

MUSIC

# Natalie Dessay Finishes What Barbra Streisand Started

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI NOV. 10, 2017

Even during her years as an opera star, renowned for her intense performances, Natalie Dessay saw herself as something more: an actress, a chanteuse. She has long revered Barbra Streisand, and now — at 52, having retired from the opera stage in 2013 — Ms. Dessay is finally completing a decades-old project originally conceived for Ms. Streisand.

The seeds were planted in 2008, when Ms. Dessay was putting together a live revue of songs by the composer Michel Legrand and they struck up a friendship. Since then, she and Mr. Legrand have toured Europe and Canada with a jazz trio; she has appeared in a stage version of his movie musical “The Umbrellas of Cherbourg”; and in 2013 they released an album, “Entre Elle et Lui,” that included “Papa Can You Hear Me?” and “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?” — both songs by Mr. Legrand that had been immortalized by Ms. Streisand.

And yet Ms. Dessay felt she wasn’t done with her new collaborator’s catalog. Might he, by any chance, have a little something special laying around?

“I played her some melodies and told her it was an oratorio for one voice and a symphonic orchestra,” Mr. Legrand, 85, recently said in a phone interview from his country home near Paris. “She started to cry and shout, she was walking on the ceiling, and she said, ‘Oh la la, that’s exactly what I want to do. I want to record it, give it to me.’”

The oratorio followed the life of a woman from birth to death, via romance, marriage and motherhood. Mr. Legrand and the lyricists Alan and Marilyn

Bergman had pitched it to Ms. Streisand in the early 1970s, but she did not want to commit to the full project, which was set aside.

Now, with Ms. Dessay on board, Mr. Legrand reunited with the Bergmans (he is 92 and she turned 88 on Nov. 10) to complete it. After a gestation of nearly 45 years, it will be released digitally by Sony Classical on Nov. 17 as “Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Woman,” with 15 songs and five instrumental numbers. (The album will be available on CD Jan. 5.)

The big mystery in the origin story is why Ms. Streisand passed on what, in hindsight, seems like a golden creative opportunity. Back then she was feeling “musically restless,” as she put it in a recent email, and was looking for ways to test herself. Yet Ms. Streisand had qualms about the Legrand/Bergman idea, then referred to as “Life Cycle of a Woman.”

“I don’t think Michel, Marilyn and Alan had fully mapped out their concept yet, except for the basic ‘womb to tomb’ idea,” Ms. Streisand said, adding that in 1973 they recorded five songs intended for the projects, which she released on various albums since. (Among them were “Between Yesterday and Tomorrow,” the new recording’s poignant title track, and the tender lullaby “Mother and Child,” in which the singer plays both roles and essentially duets with herself.)

“The only two songs I didn’t relate to musically or lyrically, at the time,” she added, “were about birth and death. They didn’t want to change them, and then we all became involved in other projects, so the idea lost momentum.”

And there was another, more practical impediment.

“I remember one of the things that made the project slightly complicated was that I’d decided to record standing in the middle of the studio surrounded by the orchestra,” Ms. Streisand said. “It’s thrilling being enveloped by the music, as opposed to standing in an isolated vocal booth with the musicians playing on the other side of the glass. However, it made the record very difficult to mix — because if we wanted to raise or lower my vocal level, it raised or lowered all the music around it!”

Ms. Dessay admitted in a phone interview from France that Ms. Streisand’s decision not to record the full oratorio made things easier. “She didn’t make it her own, which freed me to be the inspiration for the cycle’s completion,” she said.

“The inclusion of birth and death speaks to me, and I really wanted to perform that.”

In the 1990s, Ms. Dessay rose to coloratura fame in the opera world for the vividness and commitment of her acting, both in comic roles (she was brilliant as the doll Olympia in “Les Contes d’Hoffmann” and the spunky Zerbinetta in “Ariadne auf Naxos”) and tragic ones (she opened the Metropolitan Opera’s 2007-08 season in “Lucia di Lammermoor”).

And since stepping away from staged opera, she has redirected her energies toward theater, touring France in Howard Barker’s “Und” and currently rehearsing the Stefan Zweig drama “Legend of a Life.” Portraying Mr. Legrand’s unnamed woman came naturally to her; she switches to a little-girl tone in “Mother and Child” without sounding cloying.

Singing the material was another matter, and Ms. Dessay had to retrain herself. (The new album’s liner notes credit the American jazz singer Tierney Sutton as vocal coach.)

“First of all, when you are miked you don’t sing in the same range, so there was a part of my voice, the lower register, I’d never used in opera,” she said. “I’m not going to turn into Patti LuPone or Barbra Streisand, but I’m learning to find my other voice — maybe my true voice.”

Since his 1954 debut album, “I Love Paris,” Mr. Legrand has worked in various genres while creating an immediately recognizable sound, including his many jazz recordings; his association with the filmmaker Jacques Demy on movie musicals like “The Young Girls of Rochefort”; his sophisticated soundtracks, most notably “Summer of ’42” and “The Thomas Crown Affair,” which spawned the hit “The Windmills of Your Mind”; and his Oscar-winning score for Ms. Streisand’s directorial debut, “Yentl.”

All of those styles can be heard on the lush “Between Yesterday and Tomorrow,” which feels like the summation of a prodigious career and allows Ms. Dessay to dart with agility and confidence from girlishness to seduction and even, on “The More You Have,” gentle swing.

“It’s so ‘Austin Powers,’” she said of that track, adding that the work “also nods to Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel, Debussy, Rodrigo. That’s what’s great about

Michel: He has a freedom today that he may not have had 30 or 40 years ago. If he wants to pay tribute to composers he loves, well, he just does. It's his way of saying, "This is part of my world, this is what has nourished me, and now it's part of my music."

The catchy immediacy of Mr. Legrand's tunes masks how difficult it can be to sing them. "There's a feeling of water, somehow, abandoned and never-ending, combined with tricky melodic surprises that require great pitch precision or you miss the key details that make each phrase special," said the singer Melissa Errico, who is among his most capable contemporary interpreters, starring in his only Broadway show, "Amour," in 2002, and releasing the album "Legrand Affair" in 2011.

"Between Yesterday and Tomorrow" abounds with delicious touches that reward close listening. Ms. Dessay points out, for instance, that she exhales during the birth song and inhales during the death one, and that the album works as a continuous loop.

"I thought that it could begin again endlessly," she said, "and that this woman could be born and die endlessly, and that this is the story of humanity. It's very particular, very personal and very universal at the same time."

Mr. Legrand's arrangements for the London Studio Orchestra have a majestic sweep that may remind listeners of classic Hollywood scores as much as the composer's own glories. Ms. Errico recalled he once told her that he meant his arrangements to be both "intimate and enormous."

The bassist Pierre Boussaguet has been collaborating with Mr. Legrand since 1993, but he was not quite prepared for the emotional impact of the full orchestration. "I was in tears after a few hours on the first day of recording," he said by email. "I looked around and saw Natalie was crying as well."

Mr. Legrand said he wasn't surprised. "The older you get, the better you get, and I write 45 times better than I did back then," he said, chuckling. "I hope it's true, in any case."

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