

Art Song Festival Winter Mini-Festival: Costanzo & Wagorn at CSU (Dec. 10)

by Daniel Hathaway



Singing was regarded as one of the riskiest of activities in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and both the 2020 Art Song Festival — scheduled for May of that year — and its replacement were scuttled.

Last week with proof of vaccinations required and other public health protocols in place, the Festival rose again as a winter mini-event. From December 9-11, countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and pianist Bryan Wagorn gave masterclasses and a riveting Friday evening recital in Drinko Hall at Cleveland State University, a temporary venue also due

to the pandemic, rather than at its official home at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Both Costanzo and Wagorn have been heavily involved with New York's Metropolitan Opera — the countertenor having sung the title role in Philip Glass's *Akhmaten*, and the pianist serving as a full-time assistant conductor at the house. They've also been a recital team for a number of years, and it was delightful to hear them in an intimate setting on Thursday evening.

Their compact but wide-ranging program began with Purcell's *One Charming Night* from *The Fairy Queen* and Britten's amusing folksong arrangement, *The Foggy Foggy Dew*. Those gave the audience an opportunity to acclimate themselves to Costanzo's striking voice and how he fits into the continuum of countertenors. In fact, he's a special case. His ringing sound can penetrate to all corners of a big house like

the Met, but his absolute control of his voice can float a beautiful *pianissimo* in chamber conditions. He changes ranges as effortlessly as an experienced driver shifts through the gears of a high-performance sports car.

The opening works also gave a good sense of Bryan Wagorn's consummate skill as a collaborative pianist. He likes to play dry or with little pedal, controlling dynamics and colors with touch alone, surprising the ear with sudden accents that leap boldly out of musical textures. He seems to have made a conscious decision about every note he plays.

The first of two contemporary works, Gregory Spears' *Fearsome the Night* from the composer's "dance-opera" *Wolf-in-Skins* relates a Welsh folk tale about a knight raised by Wolves. Here, Costanza sang long, spooky lines later decorated with melismas over an insistent piano ostinato that nudged the countertenor higher and higher.

The second, Joel Thompson's *Supplication & Compensation*, written for the Bang on a Can Festival, sets short Harlem Renaissance poems by Joseph Seamon Potter, Jr. and Paul Laurence Dunbar. In *Supplication*, Costanza quietly wailed "I am so tired and weary" over bluesy chords, then floated an impressive *pianissimo* F-sharp. (He jokes about telling Thompson that he can do that in a video, but he brings it off). Tinkling piano figures introduced *Compensation* and led to joyous vocal melismas.



Between those new pieces came the longest work on the program, a complete performance of Berlioz' six-song cycle *Les nuits d'été* that called for a different way of shaping phrases — and introduced French into the language mix.

Four Liszt songs were a revelation, substituting lyricism for pianistic bombast. The first, *Im Rhein, in schöne Ströme*, contrasts with Schumann's more dramatic and slightly chilling setting of Heinrich Heine's text. The transcendent chords in *Über*

allen Gipfeln ist Ruh inspired Costanzo to some of the most exalted singing of the evening.

Then, the countertenor's Broadway alter ego took over. After explaining that he was half Italian and half Jewish — probably Hungarian to be precise — Anthony Roth Costanzo launched into music by George Gershwin, having been egged on into performing that repertoire by his piano teacher at a young age. *Sam and Delilah* led to near-choreographed versions of *Embraceable You*, and *I Got Rhythm*.

A big ovation called for an encore, and Costanzo promised only one. You could see why when he took on both characters in a Mozart duet, singing in different ranges and acting out the scene with hilarious athleticism.

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