

Review**Tuesday Musical: baritone Thomas Hampson
& pianist Craig Rutenberg at E.J. Thomas (March 3)**

by Robert Rollin



Thomas Hampson, a stunningly gifted and remarkably versatile baritone, appeared on last Sunday's Tuesday Musical Club Concert Series at Akron's E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall. Pianist Craig Rutenberg, Head of Music and Administration at the Metropolitan Opera, accompanied him. Hampson performs lead roles at the world's opera houses, presents many recitals, is a major recording artist, is active in research, and is an accomplished teacher. In fact, he held a master class for area conservatory students after his concert.

Hampson partners with the Library of Congress in his "Song of America Project," employing the art of song to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding. The afternoon program was an intriguing mélange of American music, ranging from its earliest roots to a song by a living American composer. Hampson organized the event into three sets that created many adjacent contrasts to help captivate audience attention. The performers sparkled in their performances. They were both technically flawless and showed great expressive sensitivity.

Set I began with colonial composer Francis Hopkinson's *My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free*, a charming piece originally written with 2 parts — treble and bass — as was typical in the day. Rutenberg's piano realization supported Hampson's ethereal rendition of a romanticized text outlining poet Thomas Parnell's daydream. The repeated passing tones made this minor masterpiece, found in a Library of Congress collection of Hopkinson's manuscripts dated 1759-60, especially lively. As indicated in the ample program notes Hopkinson, an acquaintance of George Washington, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

In a similar vein Stephen Foster's *Open Thy Lattice, Love* (1844), the composer's first published song, has an extravagant two-stanza rhyming text that suggests a woman sitting by a window overlooking the sea and awaiting her love. The music, though lacking Foster's later, nuanced harmonies, has considerable appeal, particularly in its hornpipe-like character.

Later in Set I, Edward Macdowell's *The Sea* (1894) also has a woman awaiting her beau, but in this case the man drowns at sea. Hampson's performance gave fine emphasis to the composer's chromaticism.

Set I's other songs, in contrast, were somewhat dark and sardonic. Charles Ives's *Circus Band* (1894) is a rhyming depiction of a passing parade, but from a lovesick adolescent's viewpoint. He recalls a lady "all in pink," who waved at him last year. This year, however, "she sees me not." Hampson's brazen tone and Rutenberg's strong dynamics helped enhance the sense of the passing parade and the whining quality at the song's end.

Aaron Copland's song, *The Dodger* (1950), straightforwardly satirizes politicians, preachers, and lovers. The traditional text is from Grover Cleveland's 1884 campaign for the presidency. Here Hampson's marvelously clear diction helped keep the text easily comprehensible, despite the boisterous piano dynamics and repetitious patterns. Copland's *The Golden Willow Tree* (1952) uses sailors' jargon to depict the sinking of an opposing ship in "South Amerikee" by a swimming sailor, who is forced by his Captain to drown. Hampson and Rutenberg both exploited the song's wonderful sudden dynamic changes to make it come alive. Both songs are from Copland's *Old American Songs*.

Set II largely concentrated on war's evil and suffering. Charles Ives' *In Flanders Fields* (1917) sets Dr. John McCrae's famous poem predicting his own death and burial amidst the white crosses and poppies. Hampson's dark vocal quality lent itself to this chromatic song. Thick and strident piano harmonies supported the song's message. Charles Nagin-ski's *Look Down, Fair Maiden* (1940) sets the Walt Whitman poem from *Drum-Taps*, a Civil War poetry collection published in 1865. Hampson's dark rendition was appropriate to the moonbeam-bathed landscape of corpses. Arthur Farwell's *Song of the Deathless Voice* (1908) adapts an Indian text about the warrior's happiness when able to fall in battle. Hampson intoned the repeated rhythmic patterns and periodic use of vocables hauntingly.

Two more-modern songs adorned and closed Set II. Margaret Bonds' *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1941) sets Langston Hughes' powerful text about the Negro throughout human history, whose "soul has grown deep like the rivers." The music's character changed with each historical depiction, and the performers brought this out very effectively. Michael Daugherty's setting of Abraham Lincoln's *Letter to Mrs. Bixby* uses simple music to depict the president's dignified sadness at the death of her five sons in battle. The performance was simply gorgeous in its poised simplicity.

Set III was more of a potpourri of sad subject matter. Hampson had a remarkably beautiful color in Vittorio Giannini's *Tell Me Oh Blue Sky* (1927). The music is rather Schumannesque and depicts lovers parting. William Grant Still's *Grief* (1953) depicts a weeping angel statue in a cemetery. Still intensifies the sadness by repeating musical phrases. The performance was appropriately subdued. The duo's performance of several songs of Paul Bowles' *Blue Mountain Ballads* (1946) on Tennessee Williams' texts was delightful. Especially entrancing was the song, *Sugar in the Cane*. Jazz harmony enlivened things here, and both performers were solidly conversant with the style.

Hampson and Ruttenberg closed with two extended songs: Sidney Homer's *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* (1926), a setting of the Vachel Lindsay poem; and Walter Damrosch's *Danny Deever* (1897) on the Rudyard Kipling poem. Both songs use repetition to build intensity. The former has a March-like character to depict Booth's steady walk to heaven. The phrase "Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?" keeps repeating to display Booth's pious single-mindedness. The steady tempo helped maintain the mood. Danny Deever's ballad-like text employs lots of English soldier dialect to describe the hanging of Deever for murdering another soldier. The exchanges in shouted question and answer form between the Soldier in The Ranks and the Color Sergeant help create the feeling of the inevitable execution. Hampson carefully changed vocal colors to portray the two characters.

The long and intense program seemed to pass very quickly because of the performer's focused expression and skill. The audience kept up throughout and responded with a standing ovation.

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