

## ***Crossing Borders: Realities Blurred***

Maureen Batt, Soprano and Cheryl Duvall, Piano  
Saturday, August 6, 2016 The Music Room, Halifax

**August 9, 2016**

**Classic Concerts NS – [classicconcertsns.ca](http://classicconcertsns.ca)**

Maureen Batt can sing really, really high (and really well). Which shouldn't be a surprise, since she is a trained soprano. But when you put together an eclectic, witty program of contemporary songs incorporating props such as cell-phone selfies, projected video and a side of cheese (which you consume before singing), one might wonder if the song would suffer. But it surely did not, as Batt and her piano collaborator Cheryl Duvall took to the stage of The Music Room for a great summer program.

*Crossing Borders: Realities Blurred* took as its premise that things are not always as they appear, and that what we think of as defined borders can shift. The title is probably also a reference to the literal Canada-US border, as this concert of Canadian and American contemporary composers was presented on both sides of the 49th parallel, with stops in Philadelphia and Toronto before Halifax. The Facebook event described the program like this: "Using multimedia, cabaret style, musical theatre style, and classical music style, this concert features modern topics relevant to today's society: mental health issues, HIV/AIDS, gender identity, body issues, and is infused with humour as it mocks nursery rhymes and even selfies! Each piece represents a reality that is blurred, a line that is crossed, a time that is both past and present."

Maureen and pianist Cheryl Duvall are doing interesting new work and Batt is the co-artistic director of Essential Opera, which just completed their sixth season. The crowd was smallish but appreciative – summer concerts are never a sure bet audience-wise, but full marks to these innovative women for bringing us this new music concert.

I have to begin with a really frivolous comment: I loved her dresses! OMG! (Probably this is the kind of comment that a stylish young singer cringes at, but seriously, her costuming on both halves of the concert played perfectly on the theme of blurred realities – in the first half a black and gold dress with many zippers including two wrapped around her shoulders made us wonder where is the real zipper). Clever!

The pieces on this program presented slices of contemporary life – some humourous, some sad – and included the afore- mentioned cell phones – allowed for a change (on stage).

It was an interesting program, moving us seamlessly between varying points of view like miniature portraits in a gallery. In Montreal composer Joseph Glaser's *Reservations in the Late*

*Afternoon*, Batt perfectly conveyed the angst of someone contemplating suicide. *Selfie* by Shelley Marwood, with its insistent repetition of “Me” (and all the things that “Me” does or poses with) really rang true, and was laugh out loud funny as soprano sat her bottom on the top end of the keyboard in order to get the perfect selfie with her accompanist! (Yes, it’s come to that – composers are writing pieces about selfies....look for the Pokemon Go reprise soon!)

*Fevered Ashes* by Toronto composer Saman Shahi with text by Iranian female writer Forough Farrokhzad showed the many colours of Batt’s voice to great advantage.

On the second half there was another really cool dress – dare I say with “bat” wings attached to the hem – topped with a big retro gleaming necklace. Classy! It worked well with the *Nursery Rhymes*, Chicago composer Ross Crean’s really funny piece, *The Passive-Aggressive’s Guide to Mother Goose*. Batt took on various characters, including “Jill” who sang virtuosically about “Jack” being a bit of a baby/misogynist, while Batt as Hickory Mouse ate cheese as the pianist tapped out the “Docks” on the edge of the piano, ending the Mouse’s aria with a decisive Big Ben on the piano. (She really did not want to strike one at all, it seems...)

Have I mentioned that Batt can sing really high?

She also has a great sense of both comic and dramatic timing. *Little Miss Muffet is a Hipster* (“who wears a hoop skirt these days?”) was tragi-comic with tongue firmly in check (or maybe that was a chicken nugget – you had to be there). These songs must be tricky and they are all virtuosic – Batt makes them sound easy, singing them expertly and with a great deal of confidence. This woman is theatrical. I’d love to see her in musical theatre (but only if she got to sing really really high). And I love her diction – it is such a treat to attend a concert where you don’t have to strain to understand the text – thank you.

Rodney Sharman’s *Crossing Over* and *True Lesbianism* (from *Cabaret Songs*) are a hoot – the first a hurtin’ song about a cross dressing lover who dies when his stilettos get caught in his truck (“Do they have Tatties or Teddies in heaven above?”) with the piano kind of honky tonky along (in a new music kind of way)... and then a didactic college graduation introduction on the piano as the singer intones what “true” lesbians should eschew (“penetration” and “coffee grinders,” apparently). Good to know.

Three evocative songs by Anna Höstman were up next, including a French/English song (*Voix/Voice*), which was very beautiful and very beautifully sung.

After a few technical hiccups *Then Still Life* was presented, which includes a solo piano work by Brian Harman with projected video created by Danilo Ursini and featuring Nina Arsenault, (looking like a cross between a Botoxed Amy Winehouse and Cat Woman). The Steinway was indeed frenetic in this piece, as we had been forewarned. The problem with video is that we can’t not watch it, and then every now and then we remember to tune back into the music –

which has been creating the dramatic storyline for the images all along. It was evocative and made me uncomfortable, which was probably the point.

There was another solo piano work on the program, *Stand Still Here* by Jenny Beck, consisting of five short movements which Duvall described as “meditative.” Duvall was a solid collaborator in the shared works, and you sense that the two musicians had a great time putting together this concert.

The final song on the evening, *In His Eyes* by Philadelphia composer Dan Martin was beautiful, but the story was a little unclear until Maureen explained that it’s about a sister painting her brother as she sees him on his last day of life. Whoa.

Then we were treated to a gorgeous encore by up and coming Canadian composer Matthew Emery, who, it was noted, has been recently named one of CBC music’s 30 hot Canadian classical musicians under 30. Well known for his choral music, this was another example of how Emery blends text and melody in a beautiful and moving way.

Skies were clear before the concert, but upon exiting, they filled with lightning, the spooky kind without any thunder, just brightly illuminating the night sky in a slightly unnerving fashion, as we waited for the big booms to follow. Perhaps this was an apt metaphor for these pieces, which opened our minds for a time on a summer’s night in August. Brava and brava!!