

Jeff & Nina Nelsen open Kent/Blossom series with delightful recital (July 1)

by Daniel Hathaway



Music for French horn, mezzo-soprano and piano isn't an everyday flavor of chamber music, so if you happen to be Jeff Nelsen and you marry Nina Yoshida and decide to perform together, you have to undertake some exploring, some arranging, and some commissioning, to come up with enough repertoire to build a concert program. Last Wednesday evening, July 1, Jeff and Nina Nelsen, in cahoots with pianist Elizabeth DeMio, proved that a delightful evening of chamber music can result from unlikely ingredients — if the performers and the music are as excellent and committed as these were.

The occasion was the opening faculty concert of the 48th season of the Kent/Blossom Music Festival, and the venue was Ludwig Recital Hall at Kent State University. As this year's Kulas Guest Artist, Jeff Nelsen had spent the last few days coaching K/B students, and teaching them concentration techniques he has developed for his "Fearless Performance" workshops. The recital gave the students an opportunity to hear their mentor in action.

Years of touring with the Canadian Brass have inspired Nelsen to imbue his concerts with a bit of showbiz. On Wednesday evening, the audience heard him before they saw him — playing the opening phrase of George Gershwin's "Summertime" from offstage, bending pitches, and proving from the outset that the horn can be as jazzy as a saxophone when the mood strikes. Elizabeth DeMio took up the song, and when Nelsen came onstage, the two delivered a sultry version of the most famous "aria" from *Porgy and Bess*.

A standard concert piece followed. Václav Nelhybel's *Scherzo Concertante* gave Nelsen an opportunity to demonstrate his classical creds in a brief showpiece that involved fanfares, festive repeated notes, a lyrical section, and some almost brazen horn calls.

Nina Yoshida Nelsen joined DeMio for Saint-Saëns's "Mon Coeur" from *Samson et Dalila*. Her powerful, expressive mezzo-soprano voice was every bit as seductive as her husband had promised in his prefatory remarks. Later on, the hornist provided an elegant, behind-the-curtains obbligato.

Moving to the back of the audience, Jeff Nelsen added color and a sense of Tyrolean grandeur to Richard Strauss's song, *Alphorn*. Composed when Strauss was only 16, and with his horn-playing father in mind, the piece might easily have been written by Schubert.

Two Brahms songs hold special significance for Jeff and Nina Nelsen — they first met when she was singing them at a concert in Santa Barbara, California. Deciding to perform them together, the Nelsens had the original viola obbligato in *Gestille Sehnsucht* and *Geistliches Wiegenlied* rearranged for horn, a change in timbre and style that seemed a bit jarring at first, but grew on the ear.

After Nina Nelsen's stunning performance of Francesco Cilea's "Acerba Voluttà" from *Adriana Lecouvreur*, both Nelsens joined DeMio in a spirited medley of Leonard Bernstein tunes, including "A Simple Song" from *Mass*, and "One hand, one heart," "There's a place for us," and "Tonight," from *West Side Story*, with Jeff Nelsen tooting the counter-melody of the Jets and the Sharks in the last song.

Jeff Nelsen unleashed his inner baritone sax for Keith Bissell's *Happy and Fat Belly Blues*, preceding the music with a little sleight-of-hand (he's an enthusiastic magician as well as musician) and exploring some raucous multiphonics. Elizabeth DeMio let down her hair and contributed some very jazzy piano playing.

The finale was a work the Nelsens commissioned from Jeff Nelsen's student, Ryan O'Connell. *Remembering the Future* is an affecting work based on little stories and drawings by Brian Andreas of [StoryPeople](#) which were projected on a screen during the musicians' winsome performance.

The good-sized audience loved this program and wanted more at the end. The Nelsens and DeMio said goodbye — figuratively and literally — with Francesco Sartori and Lucio Quarantotto's *Con te partirò*, made popular by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman. By now, the combination of mezzo-soprano, horn and piano made perfect sense.

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