

PROFILES JANUARY 5, 2004 ISSUE

## THE SOUL SINGER

*A mezzo with the most potent voice since Callas.*

**By Charles Michener**

December 28, 2003

**W**e are living, operatically speaking, in what might be called the Age of the Seconda Donna. During most of the four hundred years since opera originated in the Italian courts at the turn of the sixteenth century, the commanding singers have been prima donnas—sopranos who take on the roles of tragic heroines and, in many cases, make it a point to be as difficult as possible offstage. Attention is still automatically paid to the Violettas, Lucias, Toscas, Brünnhildes, Salomes, and various Leonoras, but recently an intrepid group of women—mezzo-sopranos, who are generally cast in supporting roles, and often as men—have created a brilliant, in many ways more interesting place for the spotlight to fall. Cecilia Bartoli fills concert halls with esoterica by Vivaldi, Gluck, and Salieri. Anne-Sofie von Otter has taken the songs of Grieg, Stenhammar, and Sibelius out of the Nordic mists. Olga Borodina has been the most powerful female voice in the Kirov Opera's resurrection of nineteenth-century Russian epics. Susan Graham has made a brilliant success by exploring *recherché* corners of the French art song. And in the great,

ongoing revival of Baroque operas and oratorios, many of them by Handel, the most luminous presence has been that of the American mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson.

None of these women have followed a conventional career path, but Hunt Lieberson is the arch-maverick. She has never had a long-term relationship with a recording label, and she has never had a press agent. Most of her opera appearances have been well outside the big arenas, in festivals devoted to close-knit ensemble performances and to innovative staging. (She has sung in only two productions at the Met—John Harbison’s “The Great Gatsby,” in 1999, and Berlioz’s “The Trojans,” last season, in which she made a notable success as Dido.) She prefers to work with directors and musicians with whom she is familiar and who share her spirit of adventure—small repertory groups like the Orchestra of Emmanuel Music, in Boston, which is conducted by Craig Smith. Their recording of two sacred Bach cantatas for solo voice and chamber orchestra—“Ich habe genug” (“I have enough”) and “Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut” (“My heart swims in blood”)—was released by Nonesuch this fall, and it has been widely acclaimed. I first heard Hunt Lieberson twelve years ago with another such group, the New York Festival of Song, at a benefit evening in Leonard Bernstein’s apartment, in New York. She sang several Spanish love songs, and when she had finished I went up to her and said, “You have one of the most beautiful voices I’ve ever heard. Who are you?”

“I’m a violist,” she replied, with the trace of a smile.

Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, who was known as Lorraine Hunt until her marriage four years ago to the composer Peter Lieberson, is forty-nine. She did not begin singing in earnest until the relatively late age of twenty-six, and before that she supported herself as a freelance violist. Craig Smith, whom she has known since her student days at the Boston Conservatory, in the early nineteen-

eighties, told me that he regards her training on an instrument that has generally played second fiddle to the violin as the key to what makes her so special as a singer. “A viola is a middle voice—it has to be alert to everything around it,” he said recently. “There’s something viola-like about the rich graininess of her singing, about her ability to sound a tone from nothing—there’s no sudden switching on of the voice, no *click*. And, like most violists, she is also self-effacing: without vanity as a singer. When we first performed the Bach cantatas, she just disappeared as a person.”

Two years ago, Hunt Lieberon sang the Bach cantatas in a monodrama staged by the iconoclastic director Peter Sellars, with whom she has collaborated on many projects over the years. For “Ich habe genug,” she wore the hospital garb—complete with medical tubes—of a woman who is terminally ill. At one point during “Mein Herze,” she was wrapped in a red sash that evoked a remorseful sinner’s torment. She dedicated the performances to the memory of her younger sister Alexis, who had died the previous year of cancer. (Shortly before her sister’s death, Hunt Lieberon herself had been diagnosed with breast cancer.) Many Bach purists in the audience protested that her voice alone would have been sufficient to serve the music and its theme of redemption through suffering. Others found the performances almost unbearably moving, as much for the beauty of the singing as for the intense conviction with which she conveyed the agony of suffering and, eventually, the ecstasy of spiritual release.

Hunt Lieberon told me that for her the staging and the singing were “inseparable,” and on the recording she seems almost visibly present. The opening aria of the first cantata is a kind of call-and-response for oboe d’amore and voice, and the reed instrument’s plaintive, slightly distant timbre is the perfect foil for the singer’s intimate, darkly gleaming mezzo, which has a vitality beyond the capacity of any wind player. With many singers of comparable virtuosity, one hears the words as something of an afterthought;

musical rapture comes before dramatic sense. With Hunt Lieberman, the two are joined, so that the sentiment of the words—by turns yearning, reflective, and joyous—gives the vocal line its urgency and its shape, each note a specific emotional character in the gentle undertow of Bach.

In the second cantata's first aria, the four words of the opening line seem, literally, to pry open Hunt Lieberman's throat as she sings: "Stumme Seufzer, stille Klagen" ("Mute sighs, silent cries"). Although the cantatas were written to celebrate certain Sundays and Feast days in the Lutheran liturgical calendar, they are also deeply private effusions that require the singer to be expressive without sounding rhetorical. Hunt Lieberman displays no sense of self-consciousness, no striving for artistic effect. Like the best pop and jazz vocalists—Billie Holiday, Patsy Cline, Joni Mitchell (whom Hunt Lieberman reveres)—she seems artless, creating an atmosphere so enveloping that the listener may feel like the only other person in the world, transported to a place beyond mere words and music.

**H**unt Lieberman and her husband live in the hills above Santa Fe, in an adobe-style house with a spectacular view down a long valley toward the city. When I visited there recently, she came out to greet me, preceded by a large brown-and-white dog who ran over to the car and nuzzled my leg as I got out. He was a friendly stray that they had adopted, she explained. Hunt Lieberman is a handsome, wholesome-looking woman, with an open manner that betrays her upbringing as a California girl. As we walked into the house, she spoke about how she had been drawn to this austere, arid place more than two years earlier. "I'm a Pisces," she said. "This is a fire landscape, and fire landscapes need water."

The house was airy and uncluttered, and Hunt Lieberman led me on a tour, pointing out a shelf of family photographs, including one that showed her at

her first piano recital, when she was six or seven, a pretty girl with long, blond curls and a timid smile. One room contained a shrine belonging to her husband, who practices Tibetan Buddhism. He was across the hall, with the door closed, orchestrating a new piano concerto that the Minnesota Orchestra was to perform in a few weeks. He came out briefly, chatted about the symbolism of the objects in the shrine, and went back to work on his concerto.

Hunt Lieberson had just returned home after a demanding period of work. She had spent August in England, at the Glyndebourne Festival, where she performed in a revival of Peter Sellars's production of Handel's oratorio "Theodora." Then, in September, at the London Proms, she sang the title role in Britten's dramatic solo cantata "Phaedra," and Jocasta in Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex." "Two suicides in one night!" she said, with a laugh. "That's right up my alley."

We sat in her kitchen, and she spoke about growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her father taught music in local high schools and, later, at a junior college, and he also organized and conducted community performances of operas, oratorios, and "lots of Gilbert and Sullivan." Her mother—"a natural actress with a warm contralto"—was a prominent local soloist who became a voice teacher. Lorraine's childhood was dominated by her father. "He was very controlling and, at the same time, he couldn't seem to control his own anger," she said. "He was single-minded in his desire to develop my gifts. I was the first child, the eldest of four, and he started me very early at the piano and then the violin. He made me practice everything excruciatingly slowly so that there wouldn't be any mistakes. Mistakes were not a natural phenomenon in our house. I was so directed by my father that it took many years to even begin to find my own voice. But it was partly because of this upbringing that I came to care so deeply about *genuine* expression."

She acknowledged that she shares her father's tendency to control things. "I

was very shy, a good swimmer, and a bright, model student,” she said, “but there was definitely a fiery temperament there, too. Saturdays were spent mostly with private lessons, so I didn’t get to go to a lot of birthday parties, but there was one party I’ve never forgotten. A parent put a waltz on, and the kids began dancing. For some reason, I tried to choreograph everyone, and I got really high-powered about it. Finally, the birthday girl’s mother took me aside and said gently, ‘Maybe you should let everybody just do what they want.’ It was a terrible moment of self-awareness.”

There were also intensely pleasurable moments of self-expression. “When no one was around,” she said, “I would put on the record player and dance by myself. During the ‘Grand Canyon Suite,’ I wrapped myself in the living-room curtains to dramatize a storm. One of my favorite records was a Harry Belafonte album. I had no idea where the music came from—nobody told me it was Caribbean. It was just incredibly primal. A song like ‘Dolly Dawn’ touched a gut feeling. It was scary and exhilarating at the same time.”

When she was about twelve, she switched from the violin to the viola. “It suited me better,” she said. “I wasn’t very ambitious at the time, and I liked being the inner voice in a group.” She began playing in a youth orchestra, and at high school, in Orinda, sang in the chorus. Her first solo was in Vivaldi’s “Gloria.” In her junior year, she transferred to Berkeley High School. “They had an amazing music program—an orchestra and three choirs,” she said. “I sang solos in Mozart’s C-Minor Mass and had a wonderful time as Golde in ‘Fiddler on the Roof.’ ” During our interviews, Hunt Lieberson occasionally broke into song—not to illustrate a point but simply to embellish the conversation with a little music. Now the memory of that high-school performance prompted her to sing the opening measures of “Do You Love Me? Do I What?” in a seductive Yiddish accent.

She went on to San Jose State, as a double major in voice and viola studies,

paying her tuition from earnings she made as a violist in the San Jose Symphony. Although she was cast as Mother Marie in a student production of Poulenc's "Dialogues of the Carmelites," she was so busy as a freelance violist that she dropped her voice studies. "I didn't feel close to opera," she said, "particularly since my father had made me sit and listen to the Met's Saturday-afternoon broadcasts, sometimes with a score on my lap. Between that and the bad radio reception and some of the wobbly singers, I was mostly turned off. But Puccini's 'Suor Angelica' always made me cry, and it still does."

After college, she fell in love with a "more worldly" young man who played jazz guitar, and the two of them had a lounge act in Los Gatos. "He played the guitar, and I sang and played the viola," she said. "We did standards, stuff by Chicago, Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder, Jobim. I had no far-reaching goals. I just enjoyed singing the songs and playing."

She and some friends formed a quartet that specialized in contemporary music. The group's name, Novaj Kordoĵ—Esperanto for "new strings"—was suggested by the Bay Area composer Lou Harrison. "We were all so busy," Hunt Lieberson said, "that the only time we had to rehearse a new piece, like George Crumb's 'Black Angels,' was at seven-thirty in the morning." When her boyfriend was arrested in Mexico for buying marijuana, she visited him at a minimum-security jail in Mazatlán. She joined a group of women who bribed the officials so that they could move in with their husbands and boyfriends in shacks they helped put up on the prison grounds. "Those were really formative years," she said. "I was learning all that music, and I was learning about love. I also had a kind of spiritual awakening after reading 'Autobiography of a Yogi,' by Paramahansa Yogananda. The story of his spiritual journey set off sparks of recognition. Things were lighting up."

In the late seventies, she became the principal violist in the Berkeley Free Orchestra, conducted by Kent Nagano. Someone came up with the idea of

organizing a performance of “Hänsel and Gretel” for the prisoners in San Quentin, and she volunteered for the part of Hänsel. “It was my first serious singing in six years,” she said. “I found a short-haired wig at a Goodwill store, and I put on a pair of ripped pants and a big flannel shirt, because I couldn’t figure out how to flatten my boobs. The place was pretty scary. Afterward, I took my wig off and let my hair down. Walking through the yard, I heard one inmate say to another, ‘Shit! I thought that was a dude with a big ass!’ ”

By then, Hunt Lieberman had broken up with the jazz guitarist, and she met a French-horn player in the Vancouver Symphony. When he landed a job with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, she moved east with him. “I went to Boston with the intention of freelancing on the viola,” she said, “and finding a voice teacher on the side.”

**H**unt Lieberman began her vocal studies in a category—that of lyric soprano—in which she was not completely comfortable. After an unsuccessful audition for the Juilliard School, she was accepted into the opera program at the Boston Conservatory. She continued to freelance as a violist, and one of her gigs was with the orchestra at Emmanuel Church, in Back Bay, which had a substantial music program under Craig Smith. “From the very beginning,” Smith told me, “it was clear that she was an incredible musician—no one came to rehearsal better prepared.”

In the early eighties, Peter Sellars had made the Boston area a mecca for enterprising operagoers with his radically updated productions of Handel (“Orlando” set at the Kennedy Space Center, for instance). Sellars and Smith were looking for someone to sing Sesto, the vengeance-crazed son of Pompey, in a new staging of “Julius Caesar,” and Smith suggested Lorraine Hunt. The audition took place in his office, and, as Sellars later remembered it, “She started singing, and you were in the middle of this raging forest fire. Certain



things were a *little* out of control, but what you got was sheer power, sheer concentrated energy.”

Hunt Lieberman’s portrayal of Sesto, in 1985 at the Pepsico Summerfare festival, in Purchase, New York, was her breakthrough performance. Sellars had transported Handel’s *Egypt of 48 B.C.* to a present-day, ersatz Middle East setting and, in a prescient touch, transformed Sesto into something resembling an Uzi-toting terrorist. Today, the conceit, viewed on a laser-disk recording of a performance that was given five years later, in Dresden, seems more than a little forced and, at times, sophomoric. But not when Sesto is onstage. As the boy searches for the killer of his father, he is in constant, almost deranged motion, both vocally and physically. Yet Hunt Lieberman’s fix on his single-minded rage is so strong that whenever she is singing the wackiness drops away.

Stephen Wadsworth, another director with whom Hunt Lieberman feels a close affinity, saw the production in Purchase. He recalled his first impression of her in *Opera News*, in 1996: “She went at the role of Sesto hammer and tongs. . . . She sang with a sort of raw abandon, honoring all at once Sellars’s distinctive choreography of torment, Handel’s music, and Sesto’s own private hell. She was absolutely in the moment. Everyone in New York wanted to know who she was.” The countertenor Drew Minter, who sang Ptolemy, credits Sellars with spotting the paradox that audiences find so thrilling in Hunt Lieberman: “He recognized her elemental, grounded quality, and at the same time he encouraged her wild freedom.” Peggy Pearson, the superlative oboist on the recent recording of the Bach cantatas, played in the orchestra of that production of “Julius Caesar,” and she remembers the emotional impact the performances had on the singer. “Many times when Lorraine came offstage,” Pearson said, “she was in tears.”

“After that,” Hunt Lieberman told me, “the singing took over. The final sign was in 1988, when I came home from a Thanksgiving weekend and discovered

that my viola had been stolen. I had asked friends to feed the cat, and one of them had left the key in the mailbox. The burglar's calling card was a cigarette butt snuffed out on the rug. I had had the viola for more than a decade, and of course I was terribly upset. Even more upsetting was the fact that I had let the insurance run out, and I couldn't afford to buy another one. I told the police and checked all the pawnshops, but the viola never turned up. I still think about it, especially when I go to a concert and hear something that I used to play and love. I always think that one day, when I can't sing anymore, I'll take up the viola again—if my fingers can still move.”

**T**he next decade was immensely productive. With the conductor Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Hunt Lieberson participated in a series of Handel opera and oratorio recordings on Harmonia Mundi—among them “Susanna,” “Theodora,” “Ariodante,” and “Messiah.” Critics compared her blazing directness on an album of Handel arias to that of the great English mezzo Janet Baker. (The tragic waters that Hunt Lieberson stirs in her rendition of “He Was Despised,” from “Messiah,” make Baker's celebrated version sound almost stolid.)

She deepened her collaboration with Sellars, notably with a Donna Elvira in “Don Giovanni,” in 1987, that turned a character who can seem a tiresome whine into a harrowing, haunted figure. Nine years later, she sang the role of the gravely impassioned Irene, a leader of persecuted early Christians, in Sellars's “Theodora,” at Glyndebourne. Her magnificent Act III invocation “Lord, to Thee each Night and Day,” as seen on a tape released by Kultur, has the visionary quality of Falconetti as St. Joan in Carl Dreyer's silent movie “The Passion of Joan of Arc,” which many film buffs regard as the ultimate cinematic performance. She worked extensively with the Mark Morris Dance Group, singing in the premières of two of the choreographer's masterpieces, Purcell's “Dido and Aeneas” and Handel's “L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato.” In a

piece in this magazine, Joan Acocella wrote that she sang “Erlkönig,” in Morris’s “Bedtime,” a setting of Schubert songs, as though it were a “national emergency.” In 1993, she triumphed in Paris (and later at the Brooklyn Academy of Music) as the heroine of what may be the most extravagantly splendid of French Baroque operas, Charpentier’s “Médée,” with Les Arts Florissants, conducted by William Christie. The following year, she sang the title role in a production of “Carmen” at the Boston Lyric Opera—a performance that is remembered by the relatively few who saw it as one of the most riveting Carmens of our time.

She was forty-five when she made her Met début, in 1999, as Myrtle Wilson, the mistress of Tom Buchanan, in “The Great Gatsby.” John Harbison wrote the part of Myrtle specially for Hunt Lieberman, and in two juicy scenes she gave the opera a complexity and an earthiness that it otherwise lacked. Last February, she had her biggest operatic triumph in New York, with a performance of Dido in “The Trojans” that had critics grasping at synonyms for “noble” and “luminous.”

“Artistically, the nineties were wonderful,” she told me. “Personally, they were somewhat tortured.” In 1988, she had started living with a composer. The relationship broke up three years later, when she discovered that he was seeing other women. “It was shattering,” she said. “And at some point the stress of work and life damaged my immune system. I had insomnia. I would get these respiratory infections and end up singing while I was sick, which, of course, depleted me even more. But I had a lot of good life-saving therapy, and when I met Peter, in 1997, I was content with myself. Of course, finding your heart-mate is a really good boost to your immune system.”

Peter Lieberman had never heard of Lorraine Hunt before Stephen Wadsworth sent him a tape of her voice, in 1996. They were considering what voices would be right for various roles in Lieberman’s first opera, “Ashoka’s Dream,” for the

Santa Fe Opera. “Ashoka’s Dream” is based on the life of an emperor of India in the third century B.C. who renounced brutality after converting to Buddhism. Wadsworth thought that Hunt might be ideal for the part of Ashoka’s second wife, Triraksha. Peter Lieberon, who is the son of Goddard Lieberon, the longtime head of Columbia Records, and Vera Zorina, a stage and film actress of the nineteen-thirties and forties, a noted ballerina, and a former wife of George Balanchine, had grown up at the pinnacle of artistic life in New York. He had become a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism during his graduate-student days at Columbia. Years later, he moved with his wife and three daughters to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he became the director of the Shambhala training and meditation program.

“I told Peter that Lorraine was very picky about what she takes on,” Wadsworth recalled. “Peter listened to the tape of her voice and said, ‘She’s so beautiful!’ He called her up, and after the two talked for an hour, Lorraine called me and said, ‘He’s so attractive!’ And they had only heard each other’s voice!” The attraction blossomed during the opera’s run, and, after a difficult period of family separation and divorce, they were married, and she joined her name to his. (“If his name had been Jones, I wouldn’t have added it,” she told me, laughing.)

“During Lorraine’s performances, I often find myself in the role of what in Tibetan is called a *kusung*,” Peter Lieberon said to me. “It refers to a person who protects the body of a teacher. The *kusung* has to be awake to everything about the teacher—to the temperature of the environment. Lorraine is a true performer, which I’m not, and she gets a lot of energy from being onstage. One reason she’s so compelling is that she’s completely synchronized. Her voice, the movements of her body—her *intention*—are all of a piece. Many artists try to graft that genuineness onto a performance, but, with Lorraine, it’s a way of being. There is, of course, a tremendous amount of stress involved. The greater the escalation of appreciation for what she does, the more pressure she’s under to meet the public’s expectations.”

Drew Minter remembers that his old friend suffered a recurrence of insomnia the night before she was to give the Saturday matinée broadcast performance of “The Trojans” at the Met. “She got absolutely no sleep, and the next morning she was wired,” he said. “She agonized over whether to have the singer who was covering for her put on call, but then she decided not to set off an alarm. She went out and gave one of her best Didos. It was awesome—she just *sang* into the fatigue. If she’s coming at it from a place of vulnerability, she doesn’t try to cover up—she uses it. She always connects from where she is.”

On occasion, Hunt Lieberon’s artistic focus has been so intense that it strikes terror in her colleagues. Stephen Wadsworth remembers a matinée of “Xerxes” at City Opera during which the orchestra’s tempo in her final aria wasn’t exactly what she wanted. “She went into such a rage that she started rocketing upstage and downstage and singing like a woman possessed,” Wadsworth said. “I thought she was going to knock down the set. Afterward, George Manahan”—the conductor—“said, ‘Boy, she can be really scary!’ ”

This fall, I watched Hunt Lieberon prepare for Debussy’s “Pelléas et Mélisande,” an opera she was tackling for the first time. She was to give three concert performances as Mélisande, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in Boston and New York. Two weeks before the first performance, I met her in the New York apartment of the French vocal coach Denise Massé, with whom she had worked on “The Trojans.” Mélisande is one of the most challenging heroines in opera—a girl/woman/siren/victim, with a troubled but obscure personal history, who expresses herself mostly in brief outbursts. Hunt Lieberon remarked that Debussy had begged his cast to “please forget that you are singers,” and Massé replied, “Yes, but you must also never lose the core vibration of your voice.” Over the next several hours, the two women spent as much time discussing the enigma of Mélisande as they did the nuances involved in bringing her to life. Was she a runaway victim from Bluebeard’s

castle, as some scholars have suggested? “Hmm, I’ll have to think about that,” Hunt Lieberson said. Was she a hopeless liar? “For her, it’s a matter of survival.” Should the singer flip the French “r”s or sing them as one would say them? “I like the naturalness of singing the way one speaks,” Hunt Lieberson said. Massé convinced her that a flipped “r” would carry better in a big hall. Afterward, Massé said, “Lorraine is like Callas in her determination to dig as deeply as possible into the character—to find all the grain in the wood.”

A few days later, Hunt Lieberson worked with her voice teacher, Herbert Burtis, in his studio in southwestern Massachusetts. As she warmed up with a series of scales, I noticed how she opened up her whole body, bending slightly at the knees and spreading her arms, to create a sound that seemed to travel from the bottom of her feet straight up through her head. She spent five minutes on Mélisande’s first, extremely rapid utterance—“*Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas!*”—in order to give each vowel the appropriate terrified resonance. “I know you’re supposed to be emotionally frail,” Burtis told her, “but you don’t want to sound *vocally* frail. Make sure you know where the vowel is going to sound in your head before you sing the consonant so that the consonant doesn’t detract from the sound.” She applied herself to the challenge, and as they went through the score, repeating phrase after phrase, the words and the music seemed to come together with an ever greater presence that filled the studio.

The next day, she travelled to Boston for three full days of rehearsals in Symphony Hall with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a superb cast of international soloists, conducted by Bernard Haitink. As I listened through all the starting and the stopping at one of the sessions, she seemed to be the only still point onstage, going deeper and deeper into the personality of the mysterious character in a way that recalled what Mary Garden, the first Mélisande, described when she first heard Debussy play the score on the piano, before the opera’s première, in 1902. “Listening to that music,” Garden wrote,

“I seemed to become someone else, someone inside of me whose language and soul were akin to mine.”

Hunt Lieberson sang her first *Mélisande* on an evening when many listeners in Symphony Hall left before the end, apparently more anxious about the outcome of the deciding game between the Red Sox and the Yankees for the American League championship than they were about the consequences of *Mélisande*'s illicit love for Pelléas. That night, her *Mélisande* was suggestively alive. Four nights later, in Carnegie Hall, her performance seemed even more richly filled out. Backstage, she was clearly elated and was full of praise for her colleagues—especially Haitink, for bringing out the score's “heartbreaking” qualities. When I complimented her on how beautiful she looked in an off-white dress with a lacy, beaded top, she laughed and said, “I got it at a Latino store in Boston six years ago. It cost ninety-nine dollars.”

A few weeks ago, Hunt Lieberson gave a recital with the pianist Peter Serkin at Jordan Hall, in Boston, performing a program that she was to bring a week later to Zankel Hall, in New York. Because of a winter storm that dumped nearly two feet of snow on the city within twenty-four hours, there were many empty seats in the auditorium when she and Serkin walked onstage, but she showed no signs of dismay as she took her place in front of the piano. After the applause ended, she stood perfectly still, her eyes cast down, holding the room in silence. Finally, she raised her head, and when the opening sentiment of Brahms's “Unbewegte laue Luft”—“Motionless balmy air, deep calm of nature”—emerged, it seemed as though she had already begun to sing, long before we heard her.

Over the next two hours, Hunt Lieberson demonstrated the full range of her powers in a program with wildly disparate musical styles and moods that were unified by her unflagging conviction. She followed the sombre nineteenth-

century Romanticism of three Brahms songs with excerpts from Handel's Baroque cantata "La Lucrezia," in which the violated heroine vows vengeance with hell-raising ferocity. When she called on the gods to punish the Roman who raped her—"Incontri larve, ruine aspetti" ("May he meet only with worms and ruins")—the intensity of her pathos and rage became almost unbearable. From there, she entered the Impressionist world of Debussy's "Chansons de Bilitis," three songs that describe the wonder and the sadness of a young woman's sexual awakening. After the intermission, she sang "Rilke Songs," settings of five of the poet's "Sonnets to Orpheus," which were composed for her by her husband. The songs, by turns rapt, erotic, and fierce, could be heard as a portrait of an intensely complementary marriage, the delicately spiky piano writing urging the singer into one voluptuous passage after another. The composer's choice of texts pointed up his wife's strengths, especially in the final song, when the poet enjoins his muse, "And if the earthly has forgotten you, / Whisper to the silent earth: I flow. / To the rushing water say: I am."

Hunt Lieberson closed the program with three songs by Mozart, including "Abendempfindung" ("Evening Thoughts"), a conventionally sentimental song that she elevated to a place of grave sorrow, and a Masonic cantata, "You who honor the Creator of the Infinite Universe," in which she turned a didactic plea for universal brotherhood into a declaration of radiant optimism. She took the humanitarian theme to a more personal level in her encores: Schumann's "Widmung" ("Dedication"), an anthem of love to his wife, Clara; the spiritual "Deep River"; and "Vedrai, carino," from "Don Giovanni," which she introduced as one of her favorite Mozart arias. After explaining that Zerlina sings it to soothe her husband, Masetto, who has been beaten up by the Don, she gave her own translation of the text: "What a wonderful remedy I am going to give you. It's all natural, and the pharmaceutical companies don't know how to make it." She placed her hand over her heart, paused, and choked up. "Feel it beating," she went on. "Touch me here." Zerlina's aria is usually sung as a coy



invitation to conjugal coupling. Hunt Lieberson transformed it into an infinitely tender lullaby. ♦

*Published in the print edition of the January 5, 2004, issue.*