

Review

Bass-baritone Mark S. Doss at The Music Settlement (December 9)

by Daniel Hathaway



Mark S. Doss returned to his hometown last weekend for a Friday evening concert with The Singers' Club, who joined with The Music Settlement to present the bass-baritone in a second event on Sunday afternoon. His solo recital on December 9 in Glick Recital Hall was offered as part of the Settlement's ongoing centennial celebrations.

Now an international opera star who has performed fifty-five roles in more than sixty houses, Doss only began studying voice at the age of 21 after he went off to seminary in Indiana. Friends, colleagues and fans packed the L-shaped recital hall on Sunday to hear Doss sing art songs, opera arias, two cantatas with instruments and a set of spirituals with the expert collaboration of pianist Jerry Maddox.

Mark S. Doss has the kind of voice you could listen to for hours. Whether the music calls for a strong and focused or a floated and velvety sound, his timbre is consistent from the top to the bottom of his range, and he infuses each piece with dramatic character, not so much singing to his audience as drawing them in to a meaningful, temporary world. If he sometimes seemed to be projecting to the back seats at the Vienna State Opera instead of singing in a big living room at The Settlement, it was enthralling to experience the power of his voice in a much smaller space.

Although he's most engaging in operatic selections — *Die Frist ist um* from Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Son lo spirito* from Boito's *Mefistofele* — Doss also created dramatic scenes from Ravel's *Chansons de Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* and a set of Russian songs by Gliinka (*Nochnoi Smotr, Midnight Review*), Tchaikovsky (*Nyet Tolko Tot, None but the Lonely Heart*) and Mussorgsky (*Pesnja Mefistofelja, Song of the Flea*). His lyrical singing of the Tchaikovsky chestnut was gorgeous, and his acting in the two Mephistopheles songs was hilarious. Maddox did fine work both with orchestral reductions and original piano parts, though his contributions were muted by a fully closed piano lid.

Composer H. Leslie Adams was in the audience to hear three selections from his *Night-songs*, the *Prayer* (Langston Hughes), *Heart of a Woman* (Georgia Douglas Johnson) and *Night Song* (Clarissa Scott Delany), attractive, lyrical pieces in a French romantic style.

Though he consulted a crib sheet in his palm from time to time, Doss proclaimed their texts with great sensitivity.

An ensemble of Music Settlement faculty and guests joined the singer for two extended works during the concert. Violinists Natalie Lin and Gerald Harris, violist Courtney Bonifant and cellist Rachel Bernstein skillfully set up the seaside ambiance for Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach* (poem by Matthew Arnold). Doss, singing from within the ensemble, floated elegant phrases over the undulating strings and projected the message of the poem with clarity and deep understanding.

The afternoon began with J.S. Bach's solo cantata, *Ich habe genug*, featuring oboist Andrea Brennan Hoy with the string ensemble. Alas, here Doss got off to a rocky start. Looking uncomfortable and with his head buried in the score, he punched out melodic lines, clipped phrases, sang wrong notes, and at one point got lost. It's risky to perform this work without a conductor but the ensemble did a fine job of holding the tricky instrumental textures together. Hoy finely shaped her ornate oboe lines.

At the other end of the afternoon, Doss closed his recital with Christmas spirituals arranged by Mark Hayes which gave him the opportunity to show off his impressive high notes. Those provided thrilling, full-voiced climaxes to three well-known and brilliantly presented traditional songs, and the audience rose to its feet in a rousing ovation.

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