

## Tuesday Musical: Gregg Kallor & Adriana Zabala at E.J. Thomas (April 21)

by Mike Telin



In an interview with *ClevelandClassical.com*, composer and pianist Gregg Kallor said that when choosing a poem to set to music, it's not enough for him to simply be moved by the text, the poem also needs to have a musical quality to it. On April 21, at E. J. Thomas Hall, Gregg Kallor and the excellent mezzo-soprano Adriana Zabala performed an enthralling program of Kallor's settings of poetry that touched on a range of emotions as well as

being musically captivating. Presented by Tuesday Musical, the concert was given in honor of National Poetry Month.

When selecting a venue for a concert of Art Song, the Thomas Hall may not be the first place that comes to mind. The cavernous space often leaves listeners feeling removed from what is happening onstage. However Kallor's and Zabala's magical performance shrunk the hall to the size of an intimate club.

Zabala, who is accustomed to projecting into opera houses, never over-sang, her richly-hued warm sound carrying wonderfully into the hall. Her diction was superb. At the piano, Kallor, who is well versed in classical and jazz, provided a kaleidoscope of musical pillows that organically supported the text. Performing the entire concert from memory added a sense of spontaneity to the evening.

The duo also established a wonderful rapport with the audience from the get-go. At the conclusion of *Song*, a poem by Christina Rossetti which opened their program, Kallor joked that beginning with a song about death means that things can only get happier.

The program, divided into six sections, continued with "Yeats Songs." Kallor's settings of seven poems by William Butler Yeats highlighted the Irish poet's two sides, the humorous and the spiritual. Standouts included the very funny *A Mermaid, When you*

*are old*, a beautiful raconteur-style poem that speaks to love and regret, and *A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety*, during which Zabala was appropriately tipsy.

The section titled “song-settings of poems by New Yorkers,” included Stephen Crane’s *I saw a man pursuing the horizon* and *Think as I think*, Sara Teasdale’s *But Not To Me*, and a heartwarming setting of Robert Richardson’s *Warm Summer Sun*, as adapted by Mark Twain.

The only section of songs not by Kallor was “Even the little things that delight us.” Here Zabala showed off her versatility during Hugo Wolf’s gorgeous *Auch Kleine Dinge*, Gabriel Fauré’s charming *Chanson d’Amour*, and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *My Favorite Things*. Kallor’s jazzy arrangement included new text about the duo’s favorite things in New York City, where they are based.

Changing things up, Kallor included two sets of his works for solo piano. *Espresso Nirvana*, a jazzy toccata, and his improvisation on *Like a Bridge Over Troubled Water* were standouts in “a bit of piano.” Three pieces commissioned by SubCulture, where Kallor is Composer-In-Residence, were featured during “a bit more piano.” Captivating on their own, *Where are you*, *The waiting*, and *The Good Kind of Crazy*, all cry out for poetry.

The highlight of the evening was the final section, “Exhilaration,” a song-cycle of nine poems by Emily Dickinson. The duo performed them without pause, and their delivery was spectacular. *It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon* was beautiful. The pianist’s dramatic transition between *We Cover Thee – Sweet Face* into *Wild Nights – Wild Nights!* was intense, as was the transition between *Still own thee – still thou art* and the concluding *Exhilaration – is within*. This provided a mesmerizing conclusion to a concert where everything the performers touched turned into gold.

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