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669th Meeting of the Houston Philosophical Society

"Expanding minds through music"
by
Sonja Brazauskas
Performing Artist

HPS President Jack Agee presented the speaker, Sonja Brazauskas. Ms. Brazauskas is a performing artist in integrative shows that connect to her European upbringing and education. She received her undergraduate diploma in Voice, Acting and Dance in Germany, where she was born and raised, and her Master of Music degree with Marlena Malas in the United States. She made her professional opera debut singing in Germany and was under a full-time soloist contract with the Dresden Staatsoper for several years prior to her move to the United States. She made her American debut as apprentice artist with the Santa Fe Opera. Her repertoire embraces a wide range of operatic roles; and she has performed both in operas and at concerts in Germany, Russia, and the United States. She has recently made a number of appearances in and around Texas, including, for example, at The Roundtop Institute and with Ars Lyrica. Ms. Brazauskas is also an active and passionate recitalist, specializing in German Art Song and contemporary repertoire. Besides being a performing artist, she enjoys her opportunities to creatively design concert experiences and programs, just as she enjoys her engagements to talk about the critical connections between music, science and the humanities.

Ms. Brazauskas' argues that, while classical music's value in brain development, education, and the stimulation of creativity has been thoroughly studied and proved, the need for a vibrant classical music culture in a city like ours, and within public education, is still a source of debate. Therefore, it is up to us to become more creative about how to bring music to people, how to "meet them where they are." In her view, performers can have more meaningful interactions with the audience by creating new scenarios and by changing contexts. Her ultimate goal is to raise a new generation of citizens who will be able to utilize their creativity in innovative and sensible ways, whether related to music, or to any other endeavor.

Ms. Brazauskas began the program by singing "Marietta's Lied" from the opera "Die Tote Stadt" by Korrnfeld. Commenting on the longing, loss and grief

captured in the song, which was written in the aftermath of World War I, she argued that the performing arts have unique voice in restoring some of this loss.

Ms. Brazauskas pointed out that music and rhythm came to human beings before words did. And, even with language as our principal means of communication, music has continued to have a unique voice. She observed that primitive cultures used their voices in rituals that combined religion, art, and the expression of emotion in what we can call "performances," even in early Egypt. From 1700 to 1500 B.C.E. we have drawings of very large choruses. The Greeks too saw that there was something in appealing to large audiences. Thus they went from using a single voice and instrument to the Greek drama and the chorus commenting on it. In ancient Christian and Jewish culture, as in other early cultures, music was exclusively religious.

Ms. Brazauskas contrasted to these early uses of music the Pope's chorus in the Holy Roman Empire, in which men and boys' voices joined in plain chant. She then sang a piece from Hildegard von Bingen from the late medieval period, demonstrating a more complex concept, polyphony, i.e., one piece with different voices that fit together. This led to the earliest operas. Sonja sang, to illustrate, a selection from Monteverdi's Coronation of Poppea—Nerona's wife saying goodbye to her own life.

Everything, including instrumentation, is now bigger, so we need to think more about projection. She referenced Jones Hall in Houston, with its larger number of instruments, bigger orchestra, and the human voice added to the symphony, as in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. And she asked that we compare this with 400-500 years earlier: a minnesinger singing to a lute beneath a lady's window.

Europe, she noted, has not only big halls and an orchestra pit but balconies hanging over the audience. In 1900-1914, there were 20 abendlieder, or evensongs, a week in Berlin and Vienna, complete with small rooms and potted plants. However, with the invention of the microphone in the nineteenth century, the platform became larger and larger. It killed intimacy while creating a new kind of intimacy. The recording industry arose. Now you listen to Mahler's Fifth Symphony andbe wholly isolated.

We all know the value of music and music therapy. Music increases the dialogue between ourselves and our own mortality and connects us to our own emotions. To illustrate, Ms. Brazauskas sang a moving "Amazing Grace," pointing out that it is very emotional; it helps people connect to their own emotions and thus to have release and cry.

In an intimate live performance, like that for the HPS meeting, the audience gets to focus—not play with cell phones, sleep, or read a paper. It is not like that listening to music at home, where you'll read at the same time or empty the dishwasher and not focus on the music. Also, you have the privilege to experience imperfection. Sweat runs down the performers; they may make mistakes. Imperfection in a performance allows you to have both an individual experience and a group experience.

Ms. Brazauskas illustrated the intimacy of live music with a symphony she went to a few years ago in a small town. Everyone clapped after the first movement. The conductor turned around and acknowledged the applause, and continued. He explained afterwards that he realized those people, who did not know the etiquette of symphonies requiring that applause be held until the end, were having an active experience.

By contrast, as a student, Ms. Brazauskas attended a performance of Tosca. The great tenor Pavarotti came on stage and sang, and it felt as if the voices were there even though they were in an opera house. But what she did not know was that the voices were recorded. The room was too big for that kind of intimacy.

To illustrate the loss of intimacy, she also gave the example of the mother who gets up, feeds the kids breakfast, takes them to school, goes to work, picks up the kids, goes through a drive-in restaurant, goes home, puts the children to bed, does the chores, and turns on the TV—achieving the illusion of intimacy with characters she knows from her weeks spent with them, but she is in isolation.

She contrasted this scenario with a trip her husband made to Minneapolis, flying via Hobby Airport to Minnesota for a one-hour meeting. The plane was delayed in Chicago on the way home, costing fifteen hours of travel for that one-hour meeting. But he had to have the in-person meeting. There is a fundamental human need for intimacy.

Finally, Ms. Brazauskas gave examples of activities that encourage intimacy: small sports games; club activities; even food trucks, which encourage interaction with strangers. In this country, churches encourage intimacy, but not in Europe, where churches were built to invoke the grandeur of God. Here they are built to encourage intimacy with God and other people.

What can we do to keep the intimacy when growing up in the isolation described? Support artistic events and clubs; hire a jazz trio for your next party. Ms. Brazauskas herself is starting an art song society to perform in people's houses large enough to have a piano.

She finished the program by singing a very moving, "There's a Place for Us," driving home the point she was making, while expressing her fear that a new generation that sees only air-brushed perfection will lose that sense of intimacy about which she spoke.

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