

## Review

### Contemporary Youth Orchestra's "Singer/Songwriters"— an embarrassment of riches (March 16)

by Timothy Robson



Sometimes good ideas run amok, despite the best of intentions and excellent execution. Such was the case with the Contemporary Youth Orchestra's "Singer / Songwriters" concert at CSU's Waetjen Auditorium on March 16. The orchestra's brilliantly inventive music director Liza Grossman hit on the idea of having singer/songwriters present their songs in full orchestral arrangements commissioned by the orchestra.

The performer/composers participated in a competition to have their songs chosen. There was a wealth of talent from Cleveland, Michigan, New York, Connecticut and California. And there's the flaw: fourteen performers (some soloists, some groups) were chosen to perform two songs each. Then there was set up time and spoken commentary in between each performer. The concert was more than three hours long, and many in the audience fled long before the end, which was regrettable,

because there were fine performances right through to the end of the evening.

The first half of the concert was devoted to new and emerging young songwriters, some still in high school, others in college or recently out of college. Some of the most interesting performances came from this group. In fact, the first half would have made a very fine concert in itself, with the songwriters peers in age to the young people in the orchestra. Indeed, several of them have previously performed as members of the orchestra. The second half of the program featured more established artists, mostly from the local scene. The orchestrations, by a fleet of arrangers, were first-rate and imaginative, although they were often overpowered by the amplification of the soloists' guitars and voices.

The new songs were, especially for the younger performers, on the eternal topics of popular song: love (falling in and out of it), the pressures of life, and coming of age. The styles were everything from full-on rock, to jazz and Broadway ballads, R&B, Americana, and folk-influenced.

Space will not allow a detailed description of all twenty-eight songs and their performances, but here are a few numbers that especially stood out for this listener. High school

senior Missy Zenker's "I Might Love Him," was not musically adventurous, but had a fun twist on whether she might or might not be in love with a boy, and whether the boy might or might not be in love with her.

Tall and lanky Baldwin Wallace student Jordan Lawson sang a quite touching song, "Few and Far Between," with a sophisticated and well-constructed lyric about the relationship between the narrator and his father. Amidst the abundance, this was the highlight of the concert for this listener.

Zxari (stage name of Praxton Zari Smith, a senior at Orange High School) sang two very inventive and fierce songs, "Surreally Beautiful" and "Too Wise", both of which made use of her extremely wide vocal range and the influence of folk music. Hers were by far the most adventurous songs on the program.

The second half of the program opened with a chorus of kindergarten through fourth grade students of the Campus International School, singing Janice Fields Pohl's "Citizens of the World" and "A Thinker," both evoking the principles of the International Baccalaureate curriculum. The students in the chorus were well-prepared and had excellent diction (not to mention choreography) to put forward their message. The songs should be adopted by other schools as anthems.

Conya Doss is not only an excellent R&B songwriter and performer, she is a public school teacher in the Cleveland area. She and her back-up singer made the most of the big orchestral arrangement in "Only Be Me," which was about her transition from being an artist under contract to a major company to being an independent artist.

Big Ship's songs were fun: "Practice" elaborated on the adage that practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect. Hey Mavis, with Laurie Caner on vocals and banjo, with Ed Caner on fiddle, and Brent Kirby sitting in on guitar with back-up vocal, gave a rousing conclusion to the concert with their bluegrass-tinged "Say Hello to Paris" and "Red Wine", with its crazed shrieks.

For the record, the performers were (in order of appearance) Christian Watson, Keifer Wiley, Garrett Cyr, Missy Zenker, Jeffery Gaiser, Jordan Lawson, Zxari, the Campus International Children's Chorus, Tracy Marie, Brent Kirby, Conya Doss, Big Ship, Monique Varsames, and Hey Mavis. The arrangers were Paul Leary, Stefan Podell, Eden Rayz, and Derek Snyder.

Kudos go to the performers in the Contemporary Youth Orchestra for playing an operatic-length concert on what Ms. Grossman described as only six weeks of rehearsal. Ms. Grossman's enthusiasm for the group is apparent. Next time we hope they leave us wanting more.

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