

Review

Mezzo-Soprano Susan Graham to sing both on Oberlin Artist and Tuesday Musical Series on April 6 and 10

by Mike Telin



Susan Graham, the vocalist *Gramophone* called “America’s favorite mezzo,” and pianist Bradley Moore will present recitals on Sunday, April 6 at 4:00 pm in Finney Chapel as part of Oberlin’s Artist Recital Series and on Thursday, April 10 at 7:30 pm in Akron’s E.J. Thomas Hall as part of the Tuesday Musical Series.

Internationally acclaimed as an operatic singer and known for embracing a challenge, Susan Graham’s repertoire spans works from the 17th through the 21st centuries. She has earned critical accolades as well as a Grammy Award for her recording of Ives songs.

Recognizing her commitment to French music, the French government awarded her the prestigious *Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur*.

The Oberlin and Akron performances will feature music that celebrates great women throughout history and literature, and spans from the Baroque period with Purcell’s *Tell me, some pitying angel (The Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation)* through the 20th century with Poulenc’s song cycle, *Fiançailles pour rire*, and Joseph Horowitz’s *Lady Macbeth*.

During a recent telephone conversation, Graham said the idea for the program was in response to her most recent recording, *Virgins, Vixens & Viragos*. “Malcolm Martineau and I devised this program a few years ago for the recording.” Graham, who possesses a great sense of humor, jokingly added that the working title was “good girls, bad girls”.

“It didn’t necessarily start out being that way. We just wanted to show the scope of the different kinds of love that different kinds of women can encounter. This carries through from the beginning to the end of the program starting off with maternal love – going into Ophelia and ill fated love – Mignon, the searching kind of love – and Lady Macbeth, vengeful love. The Poulenc deals with different kinds of love from artificial to misguided to unrequited.”

Graham points out that beginning the program with the Purcell was an obvious choice. “The Blessed Virgin Mary, she’s rather iconic and so she seemed like a good jumping off point. And the chronological aspect of Purcell puts it at the beginning of the program. I

also wanted to include some Berlioz, which is how Ophelia gets into the mix. But the interesting thing about the Mignon group is that they are all by different composers. Rather than sticking with one composer's take on the character, it's been really interesting exploring the different aspects that each composer chose to bring out in the way that they set the text."

She finds the same to be true with the three settings of Goethe's poem, *Kennst du das Land*. "There are two in German, Liszt and Wolff, and the Duparc is in French. Each composer has a different take on it. The Wolff is like an operatic scene. It's quite extroverted, while the Liszt is a little more restrained. And the Duparc has sort of a transparency to it that is also very interesting."

In addition to her Oberlin recital, on Monday, April 7 Susan Graham will present a public masterclass beginning at 2:00 pm in Oberlin's Kulas Recital Hall. Has the recent onset of live HD broadcasts changed how she approaches performing, and is this something she will talk about with the students? "No, not at all! For me it's all about singing. [Even with the cameras] it's still all about the singing. I believe that there's opera on film and there's opera in the theatre and for me personally I think the integrity of the live sung performance is first and foremost."

Graham adds that she's not the kind of person who gets the scratch tapes and reviews all of the camera angles. "That's not what I am about. I feel very strongly that it's the director's job to deal with the cameras. It's my job to give the best, most authentic performance that I can. Also, if you're worried about that, it takes you out of the moment. So back to your question about the masterclass, I'm much more interested in having a student convince me of the plight of Cherubino then to stand with a good camera angle."

In addition to her many operatic, orchestral and recital performances, in June Graham will add another chapter to her career when she performs the role of Anna in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* at [Le Théâtre du Châtelet](#) in Paris, directed by Lee Blakeley. What led Graham to take on musical theatre?

"Yeah, what about that!" she laughs. "I did Offenbach's *Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* with Lee last summer in Santa Fe. Before we had really embarked on that project, he was doing another musical at the Châtelet. He wrote me saying they were talking about *King and I* and he was thinking, wouldn't that be interesting for *you* to think about. Then during the course of the e-mail he started backtracking – oh, this something you'd probably never consider, this is a terrible idea and I'm sorry to bother you, so never mind."

"When I received the e-mail at first I agreed. I thought, oh no, this is a terrible idea. Then I started thinking about it and thought why not? It will be something different, it will be challenging, I love the music. I grew up with musical theatre all around me and I did a lot of it in high school and college. So why not. It's something that might be interesting to me as I go forward."

Does Graham like all types of music? "I don't like *all* types of music [laughing] I like *many* types of music. There are vast genres that don't appeal to me, however I think my musical tastes are pretty eclectic. I love Brazilian Jazz and certain kinds of pop music. I love Classic Rock. I like 40's Jazz, having grown up listening to it, and there's a lot of

Country and Western that I like. I like Reggae but I don't like Rap. There's also quite a bit of classical music that I like a lot. And, I do like singing lots of different kinds of music." Graham also admits to being a lover of melody. "I like a good tune, and if that might make me seem old fashioned in some ways, *c'est la vie*."

One composer Graham enjoys working with is Jake Heggie, and in 2000 she performed the role of Sister Helen Prejean at the premier of Heggie's opera *Dead Man Walking*. Did she find it difficult to not be influenced by the very popular film version of the book? "One is influenced by the other, especially when one is such a well-known film like *Dead Man Walking* was." Graham added that once she began working on the opera she no longer watched the movie. "It lives in the back of your mind, but then what Terrence McNally and Jake Heggie put on the page is what has to take over."

Graham was pleasantly surprised to discover one major difference between the film and the opera. "One of the things I didn't realize, having watched the movie — and this is something Terrence and Jake brought into the forefront more than the film did — was Sister Helen's use of humor. She's one of the funniest ladies you'll ever meet. Humor is a great part of her personality, her arsenal, which it is for me as well. I didn't know this until about two days before the opera opened when I finally got to spend some time with her. Spending time with the actual character that I was portraying! How often do you get a chance to do that? It's a great resource, having a living composer, a living librettist and a living character to work with on top of it."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 3, 2014