

## Tuesday Musical: Brownlee & Owens at E.J. Thomas Hall (Feb. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



Stepping off on a multi-city tour, tenor Lawrence Brownlee and bass-baritone Eric Owens brought their wide-ranging duo recital to the Tuesday Musical series in Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall on February 12. The two longtime friends joined pianist Craig Terry in a heartwarming demonstration of camaraderie that spilled over into a love fest. Tag-team opera arias, traditional spirituals, popular songs, and gospel numbers filled the two-hour program laced with friendly banter and commentary.

The two immediately established their operatic credentials, Owens with “Non più andrai” from *Figaro*, Brownlee with “Ah! mes amis” from *Daughter of the Regiment*, notable for its nine (count them!) high Cs. Seemingly effortless vocal production and beautiful tone — from bottom to top of their ranges — carried through into solo selections from *Ernani* and *Faust*, and duets from *The Elixir of Love* and *Pearl Fishers*.

Seated on stage right, WCLV's Eric Kisch gave contextual notes for each of the operatic selections, and full texts and translations were printed in the program book — not so very helpful to the audience when the auditorium lights were doused. Maybe supertitles would have been a better choice.

After intermission, Brownlee, Owens, and Terry all remained onstage for a set of traditional spirituals. *All Night, All Day, Deep River, Come By Here, Give me Jesus,* and *He's Got the Whole World in His Hand* provided engaging contrasts between

tenor and bass-baritone voices in attractive arrangements by Damien Sneed, Hall Johnson, Margaret Bonds, and Terry himself.



Some of the American popular songs in the next set may not have been so familiar to many in the house on Tuesday. But *Song of Songs*, *Lulu's Back in Town*, *Dolores*, and *Through the Years* gave the singers some great material for solos and duets — and the listeners a reminder that once upon a time, this repertoire was performed by classically trained voices rather than Broadway belters. Case in point: Owen's beautiful singing of "Some Enchanted Evening" from *South Pacific*, originally styled by opera star Ezio Pinza as the French expatriate planter Emile de Becque.

The evening ended with gospel favorites — Brownlee in *I Don't Feel No Ways Tired*, Owens in *Peace Be Still*, and the two of them in *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*. An encore was inevitable and welcome: *This Little Light of Mine* continued in the gospel tradition and put an enthusiastic button on a performance where Brownlee, Owen, and Terry had flawlessly shifted gears between a number of musical styles.

Speaking of enthusiastic, the audience included contingents of students from Miller South High School and Kent State University with whom Lawrence Brownlee and Eric Owens had interacted earlier in their visit to Akron. Outreach activities are an important adjunct to Tuesday Musical's performances, and from the students'

reactions to shout-outs from the stage on Tuesday evening, very successful ones on this occasion.



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