

Tenor Nicholas Phan to guest direct & sing in next Apollo's Fire concerts

by Daniel Hathaway



Nicholas Phan will certainly be no stranger to Northeast Ohio when he arrives to guest direct and perform in Apollo's Fire's next production. The versatile tenor has appeared with The Cleveland Orchestra in Orff's *Carmina Burana* in 2013, and in Bach's *B-minor Mass* in 2014. In his previous engagements with Apollo's Fire in 2016, he covered both

the Evangelist and the tenor solos in Bach's *St. John Passion*. He got off a bit easier in the Cleveland Orchestra's *St. John* last March, *only* singing the role of the Evangelist. And in between those gigs, Phan stepped in for John Relyea on Oberlin's Artist Recital Series in February, 2016.

This time around, Phan will be performing a program adapted from *A Painted Tale*, a 2015 recording of Elizabethan lute songs in which he collaborated with lutenist Michael Leopold and gambist Ann Marie Morgan. The album takes its name from the Thomas Morley piece that introduces it, and Phan wrote in a preview that "The songs are structured so that when one listens to them in order, they tell the story of a young man who falls passionately in love for a woman and who is ultimately destroyed by the fire of that passion."

Apollo's Fire artistic director Jeannette Sorrell said in an interview earlier this fall that she had planned to stick with the original title for the Cleveland performances, "but when I described the program to our board, one of the members dubbed it 'Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover!'" Borrowed from a song by Paul Simon, that catchy title stuck — a gift to the marketing department.

In a recent telephone conversation, Phan said he thought that “Fifty Ways” was actually a great title. “I kind of love that, because when we did the album program at Carnegie Hall in 2015, I told the audience at the end that they’d just heard the greatest breakup playlist from 1500 through 1630. It’s very much in line with my idea of the project. Unfortunately, the lover who’s left at the end is the protagonist, not the one he’s singing about, so there’s a little more tragedy involved.”

After Carnegie Hall, Phan performed the live show once or twice with a single lutenist and gambist, “including in Istanbul, of all places,” but he’ll have an expanded ensemble of six instrumentalists to work with for the Apollo’s Fire version. Violinists Johanna Novom and Evan Few, gambists René Schiffer and Ann Marie Morgan, and lutenists William Simms and Charles Weaver will join him in songs by Thomas Morley, Robert Johnson, John Blow, Nicholas Lanier, Henry Purcell, John Dowland, and Alfonso Ferrabosco, and those selections will be interleaved with instrumental music by Henry Lawes.

“It’s really exciting to be able to ‘paint the tale’ with a richer palette in Cleveland,” he said. “Early instruments are capable of so many different colors, and having extra musicians only increases the possibilities. We want to emulate groups who treat this music almost like jazz and create fantastic, innovative ways of interpreting things that look so simple on the page. That keeps the experience of the music fresh both for performers and listeners.”

Our conversation turned to the famous lutenist John Dowland, who is well represented on this program. Does Phan think the composer deserves his self-imposed tagline, *semper Dowland semper dolens* (“always Dowland, always doleful”)? “He is kind of that way, which is why his songs inhabit the second half of the program — when things turn sour in the story. But sometimes the way he expresses those things is cheerier than the text would lead you to think. And some of the pieces are dances that have been adapted into songs so they become a giant, virtuosic lute solo.”

And what does Phan think of pop singers like Sting, who have recorded their own versions of Dowland songs? “I find that really compelling,” he said. “Some purists roll their eyes at that, but what I love about it is that this music really is for everyone. If somebody like Sting takes an interest, I think that’s a testament to how powerful, wide-reaching, and timeless this repertoire is.

Watch a video preview for Phan’s album A Painted Tale [here](#).

Performances are scheduled in Akron on Thursday, November 9, Cleveland Heights on Friday and Saturday, November 10 & 11, and Rocky River on Sunday afternoon, November 12. Details and tickets [here](#).

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