

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

Founded in 1907

The National Arts Club
15 Gramercy Park South
New York NY 10003

Monthly Meeting * 1:00– 3:00PM

Thursday, January 17, 2019

Performance of *Dear Miss Barrett*



The Browning Society of New York is excited to invite members and guests to a performance of selected songs from the musical Dear Miss Barrett. For this month's newsletter, I asked composer and music professor Michael Kurek to discuss the genesis of Dear Miss Barrett and what inspired him to write a musical adaptation of the Brownings' famous love story.

I must confess at the outset that I am a latecomer to the Brownings, beyond the few poems one reads in school. Finding them took a bit of a convoluted path. By profession, I am a classical composer and had never written for the theater. My classical works have been played by symphony orchestras and chamber groups on five continents, won the top annual award in composition from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and been number one on the Billboard classical chart. In 2010 I married Crystal Kurek, who happened to be a Browning fan, as well as a very wonderful local theatrical performer (and who will play EBB at our reading in January). In the last five years, she has performed in twenty musicals in theaters in

the greater Nashville area, including the lead roles of Mary Poppins (in *Mary Poppins*) twice, Eliza Doolittle (*My Fair Lady*), Maria (*West Side Story*), Truly Scrumptious (*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*), Fantine (*Les Miserables*), and others.

Crystal was the one who suggested the Brownings to me as the subject of a potential musical, should I ever be persuaded to try writing one, hint, hint. It so happens that my classical music is known for being neoromantic and melodic, and on more than one occasion people had suggested to me that some of my instrumental melodies were crying out to be sung with words. One evening at our home, Crystal hosted a social gathering of several women, all leading Nashville theater performers, and I thought this might be a good test audience. As they were about to leave, I asked them if they might kindly step into my composing studio and take a listen to something, and they graciously agreed. I put on a symphonic recording of the slow movement of my *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, which had been performed several times nationwide. I proceeded to sing along with

the melody for them my slightly modified words to EBB's "How Do I Love Thee?" which fit the tune hand in glove. My back was to these women, because I was facing the score on my computer screen, and when I turned around, I saw them all in an emotional state; they absolutely loved it. Then I knew I was on to something. "How Do I Love You?" became the first song of my show to be written, and in all, six of the twenty-four songs in the show borrowed melodies from my previous classical works. The rest are new.

As a professor of music at Vanderbilt University, I had done a good amount of published academic prose writing about music over the years and critiqued the writing in many student term papers, so I decided to take a crack at writing the book for a Browning show myself. Then I would show it to lots of theatrical writers and directors for their advice and critique. This I did, producing, thanks to their good comments, several revisions. I had obtained a first edition of all of Elizabeth's and Robert's letters to each other, from which I drew both dialog and lyrics, and I read and studied a few Browning biographies, including *Dared and Done* (1995) by Julia Markus. It was a task to decide what scenes, in such a limited time span, would give an audience a few "snapshots," or at least a sense of the Brownings, while having to painfully omit so many things one would wish to have, were it a comprehensive biographical treatment – not the least of which was Flush, the dog! I will ask forgiveness in advance of the NYBS members if I have, of necessity, neglected something dear to them. But just think, if people can only discover the Brownings through my show, many will go on to learn

much more about them and their works, later.

I chose to put the focus of my book on the love story rather than on Elizabeth's conflict with Papa, as had been done in the play and movie versions of *The Brownings of Wimpole Street*. There are still two big songs for Papa, but we will not be doing those among our selections for the NYBS. For additional interest, I created an original, parallel story with a modern-day couple, Sarah and Henry, with Sarah as a huge fan of EBB. I believe her character is important, both for comic relief and as an effective bridge and advocate for the Brownings to present-day young people. The show therefore jumps back and forth across time, including some numbers where characters sing simultaneously across time, unaware of each other, but with similar concerns. When they are alone in their own time, though, the modern characters generally sing in a more popular musical theater style, while the historic characters sing in a more classical, yet tuneful style, highlighting the time contrast. This creates something of a hybrid genre between popular Broadway theater and light opera, which could be problematic in some ways but, I believe, ultimately of real interest to reviewers, in itself. From Sondheim to *Les Miserables*, finding some such bridge or hybrid has been under discussion. Rather than to find a merger of styles in every song, though, I keep the Broadway and classical styles mostly distinct, in separate songs, but present them side by side in the same show, justified by the switches in time between present and past.

Needless to say, in the process of working on this, though a latecomer, I have caught my

wife's enthusiasm for the Brownings and strongly believe in a mission to perpetuate their works and legacy to new generations, which I hope this show will help to do, and I am deeply grateful to the New York Browning Society for their interest.

We do hope that you will be able to join us for this exciting event. Please note that the performance will be held on Thursday, the 17th of January, rather than our usual Wednesday meeting.

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