

Oberlin Artist Recital Series April 2: A conversation with bass-baritone John Relyea

by Mike Telin



Choosing repertoire for a solo recital is not an easy task when you're a bass-baritone. "The bass voice is often put into dramatic dark territory, and maybe that's because of the way people heard the color of the voice lending itself to the mood of the poetry," bass-baritone John Relyea said during a telephone conversation. "I'm always looking for songs to sing that have more positive, less depressing texts."

On Thursday, April 2 at 8:00 pm in Oberlin College's Finney Chapel, opera superstar John Relyea and pianist Warren Jones will present a recital featuring works by Richard Strauss, Jacques Ibert, Samuel Barber, Modest Mussorgsky and Peter Warlock. The concert is presented as part of Oberlin's Artist Recital Series.

The Canadian-born and 2003 Richard Tucker Award winner [John Relyea](#), has earned critical acclaim for his performances in opera houses around the world including the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera (where he is an alumnus of the Merola Opera Program and a former Adler Fellow), Lyric Opera of Chicago, Seattle Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Paris Opera, Bayerische Staatsoper, Vienna State Opera, Theater an der Wien, and the Mariinsky Theater. A snapshot of his current opera schedule includes the roles of Henry VIII in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and Landgraf in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, both for Lyric Opera of Chicago (January and February). In May, he will perform the title role in Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* with the Canadian National Opera.

"I'm getting ready to go to Montreal to sing Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* with the l'Orchestre Métropolitain with Yannick Nézet-Séguin. I haven't sung with them for a very long time, but they're a good group. Then I come to Oberlin and I'm very excited about the recital. I

don't get to do them as frequently as I did in the past just because I've been singing so much opera. But I really enjoy recital work because it's an intimate setting, and you really get to communicate directly with the audience in a very different way. The text, or poetry is so much a part of the performance. It's a totally different way of expressing yourself than in opera, where it's so much about filling the house with sound."

Relyea looks forward to sharing the stage with his frequent collaborator, pianist Warren Jones. "He's one of the most experienced people in the field. He knows the entire repertoire, and quite often has memorized a lot of it. He's brilliant and has so much insight, and he's a really great guy."

A centerpiece of Relyea's program will be Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*, set to poems by Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, but figuring out its exact placement on the program was important. "It's so heavy and so dark that you have to bring people there by degrees. You don't want to start with a piece like that any more than you want to finish with it. You don't want the audience to feel like hanging themselves when they leave," he said with a laugh.

The program will open with a set of Strauss songs, *Heimliche Aufforderung*, *Traum Durch die Dämmerung*, *Ich Trage meine Minne*, *Nichts*, *Morgen!* and *Zueignung*. "I like the uplifting, devotional love poetry that you find in a lot of these songs. That's important to me because the texts draw an audience into the performance so that eventually you can take them to darker places."

Is there a personal favorite of Relyea's in the group? "I really like *Traum Durch die Dämmerung*, if only for the fact that I don't believe it is sung a lot. I think singers who aren't lower voice types avoid it, but it is shaped very well for bass voices. But all of the songs bring themselves to the same mood, just from different angles."

Although Relyea has always loved Ibert's *Chansons de Don Quichotte*, his impressions of Don Quixote the man have evolved over time. "When you're in university, it's one thing to pick up a piece like this and learn it, but there's such an idiosyncratic quality to the character that people don't think of when they first see the music. How much does a young student really know about Don Quixote? Yet these pieces have such a sense of elegance that you don't begin to think about the fact that the man behind the songs is completely nuts, and that's another layer of interpretation that I've added to the character over time."

Three songs by Barber, *Rain Has Fallen*, *Sleep Now*, and *I Hear An Army*, will follow. "These are interesting pieces that make for a nice follow-up to the Ibert. I think Barber was greatly influenced by early 20th century French music, and James Joyce is a great poet, so it's a good way to finish the first half."

After intermission Relyea said that things will go to the dark side with the Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*. "These are remarkable songs. I've sung them with orchestra too, and experiencing them that way is really something. But even with piano you still get all of the feelings of color. Like most bass-baritones, I dream of singing Boris Godunov, and I totally intend to someday. I think Mussorgsky is brilliant and the texts to these songs are fantastic. We've dealt with the universal themes of love during the first half, and now death in the second. In the opera world that is our daily bread."

The evening will conclude with a group of songs that are new to Relyea's repertoire, Peter Warlock's *Yarmouth Fair*, *The Bayly Berith the Bell Away*, *Fair and True*, and *Captain Stratton's Fancy*. "This is my first time performing these songs. I really enjoy that quasi neo-Victorian thing they have going on in the melodies and harmonies. I think Warlock is somewhat the British equivalent to Charles Ives — you feel there is a slight popular idiom that preceded them, but he takes them into some less tonal places. But the last song, *Captain Stratton*, is just a good old Victorian drinking song gone awry."

Relyea said that he's enjoyed getting to know other works by Warlock. "At first glance they appear very British Victorian, but at the same time there are some very interesting things going on — like in most music from the first few decades of the 20th century. Composers were doing interesting things at that point because you had all of these different musical styles colliding and mixing together. I've always been drawn to music from that period. I'll be singing Bluebeard in Toronto right after the Oberlin recital, and it's another piece from that time. There's so much beauty in it, but so much chaos too. Right now Bluebeard is probably my favorite role. Bartók was only around 22 when he wrote it, and in a way, it just came out of nowhere."

Does he think he's attracted to the music of that time because it fits his personality? He said that he finds that all singers have musical areas where their personalities live. "There are Mozart singers, Verdi singers and Wagner singers, but it's not always exclusively about what their voices are best suited for, it also has a lot to do with a performer's temperament and personality. In regard to opera, where is Relyea's voice and personality? "Right now it's in the early stages of Wagner and Verdi. I did sing a lot of Mozart Figaros but that was part of the process for me. When you're a young singer it's healthy to sing lighter repertoire — you're not going to jump into the big stuff right off the bat. Especially if you're striving for longevity as a bass."

Achieving longevity has been John Relyea's plan from the beginning, and finding the right teachers to guide a young bass-baritone on the longevity pathway is extremely important. His first teacher was his father, Canadian bass-baritone Gary Relyea. He then went on to study at the Curtis Institute of Music as a pupil of Jerome Hines. Most recently he's been working with Bulgarian bass Nicola Ghiuselev. "He had a pretty big

career singing roles like Boris. I started working on the Verdi repertoire with him, but it's not easy to find basses now days who really excelled in that repertoire. I've always believed in working with teachers who have been singers themselves. I'm not saying this is what everybody should do, but for me, that was how I started, first studying with my father, and then Jerome Hines, and all these guys had such great stories to tell."

Relyea also had the good fortune to work with the great vocal coach Armen Boyajian. "He was the go-to guy for basses at the Met for a very long time. He learned so much about teaching because he accompanied all these great post-war voice teachers in New York during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He picked up a lot of ideas and figured out his own system, which consists of concentrated, fine-tuned work, especially with the vowels — up and down the entire range and in all of the dynamics. In the older school of voice teaching, this was not an unusual way to go about things before you began to tackle repertoire. Of course, by the time I came to him I was singing plenty of repertoire. I was just looking for some extra insight, and I think that is something singers should always do. I don't know of any great singers now who don't still have a teacher that they check in with from time to time."

Listening to John Relyea talk about his career, I couldn't help of thinking of a popular phrase of wisdom: "Patience is a virtue." I mention this to him. "Bass-baritones don't hit their stride until about 50, and yes, it takes a lot of patience, especially when you are younger. Every now and then a role will come along and you're always tempted to take it, even if you know in the back of your mind that it might be too early. But to cause a real problem, all it takes is saying yes, when you should be saying no."

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