

Field of Stars: Songs of the Canadian Musical Theatre, Vol. 1. Compiled and edited by Jim Betts. Toronto: Northern River Music, 2004. 1 songbook + 2 compact discs. \$39.95. Web site: www.northernriver.com.

One of the challenges facing voice teachers is the search for new songs that will delight their students. Too often, one is left to resort to the old stand-bys, even when they don't connect with the singer or the audience. The search is especially difficult when it comes to the repertoire of *Canadian* musical theatre, since choice is frequently limited to the standard volumes of published Broadway hits. Does a Canadian musical theatre tradition even exist? And where does one find the printed music?

Fortunately, help has arrived in the form of *Field of Stars: Songs of the Canadian Musical Theatre*, vol. 1, edited by Jim Betts. This collection makes available for the first time seventeen songs, and singers and teachers alike should make it part of their standard repertoire. I was delighted by the range of material, which includes songs ranging from those accessible to the youngest singer to those that are technically more challenging.

Field of Stars spans fifty-two years of Canadian musical theatre from the 1952 production of Mavor Moore's *The Optimist* to the 2004 national tour of *Pélagie*. The collection includes the sheet music, a CD of piano-vocal performances, and an additional CD of the piano accompaniments. The foreword by Moore underlines the need for such an anthology for, according to him, the last forty years have seen a "bonanza of musicals by Canadians, both in English and French, all seeking the magic formula for a Canadian show

that will catch the world's fancy." He also laments the fact that in Canada "we lack Broadway's advance publicity apparatus" and marketing devices. The long-overdue appearance of this publication will certainly begin to remedy this lack of awareness and familiarity with our musical theatre.¹

There is much to applaud in the collection and the CD, especially since the singers on the CD were often members of the original cast, and the composers themselves sometimes provide the piano accompaniments. Whether it is a rock ballad or a dramatic aria, these artists meet every technical and interpretative challenge. The benefit of hearing their delivery is invaluable since style, phrasing, character, and all the inherent nuances of the music are captured as if in the live theatre. One is never expected to imitate or replicate the performance of an individual artist or to fabricate colour and timbre, but it is nevertheless important to hear and understand an ideal and professional interpretation. The bonus, of course, is the CD of just the piano accompaniments. Students will profit greatly in their practice and rehearsal time by having this. What follows is a brief summary and commentary from a

¹ It should be noted the collection reflects only English Canadian theatre. The sole exception is "The Dancing is Done," from *Pélagie* (music by Allen Cole, lyrics by Vincent De Tourdonnet). However, even this song, from a plot involving the Acadians' quest to journey homeward from exile, is presented in English.

singer's perspective, based on listening to the CD:

“Field Of Stars” (1986), with music by Joey Miller and lyrics by James Saar from *The Growing Season*, is convincingly and passionately sung by Jim Betts, whose singing almost never sounds pushed or strident. Later, Betts's performance of “Starlight” (1979), music and lyrics by Jim Betts from *On a Summer's Night* (also by Jim Betts), based on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, is again extremely sensitive and lyrical. Young male singers will not find the range and tessitura taxing.

One of liveliest and most hilarious tracks is “Live A Little, Julia” (1997), music and lyrics by Leslie Arden from *The Last Resort* (book by Norm Foster). Glynis Ranney's vocal performance is overwhelming, for she handles the huge range and shifts of emotion with ease and power. This aria is only for the technically secure comedic actress.

Those singers who prefer the dramatic challenge of *Sprechstimme* delivery should listen to John Gray's rendition of “In The Sky” (1978), music and lyrics by John Gray from *Billy Bishop Goes to War* (by John Gray with Eric Peterson). Gray, who also plays the piano accompaniment, demonstrates how the word can be lifted off the page to create something poignant and memorable.

The best-known song in the collection is “Gee, I'm Glad I'm No One Else But Me” (1965), music by Norman Campbell, lyrics by Elaine Campbell, from *Anne Of Green Gables* (book and lyrics by Don Harron, additional lyrics

by Elaine Campbell and Mavor Moore), based on the novel by Lucy Maude Montgomery. Jennifer Toulmin's exuberant singing makes it a sparkling, giddy and delightful adventure. Young singers with a strong theatrical flair, secure vocal ability and range will find it irresistible.

“Ashes To Ashes” (1990), music by Marek Norman, lyrics by Richard Ouzounian, from *Larry's Party* (book by Richard Ouzounian, based on the novel by Carol Shields); and “Let The Night Begin” (1990), music by Marek Norman, lyrics by Richard Ouzounian, from *Dracula – A Chamber Musical* (book by Richard Ouzounian, based on the novel by Bram Stoker), are two fine examples from composer, singer and pianist Marek Norman. Yet these songs, printed here in the original manuscript version, are less easy to read and inconsistent with the rest of the volume.

Another striking and compelling song is “Jack's House” (1993), music and lyrics by Cathy Elliott from *Fireweeds: Women of the Yukon* (book by Cathy Elliott). Here, Julain Molnar's stirring delivery evokes the time and place with plenty of thoughtful, tender singing. Avery Saltzman's vocal style works well in “Entertain” (1976), music and lyrics by David Warrack from *Counter Melody* (by David Warrack), and “A Matter Of Taste” (1956), music and lyrics by Mavor Moore from *The Optimist* (by Mavor Moore, based on Voltaire's *Candide*). Saltzman uses his substantial voice in an unfussy, unpretentious manner ideal for this sort of repertoire.

Two contrasting songs that demonstrate the range of Charlotte Moore's abilities as a singing actress are

found in “Nostalgia” (1978), music by Bob Ashley, lyrics by Nancy Phillips, from *Lies and Other Lyrics* (music by Bob Ashley, lyrics by Nancy Phillips), and “The Prenatal Course” (1985), music and lyrics by Jim Betts from *The Moose That Roared* (by Jim Betts). Charlotte Moore is perhaps happiest when singing out fully and freely in the wickedly witty warning to girls in the ballad, “The Prenatal Course.” A pole apart is the placid performance of the lyric ballad, “Nostalgia,” written in a low tessitura and narrow range that mezzo-sopranos would find accessible and appealing.

“Home Away From Home” (1978), music and lyrics by Joey Miller from *Eight to the Bar* (book by Stephen Witkin), is an extended, up-tempo, strophic meditation that young singers would find attractive in demonstrating their ability to delivery a musical soliloquy. “Plain Girls in Love” (1984), music and lyrics by John Gray from *Don Messer’s Jubilee* (by John Gray), is the gem of the collection, sung by Jane Mortifee. Marked by confident singing, completely natural and unforced, it is a heartfelt, bittersweet ballad about the realities of life and love. Phrases are spun with impressive evenness, and the sound never loses its warmth and depth. Just as important is the unmannered clarity of the text.

Young female singers in search of a lyric ballad and a low tessitura will find “Dress Up” (2002), music by Jay Turvey and Paul Sportell, lyrics by Morwyn Brebner from *Little Mercy’s First Murder* (book by Morwyn Brebner) a most accessible piece. Brent Carver’s warm lyric ballad singing is a perfect

way to finish the disc. However, in “The World is Changing” (1993), music and lyrics by Leslie Arden from *The House of Martin Guerre* (book by Leslie Arden and Anna Theresa Cascio), the range for young male singers is more challenging: a developed head voice (not just a falsetto for the high notes) is essential for the climax of the song.

There are some minor flaws. I was puzzled by the order in which the music was presented, for it is not organized according to any recognizable system, either chronological or alphabetical or by show or composer. I was also left wondering how and why they were chosen. It’s not that the choices are not valid, but even a word of explanation would have been helpful. An index at the back provides a brief background, history of the production of the shows and a brief précis on the context of each song. But again, it would have been more satisfying to know what inspired the songs and to have included some short plot summaries. It did become clear to me, once I played the CD, that the aim was to present a high-quality, well balanced recital program, and thus the ordering of the printed music did make sense. But a more standard table of contents would have been appreciated and user-friendly. Finally, a professional copy of the printed music, consistent throughout the volume, is paramount. No manuscript reproductions should be included.

Despite these caveats, Northern River Music deserves high praise for this fine publication. Bring on Volume 2!

Jane Leibel
Memorial University of Newfoundland