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All stand for a musical match made in heaven

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Peerless performer ... Susan Graham.

SUSAN GRAHAM **Opera House Studio, May 1**

NOT all operatic stars can present a convincing song recital, however the renowned American mezzo-soprano Susan Graham proved a peerless performer in this most intimate of genres. Her partnership with the flawless accompanist Malcolm Martineau on piano seemed a match made in musical heaven, such was their complete interpretative rapport.

Graham's voice is an instrument of extraordinary tonal control, yet seems utterly effortless in production. The sound quality is even and warm throughout the entire vocal range, from the most dramatic of declamatory phrases to those delicately spun pianissimos. She brings absolute clarity of diction to each word so that meaning and sentiment are never in doubt. It is as though she directly addresses each individual in the audience.

The intelligently structured program embraced feminine sensibilities. There was a pleasing symmetry in the two-part program whereby songs of innocence in the first contrasted with songs of experience in the second. Both halves opened with miniature dramatic scenes: Purcell's *The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation* offers a vision of purity, whereas Horovitz's *Lady Macbeth* evokes the psychology of Shakespeare's most malevolent heroine. In both, Graham's acclaimed operatic talents created wholly believable women wrestling with their individual predicaments.

In six settings of Goethe's *Mignon* songs, each by a different composer, the performers found variety and pathos, delivered with unfaltering truth. Wolf's climactic setting of *Kennst du das Land* brought a profound climax to the sequence in a perfectly fashioned performance.

Poulenc's *Fiancailles pour rire* introduced gentler versions of the femme fatale, sometimes louche, sometimes melancholic, always elegantly shaded in Graham's nuanced colours, wonderfully replicated by the piano. Naughty and flirtatious dames followed, celebrated in songs by Messager, Porter and Duke, bringing quintessential New York cocktail-party chic to this intimate salon recital. Ben Moore's witty party piece *Sexy Lady*, written for Graham, amusingly charts the frustrations of the operatic mezzo confined to pants roles, and allowed both performers a bravura comic turn.

Generously proffered encores crowned a superb recital by two musicians whose consummate artistry demands only superlatives, and deserved the standing ovation it received.

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