

POP VIEW

Trying to Rescue Songs Once Held Dear

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THERE IS A DERELICT crooner who haunts subway platforms on the Upper West Side of Manhattan singing like Nat (King) Cole. Though the fellow misses the mark by a mile, his concertizing is as close as many people are likely to come to Cole's vocal artistry, above ground or below. The same may be said of the songs that Cole once sang so caressingly, the standards of the American popular song book. In the culture's clamorous subway roar, they are just an echo.

From the beginning of the 1920's until roughly the end of the 1950's, a number of ingenious musical craftsmen and at least a few geniuses named Kern, Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, Rodgers and Hart turned out what is now called the American

popular song -- music and lyrics that managed to be both wildly popular in their own times and esthetically timeless. Not since Elvis almost single-handedly supplanted them, though, have these songs been even remotely popular. Today the music survives far from its populist roots -- largely in recordings by opera stars and prepackaged special events broadcast on public television.

Now two of the nation's most influential classical music institutions have taken up the cause. Some months ago, Lincoln Center announced the establishment of "American Classical Song," a still-to-be-defined home for this music alongside the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet and Jazz at Lincoln Center. And on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, Carnegie Hall will continue its own "American Popular Song Celebration" (a program inaugurated two years ago with a series of Frank Sinatra tribute concerts) by honoring the real Nat (King) Cole.

The interest of these institutions is more than welcome. Both Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall can together shine a spotlight on this neglected music. Look what subscription audiences, grand surroundings, formal programming and aggressive marketing have done for jazz. Once similarly dismissed as moribund, jazz was formally embraced by Lincoln Center in 1996 and shortly thereafter by Carnegie Hall, enshrined as a classic American art form and reintroduced to a young new audience with smashing results. Evidently, both institutions now believe that they can do the same thing for the American popular song.

At Lincoln Center, the task of directing this operation has been assigned to Jonathan Schwartz, a popular New York radio personality for more than 25 years and the son of the composer Arthur Schwartz, whose contributions to the canon include "Dancing in the Dark" and "That's Entertainment." Like the choice of Wynton Marsalis to run the jazz program at Lincoln Center, the

selection of Mr. Schwartz is an astute one. His ready identification with both singers and listeners and his missionary zeal for the music should get this enterprise off to a running start.

Presenting both jazz and the American popular song as concert-hall fare is hardly unprecedented. Seventy-three years ago, the band leader Paul Whiteman promised to "make a lady out of jazz" with an orchestral concert of American popular music at Aeolian Hall in New York. The city's social and cultural elites were treated to a hodgepodge of Tin Pan Alley tunes and semiclassical novelties far removed from nightclubs and vaudeville houses. The evening was an utter disappointment, saved from disaster only by the appearance of the 25-year-old George Gershwin, performing for the first time "Rhapsody in Blue," his revolutionary blend of pop music and classical composition. American popular song's relationship to the concert hall has remained problematic ever since.

Part of the problem is the music itself. The American popular song is a populist invention, a music of the people that resists being squeezed into a tuxedo. Yet in its own way it defines the word elegant. Some jazz purists maintain that Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall effectively throttled jazz's development with their rigid institutional largess, rewarding the preservation of traditional repertory at the expense of experimentation. Trying to revive the American popular song in such rarefied precincts could also deprive the music of the energy underlying so much of its melodic and lyric invention, the energy of the streets. Yet for the young today, the street has come to mean the very antithesis of the American popular song.

How can Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center induce a new generation to attend to this music? The most obvious route has already been traveled with mixed results in the recording business: invite performers who speak to this generation

-- K. D. Lang, Sinéad O'Connor, Bono -- to sing the American popular song. Thus far, neither Lincoln Center in its preliminary planning nor Carnegie Hall has adopted this course.

Rather, they have both chosen to go with veterans, that fraternity of performers who have spent their lives sounding the depths of these songs, including Mark Murphy, Ruth Brown, Abbey Lincoln, Annie Ross and Carol Sloane, each of whom will participate in the Nat Cole celebration. Carnegie Hall will also present a few promising new talents: the sultry piano-playing vocalist Diana Krall, the boyish guitar-playing vocalist John Pizzarelli, the impeccably swinging singer Weslia Whitfield.

If Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall accomplish anything, it will be to inspire a new generation of composers and performers by developing a new audience for this music. The challenge these two institutions face is how to bring the past into the present, how to enrich the popular song legacy with a few new things worth singing, and a few new worthies to sing them. Not just preserve, protect and defend, but educate and inspire. Or as Mr. Schwartz puts it simply: "To introduce Mr. Nat (King) Cole and show them why."