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New “Standards” for Singers: The Next Generation of Great American Songbook Writers

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WHAT MAKES A “STANDARD”?

BEAUTIFUL MELODIES, CATCHY LYRICS, TIMELESS SENTIMENTS: these are the common elements of the works in the Great American Songbook. Popular, jazz, and even classical singers have made these songs their own since the turn of the twentieth century. No one would argue the universal appeal of songwriters such as Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Rodgers and Hart.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the main sources of popular music were the stage, the screen, big bands, and radio. Performers would broadcast their own arrangements of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley songs across America’s radio airwaves. Artists popular at this time included band leaders Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, and Duke Ellington, and singers Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Ethel Merman, and Frank Sinatra. Hollywood musicals made stars out of Al Jolson, Fred Astaire, Judy Garland, Doris Day, and countless others.

Broadway, through its “Golden Age” into the contemporary era, has continued to add to the legacy of the Great American Songbook. Jazz, club, and classical singers were quick to embrace the beautiful ballads and powerful songs of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Leonard Bernstein, Kander and Ebb, Marvin Hamlisch, and Stephen Sondheim. Recently added to the compendium are the British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, the French team Schönberg and Boublil (*Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*), and current American Broadway composers, Stephen Schwartz, Stephen Flaherty, Frank Wildhorn, Maury Yeston, Jason Robert Brown, Andrew Lippa, and Adam Guettel.

The term “standard” conjures up a wide array of nostalgic images of popular music. Through the decades, many of these great songs have retained their timeless charm and appeal for performers and audiences alike. Opera stars including Richard Tucker, Marilyn Horne, Thomas Hampson, Dawn Upshaw, Bryn Terfel, and Renée Fleming have included standards in their repertoire. Seventies rocker Rod Stewart recently recorded several compact disks of standards, as did Linda Ronstadt over a decade ago. From the current music scene, even Alanis Morissette, Sheryl Crow, and Robbie Williams can

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be heard singing Cole Porter tunes on the soundtrack to the recent film, *De-Lovely*.

EXPANDING THE TERM

In addition to this historic legacy from Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood, some pop-rock material is making its way into the “standard” literature. This is not surprising considering that the “original” standards were the pop music of their day. Likewise, the pop music influence on music theater can be seen in the development of recent Broadway shows using the music of Billy Joel, ABBA, John Lennon, and Elton John. Current chart singer Michael Bublé combines on his recordings traditional standards with swing and jazz arrangements of pop-rock hits by the Bee Gees, Van Morrison, and Paul Anka. Queen Latifah’s recent recording of standards includes vintage blues and jazz numbers as well as the Mamas and Papas’ “California Dreamin’.” Patti LuPone included the ballad, “The Air that I Breathe” by 70s band The Hollies, in her New York cabaret act. Many other cabaret and club singers have added to their acts songs by Joni Mitchell, Kansas, Queen, and Bruce Springsteen. Even British soprano Lesley Garrett has included songs made popular by the Beatles and Elvis Presley among the classical and standards selections on her recordings. Following suit, the Hal Leonard music company has published a four-volume set of standards that includes traditional “Golden Age” songs, along with pop hits by the Carpenters, Barry Manilow, Helen Reddy, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Stevie Wonder.

THE NEXT GENERATION

While performers are widening the definition of “standards” to include more recent and current pop material, there is also a group of songwriters producing fresh, new songs with beautiful melodies, catchy lyrics, and timeless sentiments that can stand with the traditional “tried and trues.” Some of these writers are classical composers, while others write for the Broadway and Off-Broadway stages. Some write for the club scene, and some write in all of these genres. This article highlights the next generation of writers of the Great American Songbook through a brief introduction to the songwriters and their material, biographies of each, and a survey of their published songs. The songwriters presented include Chester

Biscardi, William Bolcom, John Bucchino, Craig Carnelia, Zina Goldrich and Marcy Heisler, Ricky Ian Gordon, Amanda McBroom, Ben Moore, and Richard Pearson Thomas.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SOME NEXT GENERATION SONGWRITERS

Chester Biscardi (b. 1948) is an international award winning classical composer whose works have been featured at prominent music festivals and recorded on many classical labels worldwide. His compositions include works for opera, chorus, voice and piano, orchestra, chamber ensembles, and solo piano, as well as incidental music for theater, dance, and television. While most of his vocal pieces are in the art song and operatic vein, his set *Modern Love Songs* and his individual song “Chez Vous” contain beautiful melodies and heartfelt sentiments that characterize great standards. Composed in the classical technique with moderately complex contemporary harmonies and rhythms, these selections easily can be performed in art song or cabaret style. Biscardi’s works have been performed at New York’s Lincoln Center, Rotterdam’s Gaudeamus Festival, and many other venues in England, Japan, Brazil, and Italy. He is the recipient of numerous honors including the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an Ives Scholarship, and the Aaron Copland Award. Born in Kenosha, Wisconsin, he earned an MA in Italian Literature and an MM in Musical Composition from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a DMA from Yale University. He is Director of the Music Program at Sarah Lawrence College.

William Bolcom (b. 1938) is another contemporary classical composer of world renown. Many singers know of his *Cabaret Songs* (Volumes 1–4), and more recently, *Ancient Cabaret*. The songs in these collections combine contemporary classical harmonic and rhythmic language with historic European cabaret and popular American musical style. Many of Bolcom’s songs incorporate modern classical dissonances with ragtime, jazz, and pop syncopations. Born in Seattle, Bolcom studied composition in France with Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen, and in the United States with Leland Smith. He taught at the University of Washington and Queens College, was composer in residence at Yale University, and eventually was hired to serve on the music faculty at the

University of Michigan. His early compositions followed the academic serial idiom. He later dropped that method and developed an approach that incorporates popular music styles into serious classical music. In the 1960s, he was one of the champions of the ragtime revival. In 1975, he married singer Joan Morris. As a duo they developed recitals and recordings chronicling the history of American popular song. His compositional output includes piano music, chamber music, symphonies, art songs, operas, and cabaret songs. In 1988, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his *12 New Etudes for Piano*.

John Bucchino (b. 1952) is a popular New York songwriter for the Off-Broadway and cabaret club scenes. His lyrics are emotional and personal, and his music can be described as pop-influenced music theater style with somewhat sophisticated harmonic and rhythmic textures. His songs typically follow a variation on the traditional standard structure (ABA—refrain, bridge, refrain), with an interlude to showcase the pianist. He often uses chromatic harmonic progressions and driving pop-rock rhythms. His songs have been recorded and performed by Judy Collins, Barbara Cook, Michael Feinstein, Art Garfunkel, Patti LuPone, Yo-Yo Ma, Audra McDonald, Liza Minnelli, the Boston Pops, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. His works have been performed at Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, the Sydney Opera House, and the White House. His numerous honors include the Johnny Mercer Songwriter Award, the Songwriters' Fellowship Award, and the ASCAP Foundation Richard Rodgers New Horizons Award. His musicals include *The Artist at 40*, *Urban Myths*, and *Lavender Girl*. He also wrote the songs for the DreamWorks animated film *Joseph: King of Dreams*. He has released three recordings of his original material. He is currently collaborating with director Daisy Prince on a musical revue of his songs called *It's Only Life*, and with Harvey Fierstein on a new musical called *A Catered Affair*.

Craig Carnelia (b. 1949) is an award-winning composer for Broadway and Off-Broadway, as well as a gifted songwriter for cabaret recording artists, including Karen Akers and Andrea Marcovicci. His work follows contemporary Broadway trends that blend traditional music theater and pop styles. Carnelia composes in conventional structures with strophic verses supported by pop-rock rhythms. Many of his songs have a slow steady build to an emotional/musical climax. As a performer,

he has acted on and Off-Broadway. His honors include the Johnny Mercer "Emerging American Songwriter" Award, the Gilman and Gonzalez-Falls Musical Theatre Award, and the Kleban Award for distinguished lyric writing. He has collaborated with Marvin Hamlisch and John Guere on the Broadway musical, *Sweet Smell of Success*, and with Nora Ephron on *Imaginary Friends*. He penned both music and lyrics for the Broadway musical *Is There Life After High School?* and contributed four songs to the musical version of Studs Terkel's *Working*. Off-Broadway, he wrote the songs for the musical *Three Postcards* with Craig Lucas, a revue of songs called *Notes*, and contributed songs to *The No-Frills Revue*, *A . . . My Name Is Still Alice*, and *Diamonds*. His new musicals include *Actor*, *Lawyer*, *Indian Chief* and *The Good War*. Carnelia serves as artistic director of the ASCAP Musical Theatre Workshop in Chicago, and frequently covers for Stephen Schwartz in the same position for the workshops in New York and Los Angeles.

Zina Goldrich (b. 1964) and Marcy Heisler (b. 1967) have gained popular acclaim in the New York music theater and cabaret scenes. Perhaps best known for their songs "The Alto's Lament" and "Taylor the Latte Boy," their work embodies comedic Broadway and heartfelt cabaret style. Their material runs the gamut of musical styles including traditional ballads, jazzy up-tempo, torch songs, parodies and comic novelty numbers, and motivational/inspirational songs. *The Village Voice* "Best of NYC" edition recently dubbed them the "Best Knocking on Broadway's Door Songwriting Team." Collaborators since 1993, the duo has been honored with several awards, including the ASCAP Richard Rodgers New Horizons Theatre Award, the Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs Award, and the Bistro Award in the categories of Outstanding Special Material, Outstanding Songwriters, and Song of The Year. Their musicals include *Top Secret Personal Beeswax: The Life and Times of Junie B. Jones*, *Dear Edwina and Dear Edwina Junior*, *Adventures in Love*, and *Allison Under The Stars*. Together and individually, they have written songs for TV's *Murphy Brown*, *Three Sisters*, Disney, and PBS. They have appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, the Ford Center, the Chicago Humanities Festival, Montreal's Comedy Festival, and New York's 24-hour A Train Musicals. Heisler is currently working with Disney Theatricals, writing new versions of *101 Dalmatians*, *Cinderella*, and *The Jungle Book*.

Ricky Ian Gordon (b. 1956) combines classical compositional techniques with cabaret influences to create stunning vocal works. His biography quotes *The New York Times*, which accurately describes his style: "If the music of Ricky Ian Gordon had to be defined by a single quality, it would be the bursting effervescence infusing songs that blithely blur the lines between art song and the high-end Broadway music of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim." Gordon has gained much popularity among classical and music theater singers alike. In the hands of classical singers, Gordon's pieces give the impression of art songs. Likewise, when performed by stage and cabaret singers, they sound like music theater. His works include art song, opera, ballet, operetta, chamber music, film scores, and music theater. He has written works commissioned and performed by sopranos Renée Fleming and Angelina Réaux. Others who have performed and recorded his songs include classical singers Lorraine Hunt, Kurt Ollman, Teresa Stratas, Dawn Upshaw, and Broadway and cabaret singers Betty Buckley, Kristin Chenoweth, Andrea Marcovicci, and Audra McDonald. His music has been performed at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, Houston Grand Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Joseph Papp Public Theater, the Ravinia Festival, the American Music Theater Festival, as well as venues in England, France, Germany, and India. His honors include the Music Theater Foundation Award, the National Institute for Music Theater Award, the Stephen Sondheim Award, the Jonathan Larson Foundation Award, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Richard Rodgers Award. He was educated at Carnegie Mellon University and has taught at the Juilliard School, Yale University, and Northwestern University.

Amanda McBroom is best known for her songs "The Rose" and "Crimes of the Heart." Her work is heavily steeped in the contemporary club/cabaret tradition, blending genuine sentiments with jazz and popular music styles. She writes in many musical styles including smoky jazz, soft-rock, country ballads, and intimate personal story songs. McBroom's career was launched on *The Tonight Show* after Bette Midler's recording of "The Rose" hit number one on charts worldwide in 1979. The song won her the Golden Globe Award. She is highly acclaimed as an emotionally evocative singer/cabaret artist, poet, and songwriter. She has performed at concert halls around

the world including Carnegie Hall in New York, the Ford Amphitheatre in Los Angeles, Wolftrap and Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., as well as in London, Australia, and Taiwan. Her songs have been recorded by Harry Belafonte, Betty Buckley, Judy Collins, Barbara Cook, the Manhattan Transfer, Barry Manilow, Anne Murray, and Leanne Rimes. She has starred in *Jacques Brel . . .*, *Seesaw* (Broadway), *Sweeney Todd*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Mame*, in productions mounted in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Europe. She also created *Heartbeats*, a musical based on her songs.

Ben Moore (b. 1960) is gaining more and more recognition as a composer of specialty songs for noted opera singers. He is probably best known for "Sexy Lady," written for mezzo soprano Susan Graham, and "Wagner Roles" for soprano Deborah Voigt. Moore's songs are composed in many styles, from classical settings of great poets to original comic novelty material for cabaret and concert artists. Also following current Broadway trends, Moore's cabaret and theater songs combine traditional music theater and commercial singer/songwriter styles. While his songs are often simple in structure, the piano parts are often rhapsodic in nature, clearly indicating his classical background. His songs have been performed and recorded by Audra McDonald, Jerry Hadley, and Robert White. His works have been featured on the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast, at Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, and at Washington's Kennedy Center. His songs also have been showcased in New York's ASCAP Songwriters Series. His music theater scores include *Henry and Company*, written with Barry Kleinbort and commissioned by Jerry Hadley, and *Bye, Bye, Broadway*, with book and lyrics by Carl Ritchie. He is currently working on a musical fantasy called *The Bone Chandelier* with book by novelist and NPR host Ellen Kushner. Holding an MFA from the Parsons School of Design, his career includes painting as well as songwriting.

Richard Pearson Thomas (b. 1957) is gaining national recognition as a classically trained composer of opera, chamber music, art and cabaret songs, music theater, and film music. Like Bolcom, his three volumes of *Cabaret Songs* combine contemporary classical harmonic and rhythmic language with the European cabaret tradition and popular American musical style. Thomas blends current classical dissonances into popular music rhythms. His songs present a variety of styles includ-

ing a dissonant tango, a modern version of a Parisian Valse, and spare expansive Coplandesque chordal writing that supports deeply emotional text. Thomas was born in Montana, graduated from Eastman School of Music, and studied film scoring at the University of Southern California. His works have been presented in New York's Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, Salt Lake City Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Chautauqua Opera, the Winter Olympics Arts Festival, the Congressional Forum, and the Covent Garden Festival. His songs have been recorded by Kurt Ollmann, William Sharp, Sanford Sylvan, and Patricia Punty. His Off-Off Broadway musicals include *Ladies in a Maze* and *Cafe Society*. His song "AIDS Anxiety" appears on the Harmonium Mundi recording *AIDS Quilt Songbook*. He earned the Best Original Score award from the 1997 New York University First Film Festival. He has served as coach/music director at many prestigious music festivals, and for college and university music departments, and opera companies.

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NOTE: Hal Leonard Corp. and Warner Bros. Publications also publish many volumes of collections by individual songwriters, including Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, Hoagy Carmichael, Dietz and Schwartz, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Rodgers and Hart, and many others from the traditional American Songbook heritage. Likewise, one may easily find song books of pop-rock performers (the Beatles, the Carpenters, Billy Joel, Elton John, Joni Mitchell, Carol King, etc.) with suitable crossover material for classical singers.

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Eric R. Bronner, tenor, of Bristol, RI, performed his concert "Next Generation: New Writers of the Great American Songbook" at the New England Regional NATS Conference in August 2005, and at many music series venues throughout New England. He performs opera, art song, chamber music, oratorio, music theater, and cabaret throughout New England. His performances have aired on BBC, NPR, and PBS. Internationally, he appeared as a soloist in the Aldeburgh Music Festival-Fringe Festival in England. He has performed roles nationally at the Napa (CA) Zarzuela Festival, Townsend Opera (Modesto, CA), First Coast Opera (St. Augustine, FL), and as a guest soloist at several midwestern colleges.

He performs roles regularly with American Classics (Boston, MA), Opera Providence (RI), Cape Cod Opera (MA), and has sung many roles with Longwood Opera (Boston), and Ocean State Light Opera (Providence).

A NATS Intern Program alumnus and a Certified McClosky Vocal Technician, he serves on the voice and communication faculties of Roger Williams University and Salve Regina University, teaching applied voice, vocal methods, diction and articulation, and public speaking. He has published two other articles in the *Journal of Singing*.

He earned his MM on scholarship at Longy School of Music (Cambridge, MA). He studied pre-WWII European cabaret technique on scholarship at the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies in Suffolk, England, and studied contemporary American cabaret style at the Cabaret Conference at Yale University. He also holds a BA in Theatre from Purdue University and an MS in Journalism from Ohio University. For many years he served as the musical director for Flickers Arts Collaborative (Newport, RI), and was a founder/artistic director of the Jamestown Chamber Music Series (RI). He is a two-time recipient of the Arts Education Fellowship from the Rhode Island Foundation.



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