

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: A conversation with Gerald Finley

by Mike Telin



During his celebrated career, Canadian bass-baritone [Gerald Finley](#) has sung all the major baritone roles from Mozart to Mark Anthony Turnage. His orchestral and recital appearances have taken him to concert stages throughout the world. In 2014 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2017. And, in August of 2014 he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro.

One thing Finley has *not* done is to perform in Northeast Ohio — that is until now. “The Cleveland Orchestra has been persistent about trying to find a time for us to work together, and it’s just never worked out.” Finley said during a telephone conversation from London. “Franz (Welser-Möst) is a close colleague since my time in Vienna and Salzburg, so I am absolutely thrilled to come to the area.”

On Tuesday, April 17 8:00 pm in Finney Chapel, the Oberlin Artist Recital Series will present Gerald Finley and pianist Michael McMahon, in a program that will include Goethe *Lieder* by Beethoven and Schubert and Romances by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. Click [here](#) to purchase ticket and to view the program.

Finley said that his first love was traditional German *Lieder*, and while music of Beethoven was accessible to him from a young age, the songs of Schubert were something that he needed to grow into. “I was quite nervous of him at the start.

Fischer-Dieskau was my huge hero, and I didn't want to touch all of the gems that he had created in my heart and ear. I didn't want to alter those experiences through my own attempts at singing them."

The bass-baritone said that over the past few years he has come to enjoy the songs that Schubert wrote for lower male voice. *Prometheus* and *Erlkönig* will bookend the Schubert set, which he said are perfectly written for that vocal range. "In the middle, we have *An Schwager Kronos* which was also written for a lower male voice."

His Oberlin program reflects his interest in trying to get away from what he calls the "light German baritone approach" and to expand his repertoire and style in the direction of Tom Krause, Hermann Prey, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Hans Hotter. "They were substantial singers who kept the bel canto style alive. I'm trying to get a bel canto foundation into my own singing and to be as lyrical as I can. I've been doing this for 35 years and I'm only just now learning how to sing," he quipped.

During the second half of the program Finley will celebrate the rich Russian singing tradition — the "unashamed romanticism of Tchaikovsky and the almost über-romanticism of Rachmaninoff. And there are two Goethe settings in both of those sets, so I'm very happy to have his poetry as the linking factor."

Although Finley has performed the Tchaikovsky selections in the past, the Rachmaninoff is new to his repertoire. "I didn't feel like I had the vocal chops for it," he said. "In recent years, my wonderfully brave colleague Dmitri Hvorostovsky offered these songs to the world and I was so taken by his dedication to his homeland. He was already seriously ill when I was programming them, and when I told him I wanted to sing these songs, he said 'Gerry, you will love them, and you'll sing them the way you sing them — you will not sing them the way I sing them.' It was very nice of him; he was a wonderful man and was never abashed to realize how important he was to the singing world. We are all so grateful that he was here, so I am offering these songs back as a tribute to him."

The program will conclude with some light-hearted favorites from Finley's many recital programs. "They will all be in English, but not necessarily by English composers. I'm looking forward to a relaxed and fun end to the evening and to say 'thank you' to the audience for sticking with me through the Russians."

Finley said that he is happy to have the opportunity to work with Michael McMahon, Canada's best recital pianist. "Michael's knowledge of the repertoire is second to none. His is also fluent in all the languages that we will be presenting so that is a great help for me."

Born in Montréal, Finley began his path to becoming a singer as boy chorister in Ottawa — at that time, becoming an opera singer had not entered his mind. “When my choir went to New York to do an exchange with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, we encountered people who earned their living as a professional chorus singers. That had never been presented to me as an option.”

Finley’s desire to become a professional chorister led him to London. “The head of the Royal College of Music at the time was conducting a choir I was singing in in Canada. He heard about my ambition and invited me to the Royal College of Music. Upon arriving in London, he said why don’t you try out for one of the Oxford or Cambridge Colleges because their choirs are amazing. I ended up at King’s College Cambridge. That experience took every aspiration and ambition of mine to an extreme level.”

Finley eventually made the decision to further his musical studies, which he said he enjoyed. He also “did a slow burn through Glyndebourne,” singing in the chorus and getting small roles. “I was very lucky in the 80s by having connections with the early music movement. I was a good sight reader and I could learn the repertoire that was coming out from Baroque specialists relatively quickly. I was hired by Trevor Pinnock, Sir Roger Norrington, and Sir John Eliot Gardiner. I had a good concert career going on the side as well as doing these original instrument band Mozarts and Handels. Since then I’ve just worked my way through the whole repertoire. With the pleasures that I’ve had in learning all types of music from Bach to John Adams, I can’t complain in any way about the breadth of my education.”

What was it like to sing the Nine Lessons and Carols at King’s on Christmas Eve? “That was the height of a professional choral experience. You knew that you were being listened to by several million people on the radio, but it’s a very special time. It’s the darkest time of the year and the chapel itself is quite mysterious and beautifully lit by candles and soft light. And the acoustic is extraordinary. I also got to premiere world-class carols — I was in the choir that sang the first John Tavener’s *The Lamb*. You can’t imagine what it was like when we first rehearsed it. All of us were just dumb-struck. The simplicity of it, the beauty of it was fantastic for us. When music is being written for you and then you get to present it to the world, you do feel like you are part of the creative forces. So yes, it was a very special time.”

Finley has had a wonderful career and yes, along with his 18- and 21-year-old sons he did climb Mount Kilimanjaro in August 2014. “It was kind of a rite of passage for us all and we raised \$10,000 for a musician’s charity in the U.K. It’s not that hard to climb, you just need to decide that you are going to reach the top. When the oxygen

disappears and the cold begins, it's not just a walk up the side of a hill. And the sense of achievement was tremendous and not anything like I would have expected it to be. It was exhilarating in a way that made me feel very vulnerable, just as a creature. It reminded me that what I do to make my living is rather extraordinary and it gave me energy to find, shall we say new mountainous projects to look for.”

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