‘From Moscow to Hollywood: Songs from the Movies” at Russian Chamber Art Society

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Even today, a trip from Moscow to Hollywood is not one to be taken on the spur of the moment. What must it have meant for those in the early years of the last century, artists and musicians seeking acceptance and success and a new life in a new land, or knowledge, connections and inspiration to take back with them? And once they got here—and once, and if, they returned—what had they gained; what had they learned? And how did the products of their experiences entertain and enrich the world they left behind, and the one yet to come?

Last Friday evening at the Austrian embassy, the Russian Chamber Art Society set about exploring these questions musically with a program of works by eighteen composers, eight of them Russian-born and ten of them American with Russian roots. Introducing the concert, the Society’s Richard Selden offered a rapid-fire overview, at once sweeping, scholarly and “insider”-worthy, of the historical context framing the music we were about to hear and the composers who wrote it or rose to fame alongside them.

From Thirties-era Russian film music to *From Russia With Love*, *Funny Girl*, and *Chicago*, the program provided an alternately dramatic and lyrical, tuneful and snappy look back at some of the films we loved, and a few that many of us—at least here in the U.S.—never knew. For those in the audience of Russian education or heritage, they were warmly welcomed as old friends.

The program began with the first of several improvisations by pianist and accompanist Genadi Zagor this one, by Isaac Dunayevsky, “one of the greatest Soviet composers of all time” (Wikipedia), on *A Merry Song Makes My Heart Light and Jolly* from Grigorii Aleksandrov’s 1934 film *Jolly Fellows*. A peppy, emphatic piece; Zagor gave it its due.

Soprano Carmen Balthrop, whose alluring gowns would complement baritone’s crisp onyx bow-tied tux, came onstage for *Anyuta’s Song*, from the same film. Balthrop seemed to be in her element here, conveying the sweet excitement of young love, the voice shifting effortlessly from lilting and natural, to luscious, to crystalline.

Timothy Mix clearly enjoyed his opening “Song About the Captain,” also by Dunayevsky and from the 1936 film *Fifteen Year Old Captain*, directed by Vassily Lebedev-Kumach. Enacted with equal parts exaggerated swagger and mortified embarrassment, this tale of a valiant seaman who “survived ’bout fifteen wrecks” and “Skipped some deadly shark attacks” but was too shy to declare his love to “his crush,” ended—Mix’s ringing asseveration accompanied by an assured smile—on a victorious note.

Which gave way to a familiar one: “Play it again, Genadi,” said Mix. And Zagor did, his sound smooth, open and clear, his fingers caressing the iconic chords of *Casablanca*’s “As Time Goes By,” rubato-ing its rhythms, and concluding with a slowly ascending arpeggio.
If Genadi got rubato, Balthrop “got rhythm,” as she displayed in her next number, the George and Ira Gershwin jazz standard danced by Gene Kelly in Vincente Minnelli’s An American in Paris (1951). Though the volume of her voice was notably diminished, as it would be in much of the rest of the concert—however popular crossover vocalists, their rarity is a matter not just of personal choice, but of the differences in vocal production between classical and jazz or pop singing, and the strain inherent in switching from one to another—Balthrop put the song across with satisfying sass, her limber hands and body and expressive face expertly communicating its mood.

Given the foregoing, I wouldn’t be surprised if the title of the next one, “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off,” brought the singer a measure of rueful amusement. If it did, the attitude was an ideal entree to the song, and may even have added fuel to the performance camaraderie that recalled (lacking only the ice skates) Fred and Ginger’s, in the Gershwin-scored Shall We Dance (1937) whence it came. Balthrop and Mix reacted to each other with choreographed precision both physically and physiognomically, the characters’ hilarious mutual exasperation subtly complemented by the performers’ obvious mutual appreciation and enjoyment.

Zagor returned with his own improvisation, this time on “And I Am Walking, Treading Moscow Streets,” from Andrey Petrov’s score for Georgiy Daneliya’s Walking the Streets of Moscow (1963), giving said walk a convivial bounce and a gratifying, climactic conclusion. The mood carried through in the next song, if only metaphorically and intermittently. “No Bad Weather in Nature,” also by Petrov, from Eldar Ryazanov’s An Office Affair (1977), tells us that, whatever the elements, “You should take them gratefully ‘as is’.” The song offered what filmgoers may have come to think of almost as Russian rhythm and melody defined, melancholy, heavy on the downbeat and minor-keyed. It was sung by Mix with a lovely, nicely modulated tone and a rich, deep bass in the final notes, whose words belie the philosophy of the preceding verses’ refrain: “But there’s no stripping love off one’s soul.”

Balthrop took up the theme in a somewhat more positive vein with Petrov’s “Romance About Romance,” from Bella Ahmadulina’s The Cruel Romance (1984), and Jerome Kern’s “Can’t Help Loving That Man of Mine,” from the 1951 film (and the 1927 Jerome Kern / Oscar Hammerstein II musical it was based on), Show Boat. The first number had the unfortunate double disadvantage of Balthrop’s having to read the Russian lyrics from the score and, in that it was more pop than classical, to sing in half-voice. She came back, dramatically if not vocally, in the second, with a quiet, bluesy expressiveness and a soulful mien.

Breaking the spell, Mix seized the stage as he burst into a song that is virtually guaranteed to do both: Nicholas Brodsky and Sammy Kahn’s “Be My Love,” immortalized by Mario Lanza in The Toast of New Orleans (1950). The song having been transposed to baritone range, leaving it lacking some of the thrills and chills that have come to be associated with its anguished/heroic top notes, Mix nonetheless seized the mood of the piece, giving it his all with a clarion top note and ending by gazing with intent ardor at a woman in the front row.

The program’s first half concluded with a humorous piece in Russian by Alexander Zatsepin, from the 1969 film Angel in a Skullcap by Leonid Derbenev. Balthrop was an exquisitely aggravating, infuriating foil to Mix’s Odysseus, who “Can’t stay home” and is “always lusting to wander.” The Russian-speaking audience members reveled in the nuances while the rest of us happily joined them in appreciative bursts of applause each time Mix rolled his eyes, our cue that he was singing the refrain that got funnier each time, “I wish you’d go home, Penelope.” Zagor was a full partner, both musically and mentally, engaging in the drollery with firm, well-placed bangs and glissandi galore.

The second half of the program, as the first, began with an improvisation: this one, by contrast, on a film song well known not only to Americans, but throughout much of the world: Harold Arlen’s “Over the Rainbow” from Victor
Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Here, the variations were intricate and not easily traced; it took a while for the melody to appear in a recognizable form. When it did, it was in a contemplative mode.

Breaking the spell once more, to rousing effect, Mix strode in, now attired in an open-collar black shirt with rolled-up sleeves and suspenders, and let forth a resounding rendition of Lionel Bart’s “From Russia with Love,” from the 1963 movie of the same name. Communing with Zagor between verses through body language as the latter coolly, elegantly improvised, Mix left the audience cheering at the end with another ringing high note. The two were equally attuned in the next two numbers: Isaac Schwartz’s intense tale of passion unrequited, “The Woman on the Porch,” from a 1985 film by Bulat Okudzhava; and Alexander Zatsepin’s “A Hoodoo Island,” from Leonid Derbenev’s *The Diamond Arm* (1968), whose breakneck pace and Mix’s stunning skill in articulating the Russian words caused many in the audience to erupt in whoops and cheers.

Mix joined with Balthrop in Alexandra Pahmutova’s “As We Were Young,” from Nicolai Dobronravov’s *My Love in Sophomore Year* (1976), whose top notes were pure, rich, and beautifully focused. At the end, the two embraced, contemplating bygone youth (“We have played the first half-time throughout/ Realized one thing only too well”) with tender regret. Her “People” (Jule Styne and Bob Merrill, from William Wyler’s 1968 film *Funny Girl*) solo was less effective and affecting, but ended with a full top note, while the Russian-language “I Like You Not Being Obsessed With Me” by Michael Tariyverdiev, from Marina Tsvetayeva’s *The Irony of Fate* (1975) and “So What” by Alexander Zatsepin, from El-Registan’s *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* were particularly notable for Zagor’s pearly descending arpeggios. The pianist next took the spotlight for his own robust “Improvisation on ‘Slav Girl’s Farewell’,” a military march (original music by Vasily Agapkin for a Soviet-era film, *The Cranes Are Flying*), which was enthusiastically received.

And what would a military march be without a marching band? Up next: Mix, whose jaw-dropping, spitfire articulation of Harold Hill’s tongue-twisting paean to “Seventy-Six Trombones,” from Morton DaCosta and Meredith Willson’s Oscar-winning 1962 film *The Music Man* earned him (and the nimble-fingered Zagor) another round of cheers from the audience.

From seventy-six to the sassiest sex: Balthrop and Mix really mixed it up with John Kander and Fred Ebb’s “All That Jazz” from Rob Marshall’s Oscar-sweeping 2002 film *Chicago*. Seated diagonally across and several yards behind her, Mix responded at turns teasingly, tauntingly, suggestively or lasciviously to her cryptically (and perhaps irresistibly) come-hither come-ons. Both of them were in perfect synch, rhythmically and emotionally, flicking the tiny stick of figurative dynamite between them, each holding a slowly burning match.

Those matches would light a slow-burning fire in the final programmed selection: “(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life,” Frankie Previte, John DeNicola, and Donald Markowitz’s celebrated finale to the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*. Singing the first verse seated, Balthrop and Mix took each other’s hands, slowly rose, walked down to the front of the stage, and, gazing into each other’s eyes, danced to the penultimate and final refrains—Swayze and Grey, still moving in synch, still deeply in love; now, grown older and wiser. After all the songs of young love gone awry, it was touching to have the program end as it began: with a song of its promise; of its possibilities now, quite possibly, fulfilled.
As an encore, Balthrop joined Mix in the rapturous duet from George and Ira Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, “Bess, You Is My Woman Now.” Here, to an extent, the promise of possibilities for both singers was fulfilled: Mix’s voice, well suited to the song’s range and vocal demands, rang out easily, describing Porgy’s passion and delight, while Balthrop’s top notes were clear, sure, and lyrical. As they warmly embraced, they took in their arms not only each other’s characters but their own, and the composer’s and lyricist’s. A smooth and successful landing for the flight that minimized in hindsight whatever minor turbulence there may have been and, judging from the standing ovation by the entire audience, left the “passengers” looking forward to the next one.

*From Moscow to Hollywood: Songs from the Movies* played for one night only on Friday, April 17, 2015 at The Russian Chamber Art Society performing at the Austrian Embassy- 3524 International Court, in Washington, DC.

Running Time: One hour and 50 minutes, with one intermission.

RATING: