

The Sullivans Take Manhattan—and Sing

By Daniel Henninger

New York

There is a lot to this story, so let's start at the beginning. About 125 years ago, a sturdy Scotch-Irish lady named Clara McNames leaves New York City for Kansas, where she marries John Ebbe and bears Libby. Soon this impatient woman and her family head by train to the new Oklahoma Territory. Libby marries and settles in a place called Boggy Depot, which is outside Norman. All the women in this story seem to have had music in them all the time (mandolins, pianos, violins, singing), and so it is not completely beyond telling that some 100 or more years after Clara left New York, a lady in this line named Elizabeth Sullivan, who like all before her is an amateur, would return from Oklahoma to perform her music this past Sunday at Carnegie Hall, where during three separate songs, grown men wept. They didn't cry at the music, which was lovely, but at the words, which I think took this audience closer to the middle of the human heart than it expected to go on a nice Mother's Day afternoon.

Many in the audience knew that the Sullivan family can make good music. Six of them sang with her Sunday, accompanied on the piano by the intensely vibrant New York cabaret star Mark Nadler. Daughter K.T. Sullivan, a major figure in cabaret, is currently appearing at Neue Galerie (see box nearby). Son Tim performed his own, quite moving one-man show, "Diary of a Songwriter," at Danny's Skylight Room on West 46th Street just hours after appearing with his mother at Carnegie Hall. Daughter Stacy won Manhattan's 2002 cabaret award for best female debut and sang the following evening in the hallowed Oak Room at the Algonquin Hotel. And daughter-in-law Robin Brooks Sullivan (married to one of two non-singing Sullivan progeny) did her solo singing the night before at Danny's Skylight Room, after which daughter Heather commandeered the bar's piano for more pro vocals.

What most people in the Carnegie Hall audience probably didn't realize is that amid the nonstop sound of family music back home, Elizabeth Sullivan found out that she possessed the art of songwriting. Not merely the skill, but the

art—that rare ability to combine notes, syllables and cadences in a way that enters the ear and touches the nearest appropriate emotion.

With brother Pat, normally a family physician in southeastern Oklahoma, K.T. sang "You Are the Reason," the sort of song that makes men in such audiences try hard not to sneak a hand to their eyes. Many failed. "Not Tonight" occupied the almost unbearably sad place that sits between love's departure and all it leaves behind. Thousands of such songs have collapsed into sentimentality; these didn't.

That afternoon, I think, was a compact case study in the roots of minor musical genius. Stacy sang her mother's "Evidence," a song so brief, spare and paced with odd tonalities that it brought to mind an art song. While Robin and Stacy performed a complex song inspired by the Homeric legend of Circe, Elizabeth sat behind them producing a torrent of non-pop notes from the Steinway. Then came her own solo version of "Amazing Grace," which she began with a meandering piano line beneath the famous first lines that made the sturdy gospel classic sound almost new. For the finale, all seven performers sang "This Is My Home," a rousing Les Miz-like anthem to the idea of coming to America ("This is my house, my place of freedom") that would have brought even tune-sodden Broadway habits to their feet.

Yes, this was a friendly audience, but that alone doesn't explain what occurred Sunday. It was really the music, not the skilled players, that earned the deeper reactions obviously evident around the room. Elizabeth Sullivan's music seemed to pass effortlessly across many musical

terrains—pop standard, country, art music, Broadway. In time, sitting in the audience, one had to wonder: What is going on here? What kind of person writes the final song for a Broadway musical that doesn't exist?

That so much wonderful music courses around the Sullivan family is remarkable—but not exceptional. Sometimes the genetic master way up yonder decides on His more expansive days to sprinkle the special genes abundantly on some family. Thus was born unto us the the Carter Family. Ellis Marsalis bequeathed to us his sons, and the Bonds family outputs home-run hitters.

On the other hand, we also know that genetic genius often sits unaroused from

THE MEN AND WOMEN who make their livings singing the great songs of the 20th century have a deep repertoire from which to choose. After spending April singing the music of Harold Arlen in the Oak Room at the Algonquin, K.T. Sullivan has taken what for most cabaret singers would be a risk: She is spending Fridays this month performing the music of the Weimar period, no small part of it in languid, melancholy German. She doesn't mince words: "I bite my men and suck them dry, and then I bake them in a pie." But she also offers the brave anti-Nazi satire of Friedrich Hollaender. The venue is the Café Sabarsky at the Neue Galerie, which houses an excellent collection of Austrian art at 86th Street and Fifth Avenue. (Tickets at 212-628-6200.)

day one to burial day. God hands the stuff out, but He doesn't arrange bookings. How did the Elizabeth Sullivan show come to town?

In the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889, Will Wright, a successful well-digger and Elizabeth's grandfather, built a house on Lightning Creek, and in that house he erected for his mandolin-playing wife what came to be called the "music room." In this room, Elizabeth Sullivan explained on Sunday, it was decreed that the children would learn to read music because her grandfather was not about to have one of those "play-by-ear families." The sounds in the music room ran to Bach, Handel and gospel. This, I think, is the moment that in time would give Elizabeth Sullivan and her children the chance to become something more than merely good family-dinner singers.

Elizabeth's mother taught her to play piano. And Elizabeth, in turn, taught her children to play. By now the Sullivan house of music had expanded to include not just classical and gospel but Broadway, jazz and of course C&W. It is not beyond imagining that an intelligent, mature, musically gifted woman sitting some seven decades in or near Boggy Depot, Okla., amid a family heritage of music handed across a century, would if given the chance late in life produce a maelstrom of strong songs touched by everything in memory. Somehow, Clara McNames's long trip from New York City to Oklahoma made possible Elizabeth Sullivan's return trip with a suitcase of songs and a family of singers. The outpouring occurred in Carnegie Hall last Sunday.

Mr. Henninger is deputy editorial page editor of the Journal.



K.T. and Elizabeth Sullivan

Sunday, June 20th 8:30 p.m. Carnegie Recital Hall