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And The
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Karen Kohler and the Kabarett Kollektiv

By **Barbara Leavy**

When Karen Kohler moved her successful performing career from Austin, Texas, to New York, her debut show, *Das Kabarett*, immediately drew the attention of our magazine. It was not only Karen's Nordic good looks and lovely soprano voice, but the featuring of European cabaret that we focused on in our review. In a more recent show, *Paris-Berlin Express*, Karen reminded her audience that cabaret was born in Paris and flourished in Germany. She has been striving to preserve that artistic tradition here in the United States. Karen's *The Moons of Venus: Romancing Marlene Dietrich* coincided with the centenary of Dietrich's birth (these days she performs it in Berlin), and Karen was one of the performers we interviewed for our two-part Dietrich feature. In 2003, Karen's musical background, her personal identity as a German who has lived most of her life in America, and her love of the Great European Songbook culminated in her formation of the Kabarett Kollektiv, a group of nine performers who perform European cabaret singly or together, sometimes

with additional guests. Since the Kollektiv's first appearance at The Duplex in 2003, it has played to sold-out audiences at various New York cabaret venues.

Karen's life and musical career can be viewed from three perspectives: her cultural background and early aspirations to become an attaché at the German Embassy in Washington, D.C.; her growing career as a singer and actress; and now her bi-continental cabaret appearances in the United States and abroad. It is a combination of these three that led her to assemble the Kollektiv.

If genes play a large part in the persons we become, Karen's artistic talents can be traced back at least to the 1700s. She was born Karen Stammnitz, a descendant of Johann Stamitz and his son Karl, court musicians and composers who were part of the renowned Mannheim school of musicians. Johann, Karen relates with pride, helped lay out the design for what is now the modern symphony orchestra, giving a larger role to woodwinds than they formerly had. The environmental influence came into play when

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Karen was 5 years old and her father, a Lufthansa airline executive, was transferred to the United States. In her Amityville, Long Island, school, the study of music



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tended to divide along racial lines. Most white students studied instruments and most black students sang. But Karen joined the choir, where, she reports, "I learned my English to gospel music, the Jackson Five and Bill Withers." Perhaps gospel singing also contributed to the emotional intensity that she continues to bring to her singing.

Years later, living in Texas, Karen studied classical voice and theater, singing the role of many musical heroines, such as Laurie in *Oklahoma*. She then experienced a true epiphany when she heard a recording of *Ute*



R. Madleen Kohler



Lemper Sings Kurt Weill and "found the music utterly captivating, like nothing I had ever heard before." Her budding musical career then dovetailed with earlier aspirations. Hoping eventually to find her place in the Germany Embassy, Karen had majored in International Relations at CW Post College, completing her studies at the University of Arizona.

How significant that she not only discovered a new music she loved, but in her discovery found a passage back to her own cultural roots. Karen decided to "revive the old Berlin songs of Marlene

Opposite page
In her Berlin debut
Singing Jacques Brel
This page
Provocatively
positioned with
uber pianist Larry
Greenawalt

Dietrich for my Texas audiences."

One can imagine that what she sang was equally new to most Texans; in any event, the result was



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Karen's first two CDs, *Das Cabarett* and *Jam and Spice: The Songs of Kurt Weill*. But Texas was hardly the environment in which to develop a cabaret career, and Karen and her husband Bob Kohler moved to New York. Then, she relates, during the Weill centenary in 2001 "I was invited to sing at the German Embassy in Washington. A diplomat greeted me upon my arrival. 'Once upon a time,' I told him, 'I

wanted to have your job. I wanted to become the cultural attaché.' That night I was introduced as an ambassador of German culture for the very first time." It was not, however, to be her last time, and appearances at

the Embassy and German Consulates are now part of Karen's performing life. In October 2004—coincidentally the date when the second Kollektiv series began—Karen officially became a U.S. citizen, able, nevertheless, to retain her German nationality.

There was yet another surprise awaiting Karen after she discovered Kurt Weill. In January 2001, Karen attended in Berlin the month-long festi-

ties and symposiums to mark *100 Years of German Cabaret* and saw and heard for herself "mostly political and satirical cabaret and virtually no songs." This was not an entire surprise since overseas bookers had already told

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