

## Ten days later: Susan Graham charms Akron with songs about “the ladies”

by Timothy Robson



The American mezzo-soprano Susan Graham was scheduled to close the 2013/14 season of Akron’s Tuesday Musical on April 10th, but a bad case of laryngitis caused her to cancel her Akron program (as well as a concert scheduled in Oberlin). Fortunately the Akron recital was rescheduled and took place on Monday, April 21, in E.J. Thomas Hall. Graham’s excellent piano accompanist was Bradley Moore.

Graham created an imaginative and varied program all based on, in the singer’s own words, “the ladies,” including the good girls (the Blessed Virgin, Ophelia and Mignon) in the first half of the concert, followed by “the bad girls” in the second (Lady Macbeth, and several other unnamed racy women.) Likewise, Susan Graham appeared for the second half of the program in an off-the-shoulder, glittering black gown with a slit up the side, replacing the first half’s more virginal flowing all-white dress.

Susan Graham opened with Henry Purcell’s *Tell me, some pitying angel*, often known as “The Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation,” in which the Virgin Mary laments the necessity to escape to desert exile to protect her son from potential death at King Herod’s hand. The Virgin ecstatically calls for the Angel Gabriel, but to no avail. Graham was able to connect into a unified whole Purcell’s alternating declamatory passages in which the text is set syllabically with sections filled with florid, ornamented vocal writing.

Hector Berlioz’s *La Mort d’Ophélie* (The Death of Ophelia) is based on Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s drowning in Act IV of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It was composed

in 1842, but several years later, Berlioz revised it for women's chorus and orchestra as part of the three-movement *Tristia*. It is a gentle lament, with the scene near the river described in brilliant detail. The stanzas are separated by a wordless refrain, sung on the syllable "Ah." Susan Graham showed her acclaimed mastery of the Berlioz and other French repertoire in this performance. The closing refrain faded away, with little crescendos and diminuendos, as if we were hearing Ophelia's last breaths. It was a spellbinding performance and a fine example of the controlled soft singing that Graham did throughout the program. Although she is capable of filling the theater with volume, her most effective performances were in the more subdued, lyrical passages.

The first half of the program closed with six songs by Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Duparc and Wolf, all based on the character of Mignon, who figures prominently in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister and His Apprenticeship*, a favorite of the Romantics. At the beginning of Book 3 of the novel Mignon sings "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?" (Do you know the country where the lemon trees blossom). Graham sang three settings of this text (including a French version by Duparc). The Tchaikovsky song was the famous *Nyet tolka tot kto snal*, better known as "None but the lonely heart." The most advanced of the settings was that of Hugo Wolf, with its chromaticism and drama. Susan Graham was able to capture the subtleties of each of the songs, in German, French and Russian.

The second half opened with by British composer and conductor Joseph Horowitz (b. 1926) which anthologizes several speeches by Shakespeare's power wife into one multi-section "dramatic scene." The idea is a good one – Lady Macbeth is one of the great dramatic parts – however the music, in several short movements of different tempos and dynamics, is largely declamatory and never takes lyric flight. Although Graham gave a committed and expert performance, it seemed like a disappointing missed opportunity.

The closing group listed on the printed program was Francis Poulenc's satirical but bittersweet six-song cycle *Fiançailles pour rire* (Betrothal for fun), composed in 1939. Susan Graham described the cycle as about "an engagement gone wrong." She demonstrated the sense of each song, including the vamp of "Violon" and the tenderness of lost love in the closing "Fleurs."

Susan Graham and Bradley Moore completed the recital with several further songs announced from the stage. First was Cole Porter's witty *The Physician*, in which a patient

(the gender of which is not revealed in the lyric) tries to seduce the patient's male doctor, but to no avail.

He said my vertebrae were "sehr schone,"  
And called my coccyx "plus que gentil,"  
He murmured "molto bella,"  
When I sat on his patella,  
But he never said he loved me.

Graham was adept at communicating Porter's complicated lyrics in this very funny song filled with the usual Porter *double entendres*.

Susan Graham gave an exquisite, almost melancholy, reading of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Hello Young Lovers" from *The King and I*, arranged by Rob Mathes (who is perhaps more famously known for his arrangement of The National Anthem performed by Renée Fleming at this year's Super Bowl). Graham revealed that she will be taking on the starring role of Mrs. Anna in a new production of the R & H classic at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris this summer. On the basis of this performance, Parisian audiences have a treat in store.

The program closed with a song by American Ben Moore written especially for Susan Graham and based on the travails being a mezzo-soprano — the trouser roles, never getting the tenor, and more recently, being displaced in favorite roles by countertenors such as David Daniels. It was hilarious, requiring a quick ear and a lot of insider knowledge of the current operatic scene to get some of the jokes. It was a fun ending for a well thought-out and well-sung program.

Graham and Moore returned for an encore, Reynaldo Hahn's ravishing *À Chloris*. Delicate, sustained, with Baroque sounding ornaments in the accompaniment, Susan Graham's performance closed a concert that was time and again a model of what solo singing should be.

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