

Jones, Parker, Csicsila, and McDaniel come together to celebrate “Black and Unknown Bards” for Re:Sound

by Stephanie Manning



For Matthew Jones, the best part about performing is doing it with your longtime friends. Luckily, the vocalist was recently able to do just that when he recorded a concert in person with hornist Van Parker, percussionist Mell Csicsila, and composer/pianist Buck McDaniel. The four are frequent collaborators who know each other well both on- and off-stage.

“We hung out during the pandemic and have been each other’s support system in some way,” Jones said in a recent interview. “So when it came time to make music again, all it took was just getting the cobwebs off.” The quartet’s latest performance, presented as part of the Cleveland Uncommon Sound Project’s 2021 Re:Sound Festival, features pieces that are deeply rooted in the Black experience.

“O Black and Unknown Bards” includes settings of poetry by four renowned and lesser-known African American writers. Two of the pieces are by Clevelander Dolores White, while the other half are by New York City-based Buck McDaniel.

The program’s title comes from a poem by James Weldon Johnson that Jones learned as a child. “After figuring out what pieces I wanted to present, that poem just came to mind,” he said. “It has a lot of significance regarding spirituals and the Black experience.”

The first piece Jones was drawn to presenting was McDaniel’s *On Seeing Two Brown Boys In a Catholic Church*. The vocalist premiered it with Parker and the DC String Orchestra in 2018, and the composer arranged the piece this year into a four-person instrumentation, with himself playing piano.

Based on a Harlem Renaissance poem by Frank Horne, the work feels personal to Jones. “I’ve had a lot of church gigs — not necessarily all Catholic — and sometimes I’ve been

the only Black person in the space, so that poem resonated with me,” he said. “Not in a negative sense, though.”

Everything on the program was chosen because of messages that remain deeply relevant today, and nowhere is that more true than with *We Wear the Mask*, Dolores White’s setting of a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem. This stirring piece for voice, piano, and percussion opens the concert and feels particularly pointed this year. “There’s a new slant on it now, and it puts it all in perspective,” Jones said.

White’s second piece, *That Black Reef*, sets a poem by Cleveland’s James C. Kilgore. Both professors at Cuyahoga Community College, Kilgore and White often collaborated before the renowned poet tragically died in a house fire in his fifties. This lesser-known art song reminds Jones of his childhood in Southeast Georgia. “There’s a connection between black reefs, or reefs in general, with rejuvenation. So it just brought back that cultural aspect that I grew up with.”

Following *That Black Reef* is Buck McDaniel’s *Charmed Syllables*, Parts I and II, based on two haiku by author Richard Wright. The work’s title was inspired by Wright’s daughter Julia, who once wrote that her father’s poems “lie somewhere in that transitional twilight area between the loss for words and the few charmed syllables that can heal the loss.”

The first haiku’s reference to a “red sinking autumn sun” portrays Wright’s connection to the McCarthyism period, during which he was accused of being a communist and consequently went into exile. “A lot of Black artists were affected by that situation,” Jones said. “There’s a lot that we just don’t know about that period — how things have been censored since then, in a way.”

Jones said that though all the poets are deceased, “the fact that these poems still resonate with us means that these experiences persist today.” The program highlights the different perspectives of the composers — one emerging and one long-established — and how that dichotomy is reflected in the music. “What I wanted to show is how two people can look at similar things.”

Above all, Jones is grateful for the opportunity to record in person with his fellow musicians. “After so many of us didn’t know when we’d be able to perform again, doing it with friends was the best part of the whole thing.”

The performance is available online for free through June 30. Register for the Re:Sound Festival [here](#) to receive an access code.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 16, 2021.

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