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Brett Kroeger's recital reviewed

JULY 08, 2016 IN REGIONAL FOURTEEN FIFTEEN

Brett Kroeger warms a December evening with songs from the Great

War

Young soprano Brett Kroeger gave a stirring recital entitled ***Over There***, Greatest Hits from the Great War, at the Greenwich Arts Council building on the evening of December 13. It was a totally pleasing and enlightening hour of song, insights, history and memories. Her marvelous accompanist was Christopher Denny.



Brett Kroeger sings songs from the Great War

Kroeger is familiar to local audiences, certainly to me most recently, through her performances with Troupers Light Opera Company. In her interview with **OperaMetro** in November (below on this page), she cited a certain fascination with the Great War era of popular music. Not surprising: Kroeger was conspicuously well suited for her part in the Troupers' production of Victor Herbert's ***The Red Mill*** in 2013. Most of the music this December evening lies easily within her vocal comfort zone.

The opportunity to create a recital structured around this era was perfect, 2014 being the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I. In her evening ***Over There***, Kroeger and Denny arranged the songs according to broad chronological stages of the War, through the call to arms, the send-off, the seemingly endless suffering in the trenches, the worries of loved ones back home, and the return for better or worse. Kroeger met the demands of the different styles and moods of the songs,

communicating directly with her audience through expressive voice and body language.

Though often the songs flowed seamlessly together, in between some, and at major junctures, Kroeger supplied us with the historical and social context, often reading quotes from letters, diaries, and other sources. The words of the songs thus became more closely tied with real human situations and emotions during wartime. Structurally her show was intelligent, informative, even more so when one checked out the program text after the fact, and as she read or recited, Denny played a soft backdrop which either introduced the next song or reminded one of the last. It was a very smart show, all said, and that they could do all of this without any hesitations or lapses bespeaks of real talents and a dedication to excellence.

But, of course, this was a vocal recital, not a history lecture. Kroeger's singing, expression, and overall *joie de vivre* made for an entertaining and at times very touching experience. For me, in particular, it was her rendition of **Silent Night** mixed with **Stille Nacht** in German. This song highlighted an unusual event during the first Christmas of the War: a lone British soldier singing **Silent Night** in the trenches is echoed by **Stille Nacht** sung from the German trenches, then more join in, which leads to an impromptu cease fire, tacitly agreed and upheld by the soldiers themselves, not by dumbfounded officers on either side. Soldiers put down their weapons, crossed the barbed wire, embraced and shared rations, photos and stories, played music and cards. My great aunt, before she immigrated to the Catskills in New York, was in the German medical corps during that war. She used to play her 78 recording of Ernestine Schumann-Heink singing **Stille Nacht**; it remained for me a dear memory of her. The 'heavenly peace' didn't last of course. The senseless slaughter continued for nearly four more years. A hardened woman, my great aunt never talked about the carnage she witnessed.

Kroeger also sang war songs from the Russians and French, all well-articulated, to illustrate that, below the ideological levels, wars deeply affect real people. The experiences are universal.

As if to underscore her status as a bona fide opera singer, not just a popular wartime *chanteuse*, Kroeger encoored her recital with **Chi il bel sogno di Doretta** in Italian from Puccini's **La Rondine**, an opera impacted by the hostilities. She managed the beautiful upper range of this aria with grace, which brought an adoring audience to their feet.

Brava! To quote the old search engines: "More like this." Please.