

Preview

Mezzo Michelle DeYoung to sing Art Song Festival concert at CMA

by Daniel Hathaway



It's an off-year for the biennial Baldwin-Wallace Art Song Festival, but the organizers like to keep a buzz going during the hiatus. This year's featured artist is mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung, one of the most versatile singers on the international circuit. In partnership with her longtime pianist, Kevin Murphy, she'll bring a recital of vocal music by Berlioz, Debussy, Brahms, Purcell and Mahler and a set of Spirituals to the Gartner Auditorium stage at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Wednesday evening, May 18 at 7:30 pm. She returns to Cleveland next season to sing the Verdi *Requiem* with The Cleveland Orchestra.

We reached the very engaging singer by telephone earlier this month at her home in the Rockies in Evergreen, Colorado, where she was enjoying a few days of rest and relaxation. (Our conversation was briefly interrupted when a pine tree her husband was felling to prevent the spread of pine beetles went the wrong way and fell on a power line — but all turned out well!)

Daniel Hathaway: Tell us how you got to this point in your very interesting career. Did you always know you wanted to be a professional singer?

Michelle DeYoung: My father's a Christian Reformed minister and I have three older sisters. Growing up, the four of us were heavily into the music of the church. So we would either sing quartets or trios or play the piano — we all took piano lessons and played different instruments. We were very, very musical. I was always in top choirs and orchestra and band, and if they needed a new instrument learned I would learn it. It was just sort of a hobby. I didn't know there was anything weird about that — it was just what we did. We lived in Loveland, Colorado, and I wanted to go away for college, so I went

to Calvin College, where my father went to seminary, and wasn't really sure what I was going to do. My sisters were all older, and two of them were teachers, so I considered going into teaching but wasn't really sure. I got into the choir there at Calvin and I auditioned for a solo, and I got it, and the choir director said to me, I think you have kind of an extreme talent. I think that you could pursue a career in singing. And I was like, really? I mean I grew up in Loveland, Colorado! My father listens to classical music exclusively, so I grew up listening to Strauss and Wagner and Mahler, but none of us considered having a career in it. It just didn't seem like a possibility.

Soon I couldn't afford Calvin any more, being a minister's daughter, and my parents in the meantime had moved out to San Francisco to start a new church. So I had a big conversation with my parents, and I said "who knows; maybe I should just try it. Obviously I loved music and it was something I would enjoy studying. So I gave myself a time limit. I said, when I'm 25, if I have no success from this, then I'll do something else. My parents were 150% behind me and said, yes, let's do this and see what happens. So I went to San Francisco State and I got into the music program. At that time, it was heavily into musical theater, which is not what I wanted to do. So I transferred down to Cal State Northridge and studied with a man by the name of Kurt Allen and created my own conservatory. I took anything that had to do with opera. I took dance class, I took acting, I took German, and, of course, music classes — I was a music major — and I did the operas. I got the leads in the opera and opera workshop, I won competitions to do concerts with the orchestra — I was doing whatever I could to really get a full education from the university.

And while I was doing that, my teacher said, it's time for you to do the Met competitions. And I laughed! Because we had this girl that went to our school a few years before me, and she was a Western Region winner. She didn't win in New York, but to us, she was just like, you know, Meryl Streep. It was just such a high goal that I just thought, wow, that's ridiculous. But he said, not only do I want you to do the competition, but I want you to prepare yourself, because they're going to ask you to move to New York and study in their program. Of course, I laughed, and my teacher ignored me.

So I prepared, I got my arias, did the LA Districts and won them, did the Western Regions and won them, and went to New York and won in New York and they asked me to be in the Young Artist Program. I went into that before finishing college because obviously it's what I wanted to do. I moved to New York and I did the program. It was so wonderful. Bill Robinson was the head of it at that time, and it just was really perfect. It was exactly what I needed, and they took very good care of me. And I got incredible training. My second year I started with Trish McCaffrey as my voice teacher — she's still my teacher today — and Kevin Murphy as my pianist — he's still my pianist and will be playing for my recital. By the time I finished, I had agents, and I've been working full time ever since.

DH: You have a quite varied menu of engagements both behind and before you, but I notice that the name of Gustav Mahler sticks out.

MDY: Especially this year because of the centennial. It's interesting, because the first ten years of my career was very heavily concerts, very, very little opera. I just filled this niche of Mahler, really, and went all over the world singing concerts. And then started to do more and more opera. Now I'd say it was 50-50. Right now I'm going through a concert thing, last year it was very heavy on opera, so it just depends on how the schedule works out.

DH: What first attracted you to Mahler?

MDY: Like I said, growing up my Dad always had it on, but now that I have done so much Mahler, I really relate to how he wrote music. The way he uses poetry, the way you almost don't need poetry because it's in the music. I just appreciate and love it more and more. When I started the career, people would call and say, "Can she sing Mahler 3?" So I learned Mahler 3. Can she sing Berio's Folk Songs? So I learned Berio's Folk Songs. I'm not a plug-in singer. I'm not a lyric mezzo, I'm not a lyric soprano, I do a lot of stuff like *Bluebeard's Castle* that very few people do. It's just how it grows. Every career is so unique and it has to do with many factors.

DH: It sounds like that was a fantastic Bluebeard you just did with Esa-Pekka Salonen in New York.

MDY: Oh, thank you. We had a blast. That was just one of those Top Ten experiences!

DH: That's the one where they turned all the house lights on for the C Major chord?

MDY: Yes, and without telling me they were going to do that. It just shocked me (laughing)!

DH: Then back in December you did John Adams' El Niño.

MDY: Yes, with John conducting. I love *El Niño*. What the mezzo gets to sing is just beyond gorgeous. It's really touching — very moving, very beautiful. I love doing it, and we did it semi-staged, which San Francisco Symphony loves to do. And it was with Dawn Upshaw and Jonathan Lemalu. We had a little stage area with the orchestra around it and it was very powerful.

DH: I want to go backward in time just a bit and ask you about the production of "Aida am Rhein" that you wrote about in your online Diary. What was that all about?

MDY: It was really kind of a funny thing. I'm not known as a Verdi singer. This is new. I've done one role and I was trying out my first Amneris. So I signed on for fourteen shows with Basel, and after it all got situated, they told us about this "Aida am Rhein" that we were chosen for, and I was like, uh, this is my first Amneris? Oh my gosh, give me a break! And to do it live! Anyway, it ended up being one of the coolest experiences of my life. It was live on TV, we were all over Les Trios Rois, which is the five star hotel in Basel on the Rhein, and we literally used the entire place. I started by going down a long hallway. The orchestra was in the conference room, and we had earphones — we weren't even in the same room as the conductor, ever. We used the bar, we used the outside decks, we used the planks because Radames and Ramfis came across the river on a boat. It was incredible. And my big judgment scene was in a gorgeous suite that overlooked the river. It was really an incredible experience.

DH: Who cooked up this idea?

MDY: It was part of a series in Switzerland. They did three operas in this boxed set: *Traviata*, *Bohème* and *Aida*. One was done in Bearn in the train station. One was done in Zurich in an apartment building, and then ours was done in the five-star hotel. And the hotel wasn't closed off, so people could just come on and watch. For the crowd scenes, we used a real crowd.

DH: Was it before that that you did the L.A. Ring cycle?

MDY: It was before that. That was a very opera-heavy year. I was in LA the entire Spring, then I spent the entire Fall in Switzerland. That was the second year of the LA *Ring*. I've done the *Ring* quite a few times. I've done it in Chicago, I've done it at the Met, I've done it with Covent Garden. But I do so many different roles in it, which is kind of funny. Sometimes I do Fricka, sometimes I do the Glendas, Weltraute, Second Norn, it just depends!

DH: Well, we're looking forward to having you twice in Cleveland in the next year, for your recital at the Art Museum, and for the Verdi Requiem at Severance Hall. Have you sung with The Cleveland Orchestra before?

MDY: Quite a few times, actually, but never with Franz, and this time it's also not with Franz, but Robert Porco.

DH: Tell us about your recital on May 18th.

MDY: We're starting with an aria, *Malheureux roi*, Cassandra's aria from *Les Troyens*, which is something we don't do often, but this aria is such a powerful opener. And then

moving on to Debussy to do *Chansons de Bilitis*, and then end of the first half is a Brahms set, just a group that I thought was nice — or we: Ken and I really do this together. And then there's intermission. The second half is Purcell's *Evening Hymn*, very simple, very clean, just beautiful. Then a set of *Wunderhorn* songs that I'm actually doing in Luxembourg next week with the London Phil and Loren Mazel, then ending with set of five spirituals. I really love this program.

DH: Well, you've got some great things coming up — and you'll not be too far away from home this summer — you're going to be doing the Aspen Festival.

MDY: Yes — we like to get up there at least once a season. It's only a couple of hours for us. I love their program. Sometimes I do master classes for the students.

DH: And Robert Spano has just been appointed music director for the Festival.

MDY: He's a good man, and I think it's a great fit.

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