

CLASSICAL: REVIEW

# An exotic evening full of gems

**KEN WINTERS**

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Amici

Isabel Bayrakdarian, soprano

Serouj Kradjian, pianist, arranger

At Glenn Gould Studio

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In Toronto, Friday night

Amici - Friends - ended their season Friday night with a stunning concert of Armenian, Spanish and Spanish-influenced vocal and instrumental music in an arresting balance.

Soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian and her pianist-composer-arranger-accompanist husband Serouj Kradjian were together in the spotlight. Core Amici members clarinetist (and artistic director) Joaquin Valdepenas and cellist David Hetherington were there in crucial supporting roles, as was violinist Benjamin Bowman. And for the last three numbers the cello section was quadrupled, as if by visiting Valkyries, when Winona Zelenka, Roberta Janzen and Rachel Mercer joined Hetherington and the others for lush accompaniments of songs by the Argentinian Carlos Guastavino, the Spaniard Xavier Montsalvatge and the Brazilian Jayme Ovalle.

The highlight of the richly exotic program, however, both in freshness and in worth, was a set of seven Armenian folk songs collected by Reverend Gomidas and arranged by Kradjian for soprano, piano, violin, clarinet and cello. The songs were having their Canadian premiere. Kradjian's arrangements were classy and strikingly effective, and Bayrakdarian's singing of them was ravishing.

On a single hearing I have no hesitation in asserting that this set of songs, in these arrangements, is as vivid and enticing as the famous Auvergne folk song arrangements of Joseph Canteloube. As for Bayrakdarian's performance, it had an authority reminiscent of the legendary Madeleine Grey's in the Auvergne songs or of the fabled Conchita Supervia's in Manuel de Falla's *Seven Spanish Folksongs*. I think the proper term is ownership: Bayrakdarian sings these songs as if she owns them. Her voice takes on a fullness and a subtle expressive flexibility it does not always bring to the classics, beautifully and intelligently though she sings these, too.

Another handsome set of songs that we too seldom hear - *Seven Classic Spanish Songs*, by Fernando Obradors - came after intermission. These were more in the formal recital mode, with just Bayrakdarian and Kradjian performing. The tough and touching *El Vito* is the third song, but every one is a gem and the team performed all of them superbly.

Two instrumental trios bookended the two song sets. The Armenian-born Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian's *Trio for clarinet, violin and cello* opened the concert, and the Armenian composer Arno Babadjanian's *Trio for violin, cello and piano* followed the Obradors.

The Khachaturian had that composer's typical difficulty in achieving real structural movement in his bass-line, but there was much interesting detail in the clarinet and violin writing, and in the piano, too, when it wasn't just striking and sustaining those long-held pedal points. Valdepenas, Bowman and Kradjian played the work superbly and shone especially in the lively rhythms of the finale.

The Babadjanian *Trio* was the other surprise of the evening: a major work for the classic piano trio which seems not yet to have found its niche in the repertoire, though it dates from 1952. Yes, it has echoes of Rachmaninoff in its discourse and even more of César Franck in its chromatic enharmony; but only the best of both other composers, and much of its own, distinctive and vigorous. Bowman, Hetherington and Kradjian played it magnificently, with Bowman particularly fine in the exquisite opening of the Andante, and all three absolutely on their mettle in the five-to-the-bar finale. This was a real discovery.

After it came the three songs with the Valkyrie reinforcements mentioned earlier, and with Bayrakdarian again in her glory. And then, the uproar of applause, and the encores. What a concert.

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