1940 -- including the ineffable "Taking a Chance on Love" -- Duke suffered a string of failures: more than seven book musicals and revues that throughout the 1940's, 50's and 60's died every possible critical and commercial death. But Ms. Upshaw proves that the caliber of music that Duke bestowed on these flops was not only astonishingly high but also preternaturally progressive.

"The Love I Long For," a ballad of conflicted Sondheim-like anguish, written with Howard Dietz for a forgotten 1944 musical version of "Sadie Thompson"; "Round About," a lush meditation on life's bittersweet circularity, created with Ogden Nash for the equally forgotten 1946 musical "Sweet Bye and Bye" -- these are just two of 10 lesser-known Duke songs that Ms. Upshaw resurrects. She is aided by an array of stellar orchestrators and the pianists Fred Hersch, Eric Stern and Richard Rodney Bennett. The album concludes with "Ages Ago," a wistful little gem composed for a 1957 Broadway production of Jean Anouilh's "Time Remembered" -- words and music by Vernon Duke, for whom, it is worth remembering, English was at best a third language, after Russian and French. The song includes these lines:

When evening comes, I live in the past,

Our past as I can see it,

Was much too full, too lovely to last,

And so be it.

In the end, according to his widow, Kay Ingalls, Duke conceded that he had perhaps endured some bad luck but said he had refused to surrender to it. He continued, until his death from cancer in 1969 at the age of 65, to write constantly: a terrific memoir ("Passport to Paris"), poetry (four published volumes in Russian), letters (a particular passion), classical music pieces and, of course, American popular songs.

It had been George Gershwin who, back in 1924, Americanized the name Vladimir Dukelsky, coining the moniker Vernon Duke. "Don't be scared about going low brow," Gershwin insisted then. "It will open you up."

Perhaps this is the quality of consolation we perceive in Duke's haunted music: the sound of a rigorously trained Russian composer allowing himself to open up, American style, his world weariness undermined, though never overpowered, by optimism. If so, there is in that nothing really sad at all.

Photo: Vernon Duke, left, and Ira Gershwin collaborating in 1936, the year Gershwin wrote the words for "I Can't Get Started." (Courtesy Kay Duke Ingalls)