

CMA: Quince to perform at Transformer Station March 22

by Mike Telin



How do you describe a vocal ensemble made up of three sopranos and one mezzo that is dedicated to the commissioning and performance of contemporary vocal music? “If I only had ten seconds I’d say that we’re a string quartet for voices,” Amanda DeBoer said during a telephone interview. On Wednesday, March 22 at 7:30 pm, the Cleveland Museum of Art

will present [Quince Contemporary Vocal Ensemble](#) (Amanda DeBoer, Elizabeth Pearse, and Carrie Henneman Shaw, sopranos, and Kayleigh Butcher, mezzo-soprano) at Transformer Station.

DeBoer said that when Quince was first formed, it was a battle to differentiate themselves from other a cappella groups. “We realized right away that there was not a lot of repertoire for unaccompanied treble voices. You have a lot of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque choral traditions, but we weren’t trying to be an early-music ensemble — we wanted to sing contemporary repertoire.”

Persistence and hard work has paid off. In 2016, the Ensemble was invited to perform at the Kody Festival in Lublin, Poland, in collaboration with David Lang and Beth Morrison Productions. They have also appeared on the Outpost Concert Series and the Philip Glass: Music with Friends concert at the Issue Project Room. This season, in addition to a busy touring schedule, the quartet will collaborate with Eighth Blackbird and Third Coast Percussion on performances of *Music for 18 Musicians* by Steve Reich, and will be presented on the Ear Taxi and Frequency Festivals in Chicago. Their second CD, *Hushers*, featuring works by Giacinto Scelsi, Kate Soper, Warren Enström, and Kaija Saariaho, was recently released on the New Focus Recordings label.

How much contemporary repertoire *is* there for a quartet of treble voices? “We sang all

that was available early on, so we went commission-crazy,” DeBoer said. “We started by asking our friends to write pieces, and soon other composers started reaching out to us. Now we have a body of repertoire to draw from so we can create a lot of different kinds of programs.”

Regarding Wednesday’s program, DeBoer said they jokingly refer to it as their greatest hits set. “These are all pieces that we love. Some come from the album that we just released, and a couple will be on our third album that we’re recording in June.”

Quince will open the concert with the title work of their recent album, *Hushers*, by Warren Enström, a composer they met during a residency at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. “We were reading pieces by student composers and this one caught our attention. ‘Hushers’ are phonetic sounds like ‘shush,’ and he was using sounds that are found in Russian. Most people write very legato, atmospheric music for a vocal ensemble, but Warren’s piece is very rhythmic.”

DeBoer described Joe Clark’s *Not Merely Bad or Broken* as a stunning work that is full of New Orleans-style jazz clusters along with a West African dance tune. She called the libretto for Cara Haxo’s *Three Erasures* “a collage of texts that she has taken from women in beauty magazines, remixed in a way that is quite bizarre. But they are lovely, tonal songs.”

In addition to music by Kaija Saariaho, Giacinto Scelsi, and David Lang, the evening will also include excerpts from Jennifer Jolley’s multi-movement song cycle *Prisoner of Conscience*, with text from the trial of Pussy Riot, the Russian feminist, protest punk-rock group. DeBoer noted that the work contains subject matter and language that some people may find objectionable.

“As a composer, Jen is a stylistic chameleon, and this piece is influenced by different punk and sacred choral traditions. It’s a lot of fun, but it’s also very heavy at times because it does address some tough subject matter, including sexual assault. It’s not written for shock value or to be provocative, and it’s not meant to manipulate people, either. This is storytelling done in a sensitive way about a subject that is resonating with people right now. It is a piece that disturbs people, but the music is very accessible.”

When visiting universities, Quince is often asked to conduct workshops on entrepreneurship. “If it were up to me, I’d call it, ‘how to start anything,’” DeBoer said. “What often ends up happening is that we tell our story — Liz, Kayleigh, and I met when we were grad students at Bowling Green, we liked each other, and thought, ‘I could spend two weeks in a car with these people’ — so we started an ensemble. But it is surprising how many people don’t think about having a website, or a good photo. It

doesn't need to be an abstract/conceptual photo, but it should be one that kind of looks like you."

DeBoer said that she and her colleagues look forward to being back in Ohio, a state they love. They're also excited to be performing in the intimate Transformer Station. "We feel so at home in the smaller venues. Of course, we love concert halls, but the smaller satellite venues are so unique."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 20, 2017.

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