

March 11, 2011

Arts & Entertainment

For 100th year, come on and hear

Berlin tribute marks centenary of 'Ragtime Band'

By Jules Becker

Benjamin Sears (left) and Brad Conner flank Irving Berlin's daughter Mary Ellin Barrett. Irving Berlin spoke Yiddish at his Brooklyn home, with English his second language. Acculturated enough to pen such popular hits as "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade" yet steadfastly Jewish, the Russian-American son of a cantor (Baline was the family name) tellingly inserted no holiday details in either one.

For more than two decades, Benjamin Sears and Bradford Conner have been performing Berlin's wide-ranging repertoire and studying the man and his music.

The Cambridge-based song duo, who perform under the umbrella American Classics series, will celebrate Berlin at Longy School of Music March 18, exactly 100 years after his first big hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," was published.

The song has particular meaning to Sears and Conner. They sang it at their first concert in 1989, and their first CD centered on Berlin numbers. In all, they've recorded four CDs of Berlin's songs, featuring works dating from 1909 to 1925. In the works are CDs for the periods 1925-'35 and 1935-'45.

And that still won't finish the songbook. Berlin, who died in 1989 at the age of 101, released his last hit, "We'll Have an Old-Fashioned Wedding," in 1966.

Sears, a 58-year-old Bedford native, was drawn to Berlin's lyrics as an English major. Conner, a 50-year-old West Virginia native who studied classical music in college, got to know Berlin's music at the age of 25 when he was hired to help stage "Annie Get Your Gun."

In the fall, Oxford University Press is due to publish "The Irving Berlin Reader," edited by Sears. It will feature writings by Berlin and others about his music, as well as his rules for composing a popular song (among them, make the lyrics easy and the melody in the range of the average singer).

"He was an absolute sponge," Sears said of the composer's ability to absorb a vast variety of styles. "Berlin did everything by ear. He could remember stuff and not have to write it down."

Berlin's ethnic roots showed in such songs as the 1927 "Russian Lullaby" (Sears described its minor-key melody as "a very haunting Jewish sound") and "Cohen Owes Me \$97," which mocks the stereotype of the Jewish business man.

Conner likened Berlin's gifts to those of the man who performed many of his hits, dancer and singer Fred Astaire. "He's often a deceptively simple composer," Conner said. "It takes a lot of work to make it look simple."

Berlin's impact went beyond music. He stood up to racism, by threatening to call off the 1933 show "As Thousands Cheer," when some whites balked at taking a bow with Ethel Waters.

Sears said that "Alexander's Ragtime Band" may be "the oldest song in the American songbook that is getting regularly performed." Among the 18 numbers in the show will be a non-Berlin piece in the same vein called "When Alexander Sends His Ragtime Band to France."

The tribute concert will be a "music hall"-style program telling Berlin's story with a mix of song and narrative. In preparing it, the duo consulted with Berlin's three daughters, Mary Ellin Barrett, Linda Emmet and Elizabeth I. Peters. "They've been incredibly supportive," Conner said.

Veteran actor-singer Bob Jolly will serve as co-emcee with fellow performer JoAnne Dickinson. The lineup also includes American Classics regulars Mary Anne Lanier and Margaret Ulmer as well as such other local favorites as Brian De- Lorenzo, Kerry Dowling, Valerie Anastasio and Tim Harbold.

In conjunction with the commemoration, Sears and Conner will give a lecture recital on "Alexander's Ragtime Band" March 30 at the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center in Newton.

For more on Sears and Conner, visit www.benandbrad.com.

"Alexander's Ragtime Band," American Classics concert of Irving Berlin music, at Longy School of Music, Cambridge, March 18 at 7:30 p.m. 617-254-1125 or amclass.org.