

OPERA NEWS

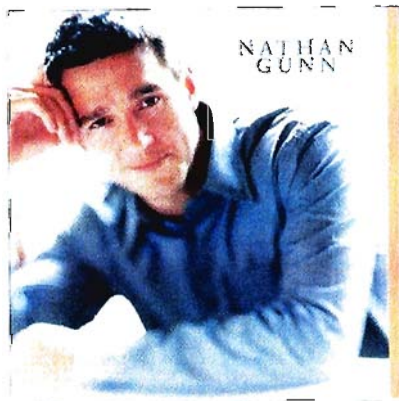
PUBLISHED BY THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE

Nathan Gunn

"JUST BEFORE SUNRISE" Songs by Scheer, Waits, Van Heusen, Eisler, Joel and others. With Chenoweth. J. Gunn, music director; Cullen, Thalken, conductors. No texts. Sony Classical 88697-06510-2

Nathan Gunn is a singer with unmistakable star power. His is not the most beautiful baritone voice on the planet, or the biggest, or the sweetest — although his singing has these qualities and many more in abundance. It is Gunn's seemingly total availability to his material that makes this record of songs so delightful. It is even more delicious on repeated hearings, and that goes for the sparkling and sometimes wistful arrangements of David Cullen and Joseph Thalken as well.

Gunn tailors his impressive baritone arsenal of robust legato climaxes, snarly macho lower notes and beautiful, floating upper tones (especially on his gorgeous "oo" vowel) to this material — none of it standard "classical" fare — and responds generously to the rhythms of the notes and words of each of these songs. Two of the lovelier ballads on the album — the title track and "Say Anything" — are by Gunn's friend Gene Scheer; both are given gentle, heartfelt performances. Likewise, Gunn's intimate, bittersweet rendition of "The Secret Marriage," a Hanns Eisler/Sting song, scores perfectly.



Lovely as the many ballads are, I'm a sucker for the uptempo numbers, such as "Polka Dots and Moonbeams" or the Tom Waits waltz, "Innocent When You Dream," utterly transformed from its original in Gunn's vocally hearty rendition. While the latter does sport one of the rare climactic high notes on the album, it seems to be a trademark of Gunn's performances that he never indulges in gratuitous vocal gestures, which, considering his considerable gifts, must be a temptation. In fact, the charm of Gunn's singing lies in its innocent mastery: he seems to surrender his vocal ego to the service of the material. One has the feeling of someone who truly enjoys the songs more than the sound of his own voice.

DREW MINTER