

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Singers grasp nuances of French vocal works

CYNICS claim the great tradition of French singing is a dead art. If one samples recordings of 65 years ago, one might be inclined to agree. Certainly the clear articulation of the text, flawless technical control and subtle expression of emotion — once the expected norm — are simply beyond the ability and patience of most modern singers. When I discussed this with tenor Benjamin Butterfield after Sunday's salon concert at the Arts and Letters Club, he repeated the dictum of his teacher, Léopold Simoneau: "The secret to French music is that it's just like Italian, but with 40 per cent more nuance."

Happily, the sold-out matinee by Butterfield with soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian and pianist Stuart Hamilton held out hope for the jaded that a renaissance may have begun. Though their voices differ in size and warmth, both singers possess good diction, excellent intonation, flexibility and the rare control to taper the ends of notes rather than break them off with a violent glottal release.

In the manner of a *belle époque* salon concert, other musicians were invited to participate. Pianist Eldon Eng opened the show with a restrained performance of Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso*. Eng has a fine technique and beautiful sound, but the stiff keyboard action on the 2.7-metre Yamaha made quick articulation of repeated notes almost impossible.

The vocal part of the first half comprised Massenet's rarely heard duet



MUSIC REVIEW

BENJAMIN BUTTERFIELD, ISABEL BAYRAKDARIAN AND STUART HAMILTON
Arts and Letters Club on Sunday

Reviewed by Alan Horgan

Ouvre tes yeux bleus and solo *mélodies* by Paladilhe, Bizet, Gounod, Delibes and Fauré. Butterfield showed truly astonishing vocal control, even altering the speed and amplitude of his vibrato for expressive purposes in Paladilhe's *Psyché* and Gounod's *Venise*.

Bayrakdarian made the biggest impression on the audience in Bizet's exotic *L'adieu de l'hôtesse arabe* and Delibes' lively *Les filles de Cadiz*. Poignant and seductive in the former, she was ideally coquettish in the latter, without resorting to vamping or vulgarity.

Pianists Boris Zarankin and Inna Perkis began the second half with three movements from the original four-hand version of Fauré's *Dolly Suite*. The elegiac *Berceuse* received a tender loving performance, while the concluding *Le pas espagnol* was vigorously delivered, complete with noisy foot-stomping by Perkis. Two vocal duets by Fauré and Debussy's *Quatre poèmes de Baudelaire* completed the printed program and the single encore was Saint-Saëns' pastoral duet *Viens*.