

NEOSonicFest 2015 kicks off this weekend: conversations with reVoice and Steven Smith

by Mike Telin



This weekend, NEOSonicFest 2015 begins its five-concert festival of new music sponsored by Cleveland Chamber Symphony in partnership with local new music ensembles. (See our concert listings page for times and locations.) “We’re excited about our second festival,” CCS conductor Steven Smith said during a telephone conversation. “This year we’ve added new venues and some new groups too. Our goal is to broaden the Festival

each year, and the addition of new and alternative venues helps to underscore the idea that the performing space can enhance the music that is playing. I think that is especially true when it comes to contemporary music.”

The festival kicks off on Friday, March 20 with a 9:00 pm performance by reVoice at Survival Kit Gallery. Mezzo-soprano Megan Elk and soprano Susan Fletcher will be joined by guest soprano Rachel Morrison and pianist Lorenzo Salvagni in an evening of music by Morton Feldman, John Cage, Stephen T. Griebing, Ricky Ian Gordon, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, Keegan Meuris and Philip Glass.

Opera singers Megan Elk and Susan Fletcher were first introduced to each other by mutual college friends. The two later reconnected when they were both working for Opera Cleveland. But after that company closed its doors, the two embarked on different journeys to find their way as classically trained singers in the contemporary performance environment. Both of their paths eventually led them back to Cleveland.

“We were trying to do the young artist thing, and to have operatic careers,” the engaging Megan Elk said during a telephone conversation. “Eventually we found ourselves back in Cleveland questioning if this was the place we should be. We both started our own bands — Susan has a well-known blues/rock band, and I have a jazz cabaret project. But we missed singing classical music, so last year we started to explore contemporary classical

repertoire and to find ways of presenting that repertoire in a way that felt less stodgy than the traditional recital format. We're both kind of rebels, but we're rebels out of necessity." Last year reVoice presented their premiere performance at Survival Kit, and they recently presented a recital at Kent State University.

Friday's concert will feature Philip Glass's song cycle *Songs from Liquid Days*, which Elk described as a crowd pleaser. "They're really pop songs. Glass collaborated with Paul Simon, Suzanne Vega, David Byrne and Laurie Anderson, so vocally the songs have a rock sensibility to them, while the piano part remains very much Philip Glass."

Elk is very excited to return to Survival Kit. "Working in the Gallery is going to be really exciting. Susan and I are going into the space with no pre-conceived expectations, because there are a lot of possibilities here. For example, Cage intends his piece *Ear for Ear* to be an exploration of space, so we'll be using antiphony in an unconventional way."

reVoice is also committed to performing works by local composers. "At every performance we highlight a Northeast Ohio composer. We'll feature Stephen Greibling on this one. His *Three Songs from "The Lamp and the Bell"* is a beautiful song cycle on poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay."

The most recent work on the program is *Far from the Tree* (2013) by Keegan Meuris. "He's a very young composer. The piece is entirely comprised of *Sprechstimme*, and it has very interesting text and interplay between the two voices. It's the most contemporary-sounding piece on the program."

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On Saturday, March 21 at 7:30 in Gamble Auditorium at Baldwin Wallace Conservatory in Berea, Steven Smith will lead the Cleveland Chamber Symphony and Verb Ballets in a concert featuring world premieres by Clint Needham, Jeremy Allen and Steven Smith, as well as Henry Cowell's *Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 10*.

"It's an exciting program," Smith said. "I think three world premieres is quite noteworthy."

I asked Smith to say a few words about his piece and Jeremy Allen's. "Jeremy's piece is called *Once more before we part*. It has a connection to his family. In his program notes he refers to an ancestor

that he says is his great-grandfather's great-grandfather, who was the first person in the family to own land in the West, having originally settled on the East coast. Jeremy also talks about how Gaelic Psalmody was so much a part of that generation's life. He doesn't really quote a hymn, but there is a section where the solo oboe leads like a hymn singer. So it's an original hymn-like tune. It's a great coincidence because the Cowell also features the oboe in the same way that Jeremy does, and he didn't know that piece was going to be on the program when he wrote his.

"I've been wanting to write *Chromo-Synchrony* for a long time, and last summer, I finally had the time to do it. It was written specifically for the Cleveland Chamber Symphony and this year's NEOSonicFest. The title is a combination of "chromo," meaning color, and "synchrony," describing the simultaneity of actions, developments or events. Both words have Greek origins. The word combination was suggested by the idea of shifting and developing coloristic, melodic and harmonic elements, in particular the intervals of fifths and thirds, that progress from section to section through the piece."

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