

Chagrin Concert Series: a chat with mezzo-soprano Lara Nie

by Daniel Hathaway



New York-based mezzo-soprano Lara Nie and her long-time keyboard collaborator, Brandt Fredricksen, will join violinist Hristo Popov for the final concert in this year's Chagrin Concert Series at Valley Lutheran Church in Chagrin Falls on Sunday, April 26 at 3:00 pm. The concert is free, but donations are welcome.

"I wanted to sing pieces that move me, but are also related to one another," Nie said in a telephone conversation. The title of the program, "Songs of Spring — Love and Life," could embrace a vast range of music, but Nie has carefully chosen her repertoire and had some insightful remarks to share.

"I don't often sing in English," Nie said, who has been praised for her performances of *Lieder* and operatic roles. "But since I'm singing for an English-speaking audience, I thought I'd give them an all-English program."

Nie will begin with three songs by one of England's great early composers for solo voice, Henry Purcell, who died younger than Mozart (35) and might have gone on to compose fully-developed operas rather than masques and incidental music for the Restoration theater.

"'Come all ye songsters of the sky' is from *The Fairy Queen*, which is based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Titania makes a grand entrance with this song, which is very spring-like.

"Next comes 'Music for a While' from *Oedipus*, which features Alecto, one of the Furies, an ugly figure with snakes in her hair and a whip in her hand. The message is that while music cannot cure you of your ills, it can 'beguile' you — a beautiful word — and give you a respite."

The third Purcell selection will be “Sweeter than Roses,” part of the incidental music to Richard Norton’s *Pausanias, the Betrayer of His Country*, which seems to have inspired an aria in Benjamin Britten’s opera, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “With its seductive word-painting, it’s more than just a sweet piece — it’s a really sexy song,” Nie said.

Popov and Fredericksen will end the first half of the program with Beethoven’s “Spring” Sonata (“Frühlingssonate”), No. 5 in F, op. 24, which was published in 1801. “Then,” Nie said, “we’ll make a transition into more modern songs.

“Michael Head’s *The Singer* is an art song but one influenced by the folk song tradition with hints of Irish traditional music. Its text, by Australian poet Bronnie Taylor, is about how a singer can create magic through music.

“Then I’ll sing ‘The Boatman’s Dance’ and ‘Long Time Ago’ from Copland’s *Old American Songs*. ‘Long Time Ago’ is one of those tunes I grew up singing but that younger people — and I’m talking about people in their thirties — just don’t know anymore. That’s a pity — it’s so lyrical and nostalgic.

Nie will turn next to songs that spring out of African American traditional music. “John Jacob Niles heard ‘Go Away from My Window’ sung by a farmer when he was walking through Appalachia. It’s fascinating how many American folk songs come from African American sources. Roland Hayes’s setting of ‘Round About the Mountain’ reminds me of the way Maria Schneider writes: folksongs accompanied by very sophisticated chords. It’s about marching to bury a woman who died. It’s very beautiful and moving.”

Nie will end the program with what she calls “a bit of pretty fluff: Clara Edwards’s *Into the Night*. She was active from the 1920s through the 1940s.” Nie said. “Originally from Minnesota, she married a doctor and moved to New York. Her husband died, leaving her a widow with a young child in the big city. She took jobs in department stores, but realized she could make more money as a composer. She wrote over a hundred songs, blending the styles of art song with popular ballads — sort of an early musical theater sound. They’re sweet and slurry, beautiful in a completely different way.”

Lara Nie is happy to be joined by Brandt Christensen for her program on Sunday. “I have a husband, but I call Brandt my ‘piano husband,’” she said. When I moved to New York in 1993, he became my coach, and I owe much of my understanding of music to him. He showed me how the piano part in *Lieder* can be even more important than the vocal line, so now I always think about the whole texture of a piece. We’ve become a real team.”

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