

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: a conversation with tenor Nicholas Phan

by Mike Telin



What makes a great art song composer? “They need to have a strong appreciation for literature,” tenor Nicholas Phan answered without hesitation during a recent telephone conversation. “I know it sounds strange to say, but there is a literacy to their compositions — they have to be able to paint the words through music.” On Wednesday, February 3 at 8:00 pm in Oberlin College’s Finney Chapel, [Nicholas Phan](#) and pianist Myra Huang will present a program of works by four great art song composers as part of the [Oberlin Artist Recital Series](#).

Named one of National Public Radio’s Favorite New Artists of 2011, Phan has quickly garnered attention for his performances with many of the leading orchestras in North America and Europe. A rising star of the opera world, Phan is also a champion of vocal chamber music. As a recording artist, his 2011 debut solo album, *Winter Words*, was included on the “Best of 2011” lists of *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Boston Globe*, *TimeOut NY*, and the *Toronto Star*. Phan followed up his recording success with 2012’s *Still Fall the Rain*, which was named one of the best classical recordings of the year by *The New York Times*. His discography also includes the Grammy-nominated recording of Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* with Pierre Boulez and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

The Ann Arbor, Michigan native described his program as a meditation on the artist, beginning with Robert Schumann’s *Dichterliebe, Op. 48*, which he called the pinnacle of the song cycle form. “I think it’s one of the most beautiful cycles ever composed. It tells a compelling story about a man who falls in love and has his heart broken, and how he deals with that experience. I began learning it when I was a student at the University of Michigan, and I studied it during a couple of summers at Marlboro, but I waited for over a decade before I began to perform it in public. There’s so much there and I wanted to do it justice. It’s fun because I feel like I’m now able to do that, and I’m really enjoying it.”

Phan will continue his program with Benjamin Britten's *Winter Words, Op. 52*, set to lyrics and ballads by Thomas Hardy. I asked him about his critical success performing the music of Britten. "I was lucky that the material I was drawn to was also material that suited me. And it taught me a lot about singing. Britten is a demanding composer — there are a lot of instructions on the page — so it's all about figuring out how to honor them and communicate his music to an audience. Learning how to achieve all of those things technically has been a really great lesson," he said. "Britten and Thomas Hardy explore the subject of maintaining innocence in a world that is corrupted by experience. I think it's important for an artist to be able to maintain that vivid sense of wonder, so that you don't take anything for granted."

The program will also include Ned Rorem's settings of five poems by Walt Whitman. "Whitman's probably one of the most self-expressive writers of all time, not just of American writers, but anywhere."

Jake Heggie's *Friendly Persuasions: Songs in Homage to Poulenc* will conclude the evening. Set to the poetry of Gene Scheer, the piece is based on Poulenc's friendships with Wanda Landowska, Pierre Bernac, Raymond Linossier, and Paul Eluard. "To be a great art song composer you have to be a good storyteller, and I think Jake is one of the greatest storytellers living today," Phan said. "He's got a huge career as an opera composer, and you get that sense in his songs. This cycle takes you through a wide range of emotions, and he paints a vivid picture of what it must have been like to be in Poulenc's circle. These people were such colorful characters, so creative and so outspoken. I think we would all wish to be in that kind of circle."

Phan's recent and upcoming performances include recitals for San Francisco Performances and Da Camera of Houston. In March he will return to Cleveland to perform the role of the Evangelist in Bach's *St. John Passion* with Apollo's Fire. "What I think is important about recital singing is that it puts the pressure on you to communicate to an audience. It's just you and the pianist — there's nobody else on stage. It is the most direct and intimate relationship you will ever have with an audience. Recitals feed everything else that I do. They make me dig for real specificity in my operatic work. They're also great preparation for Bach's Passions. When you sing the role of the Evangelist you are the storyteller, so doing that with nuance and detail is going to make it more enjoyable for the audience."

Passionate about performing art song recitals, Phan has realized the rarity of such opportunities. "It's partly because presenters always say that the audience for them isn't there," he pointed out, "so my feeling is that if I am passionate about this art form, then it's up to me to help build an audience for it."

In 2011, along with two colleagues from the University of Michigan, Phan formed the [Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago](#), a non-profit organization devoted to promoting the art song and vocal chamber music repertoire. “Our mission is to make Chicago a world home for art song because the genre is an increasingly endangered species in the classical music world. Chicago already has a rich classical music scene, but art song was missing from it. It’s been an educational experience, and it taught me that you can’t take anything for granted. It’s been an exciting adventure.”



The tenor looks forward to returning to his Midwestern roots for this recital, and being able to perform with his longtime collaborator, pianist Myra Huang, will add something extra special to the evening. “Myra’s a phenomenally gifted pianist with a wonderful sense of imagination. What I love about her is that we don’t have to actually talk very much when we rehearse. We’re both able to easily communicate with each other so that we can just have fun and create a musical dialogue, which I think is a very special thing.”

Phan’s partnership with Huang was the result of a fortuitous meeting. “When I was applying to Manhattan School of Music in 2001, she was assigned to play my audition. We have a very long history and we’ve seen each other through the many stages of our careers. We were both young artists at the Houston Grand Opera Studio together so we’ve kind of grown up with each other, and I think that’s part of why the relationship is so special to both of us. We’re a little chamber duo and we’re happy to be able to do recitals together.”

In addition to being a talented singer, Nicholas Phan is also an engaging writer, as is evident from his blog [grecchinois](#). (Phan is half Greek and half Chinese, so the blog's name is a combination of the two nationalities in French.) "It's a wonderful way to interact with people, and it's something I still enjoy doing, although because I've been very blessed with such a busy schedule, there is less and less time to write. I'm finding that between the Collaborative Arts Institute and my recording projects, a lot of my writing time is taken up with writing program notes. I'd really like to figure out a way to combine those two types of writing, but for now I'm just happy to make the program print deadline. Actually, thanks for mentioning the blog because now I'll go and publish my program notes for the Oberlin recital so people can read them there."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 26, 2016.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)