



BWW Reviews: Russian Opera Workshop Programs Begin With RUSSIAN ROMANCES

[Back to the Article](#)

by Marakay Rogers



Ghenady Meirson's annual Russian Opera Workshop was held this year at Academy of Vocal Arts near Rittenhouse Square, from June 3 through June 27. The first public



performance, on July 24, was RUSSIAN ROMANCES, a collection of Russian song, mostly by Rachmaninov, performed by the students of the Workshop. Meirson is perhaps better known in the area as a gifted pianist and as a member of the vocal faculties at both Curtis and Academy of Vocal Arts, but he is also perhaps the preeminent expositor of the Russian vocal repertoire in America, and he does that through the annual Russian Opera Workshop programs.

Prior to the recital, noted opera composer Daron Hagen gave a public lecture on FRANCESCA DA RIMINI, the Rachmaninov opera at the center of this year's Workshop that was presented, along with ROMEO AND JULIET, in concert on the following three nights.

During the recital, thirteen sopranos, mezzo sopranos, baritones, and tenors, students of the Workshop, presented twenty short works, primarily art songs, of Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky, Glinka, and Alyabiev to a crowded house at the Helen Corning Warden Theater, accompanied by pianist Laura Ward. After their time with the Workshop, the young artists in this year's program were able to present these works, with proper Russian diction and an understanding of the lyrics, to an audience successfully. (However, for ease of audience understanding, all musical titles were presented in English, even those whose titles might be better recognized by some in the original Russian.)

Although these performers are young artists and they are still developing musically, several of them were outstanding in their recital pieces. Soprano Sangying Li, a native of Hunan, China currently studying at Temple University, sang Glinka's "To Her" and Alyabiev's "The Nightingale." Especially in the latter, Li demonstrated a magnificent voice and a controlled vibrato along with a clear understanding of what she was singing. Li is one of the most vocally developed women in this year's program, and it will be a great surprise if she fails to have a notable vocal career.

Ashley Becker, another fine soprano, presented "The harvest of sorrow" and "The pied piper," both by Rachmaninov. Becker's vocal coloration is already well-developed, and as soon as she spoke, this reviewer wanted to hear her sing Puccini as well as Russian works; it was no surprise

to discover after the performance that she has already begun including Puccini in her repertoire.

Mezzo Elizabeth Rigby Jones all but had the audience on their feet after her performance of the Jeanne D'Arc aria from Tchaikovsky's MAID OF ORLEANS. She is without doubt one of the finest younger mezzo sopranos this reviewer has heard recently, and her emotion with the Russian lyrics was delivered beautifully.

Isaac Edward Wenger, who performed Don Juan's Serenade by Tchaikovsky has both the looks and voice of an up and coming lead baritone, and the expressive power that comes in the lower registers, which made his performance a crowd favorite along with Li's.

Of the tenors on the program, Las Vegas native Dominick Chenes, currently in residence at Academy of Vocal Arts, is perhaps the outstanding example. Chenes, also the Paolo of the Workshop's FRANCESCA DA RIMINI, is a powerful tenor who impressed the audience during his performance of Rachmaninov's "Arion". Many attendees at the Russian Opera Workshop public events will no doubt be following his work at AVA this coming season.

Meirson's goal in beginning the Russian Opera Workshop programs was to promote knowledge of Russian opera among younger opera singers. However, it also has the equally salutary effect of educating opera fans about the classical Russian vocal repertoire, as well as increasing interest in it among listeners. For those who know him primarily as a pianist, investigation of the Russian Opera Workshop programming is well worth the effort.

For additional information, and for biographies of the participants in this year's programs, visit www.russianoperaworkshop.com; additionally, there is a Facebook page available for the program.

Photo Credit: Leonard Meirson