

CLASSICAL MUSIC NOTES

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Sunday, September 4, 2005

Festival of Song toasts pushy dames

"Girls Gone Bad," a show Thursday at the Woodruff Arts Center, marks the much-anticipated return of the Southeastern Festival of Song. The festival's only show to date, in May 2004, promised to fill an invaluable gap in Atlanta's cross-cultural music scene: a vocal series, performed at the center's Rich Auditorium and drawing on young national talent. The debut event covered a wickedly eclectic program, pairing Henry Purcell with Dolly Parton and Edith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose" with Gene Scheer's honky-tonking "Find Me a Primitive Man." The mind-set was refreshing in the extreme: Throw all musical boundaries out the window. A good song is a good song, regardless of who wrote it or who sang it.

After a mostly dormant year, festival co-founders Ryan Taylor, a baritone, and Adriana Zabala, a mezzo, are back on more secure financial footing. For each show, which costs about \$35,000 to produce, Taylor says they've found more private sponsors and heightened corporate interest. In addition to Atlanta, the festival performs at the Dallas Museum of Art and at the Bar Harbor Music Festival in Maine, where Taylor and Zabala plan to repeat "Girls Gone Bad." The festival will also co-produce "Carmina Burana" with the Atlanta Ballet in October at the Fox Theatre.

The idea for the "Girls" theme came when Taylor and pianist Steven Blier were listening to an old Eartha Kitt album, including the tunes "I Want to Be Evil" and "An Old-Fashioned Millionaire."

"We started talking about the whole subgenre of great songs, about women who push boundaries and the men who get in their way," Taylor recalls. "We can call them sirens or femme fatales, but what was considered 'bad' behavior for a woman a few hundred years ago, or even a few decades ago, is now a drop in the bucket in our culture."

Pianist Kim Witman, general director of the Wolf Trap Opera, will accompany five singers --- four women and a man --- in songs made famous by "Miss Eartha" along with lyrical bad girls etched by Stephen Sondheim, Harold Arlen, Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms. Biblical stories, the Faust legend and tongue-in-cheek pop ditties mix together to explore the topic from several angles. As always, boundaries don't mean anything. Only good songs matter. 7:30 p.m. Thursday. Woodruff Arts Center's Rich Theatre. \$12.50-\$40. 404-808-2520, www.sefos.org.