

A Pair to Draw From.

Bolcom & Morris's new CD seems anything but autumnal.

► **A CONVERSATION** with WILLIAM BOLCOM and JOAN MORRIS can be dizzying; the husband-and-wife team ricochets from BING CROSBY to KAY SWIFT, bounces off JUSSI BJÖRLING and grazes CHARLES LUDLAM and MAGGIE TEYTE, while you desperately try to keep up. Associations spin off associations, and you come away with a sense of a life in music that has been lived with breath-taking fullness. Bolcom and Morris, seventy-seven and seventy-three, respectively, spoke with me just after Christmas, by phone from their home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They recently made the decision to retire from performing, but Bolcom is in a swirl of other activities: his 1992 opera *McTeague* was just revived at Landestheater Linz. On April 21, Manhattan's Café Sabarsky will present the complete Cabaret Songs of Bolcom and the late ARNOLD WEINSTEIN. In June, Bolcom's Trombone Concerto will be given its world premiere by the New York Philharmonic, led by ALAN GILBERT, with soloist JOSEPH ALESSI. After a protracted recovery from several broken ribs, Bolcom is also orchestrating his latest opera, *Dinner at Eight*, scheduled to open next season at Minnesota Opera.

Dinner at Eight is based on the play by GEORGE S. KAUFMAN and EDNA FERBER—not on the well-known film that GEORGE CUKOR made of it in 1933. “We had to sign a paper saying we would not use certain things from the film,” says Bolcom. “The play is really kind of a downbeat comedy. There’s some dark stuff in there. And when the movie was done, it was between 1932 and 1933, the nadir of the Depression, and you really couldn’t give them something that downbeat. But ours will still be funny, I hope.” The opera’s librettist is MARK CAMPBELL; it’s one of nine world premieres Campbell has coming up.



Bolcom and Morris at Lauren Flanigan's Christmastime benefit for the homeless, “Comfort Ye”

Bolcom and Morris recently released their latest CD on White Pine Music, the label of the Central Michigan University School of Music. It’s called *Autumn Leaves*, and it’s a collection of songs that the duo has performed for years but never included on any of their previous albums, partly because they didn’t fit into the various themes of those earlier programs (turn-of-the-century-songs, Jerome Kern, etc.) There are few accompanists nimbler than Bolcom, and he provides the ideal foundation for Morris’s warmly intimate interpretations. Her voice has thinned out on top, but she compensates for it with a sense of immediacy that few singers, in any genre, can even approximate. Among the standouts on *Autumn Leaves* are Paul James and Kay Swift’s melancholia-tinged “Can’t We Be Friends”; Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen’s “Swinging on a Star,” in which Morris may make you laugh out loud with her reading of the line “Or would you rather be a pig?”; and “Bruce,” John Wallowitch’s comic number that has been sledgehammered by numerous cabaret artists. Here, Bolcom and Morris give it an accelerating tempo that makes it freshly funny.

Morris didn’t always have such an easy presence. She grew up in Portland, Oregon, attended Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, and came to New York in 1965, studying at the American Academy of Dramatic Art. She met Bolcom in 1972. “Early on,” she says, “I was floored that Bill could talk to the audience so easily. He used to feel like Svengali, because I would never say a word. When I was growing up in Oregon, I sang in the chorus of the operetta. It was an all-girls academy, and girls would do the boys’ parts, too. People told me I had a pretty voice. Once at a birthday party, a girlfriend said, ‘Sing for us.’ I said, ‘Okay, but everybody has to turn around while I do.’ I guess that’s why I eventually felt so comfortable recording. Nobody was there.”

Morris gives particular credit to her voice teacher, FEDERICA SCHMITZ-SVEVO, for steering her attention toward the true meaning of the words she was singing. “She was the only teacher I ever had who did that,” says Morris. “Also, I was always a big reader. As a child, I read *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* over and over. Words were so important to me. I wanted to tell the story. That’s what I tried to do in my first show in New York, *The Drunkard*. It played off-Broadway, on Thirteenth Street. The music director was BARRY MANILOW. Best accompanist I ever met—until Bill.” ■