

Art Song Festival rises again from June 23-28 at CIM

by Daniel Hathaway



It's been rough going for Art Song Festival for the past two years. Founder George Vassos passed away after a long teaching and entrepreneurial career in February of 2020, and although detailed plans were in place to hold the festival that year, concerns about the well-documented spread of COVID via aerosols among singers dictated a postponement.

"It feels like such a gift that the Art Song Festival is actually happening," director Dean Southern said in a recent phone conversation. "It's also time for reflection, and I find myself

getting to a really reflective place.

"More than two years ago, George, Tamara Wilson, and Warren Jones were planning the 2020 Festival, The Cleveland Orchestra was going to do *Otello*, and we worked it out so that Tamara could do both, then that all got canceled. We postponed to 2021, when it all got canceled again. So it feels quite amazing that it's all going to come back this year. For me, spring and Art Song Festival just go together."

Southern, who also serves as director of opera at CIM, noted that it's not without mixed emotions that things are returning to something like pre-COVID times. "We're getting back to normal, but in many ways, people seem worn out. That first year we all really pulled together to get through it, we had the vaccines a year ago that made us feel hopeful, then this year we realized that this situation is going to be with us for a long time, and we have to get used to dealing with it. That's frustrating for a lot of people, and it takes a lot of energy. At CIM it was really fun to be creative and find new ways of doing things with opera, but that gets tiring too."

That said, Southern finds new energy bubbling up in this year's Art Song Festival plans. "We did more advertising, and had 38 singer-pianist teams apply this time, including four from CIM — the highest in many years. The Festival is really about teams auditioning together. We score singers and pianists individually, then as a team."

The Festival Week will be bracketed by the two artist recitals — Tamara Wilson and Warren Jones on Monday, and David Portillo and Craig Terry on Friday. Master classes take place during the week, and the Festival culminates on Saturday in a recital by the ten teams. Midweek, a panel discussion about collaboration chaired by Warren Jones will be available both as an in-person and online event, with separate Q&A opportunities.

Dean Southern especially looks forward to the master classes, which offer a look behind the scenes of the artistic process, with established musicians working with young artists on the cusps of their own careers. "The subjects can include repertory, musical expression, dramatic interpretation, dictionary, and vocal technique, and the keyboardists have as much to offer as the vocalists. Craig and Warren are a powerhouse — two of the best ears in the business."

During the pandemic, Southern admitted that he came to appreciate some of the benefits of taking events online. "I still feel like I listen more intently when I'm in the room, but at the very beginning of the lockdown, my CIM colleague Dina Kuznetsova and I watched the Met at Home Gala and texted each other throughout — something we couldn't have done during a live performance!"

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