

## Tuesday Musical: “Our Song, Our Story” (Feb. 2)

by Stephanie Manning



At first glance, the sheer number of pieces on the program for “Our Song, Our Story” looked a little intimidating. The concert, which was presented by Tuesday Musical and traced the musical output of Black Americans, offered listeners all kinds of categories: spiritual songs, opera, and lieder, just to name a few. But on February 2, what was printed on the paper was more of a guide for the performers to

pick-and-choose, letting them present their songs, their way.

At the center of the program was composer and pianist Damien Sneed, who accompanied the small set of performers while also presenting some of his own works. Talkative and affable towards the audience in E.J. Thomas Hall, Sneed provided both personal and compositional context throughout the evening. He also explained a crucial last-minute change: originally-scheduled soprano Brandie Inez Sutton had just been called up for an opportunity at the Met, leaving Jacqueline Echols to step in on very short notice.

But aside from Echols’s reliance on printed music, you never would have known. Her confident and composed stage presence bolstered the power in her voice, and her technical agility in selections like Sneed’s arrangement of *Great is Thy Faithfulness* and Gershwin’s “Summertime” from *Porgy and Bess* quickly established her as an audience favorite. And the chemistry between her and baritone Justin Austin — whom she had just met that day — was undeniable. The duo’s rendition of Mozart’s “La Ci Darem La Mano” from *Don Giovanni* was as well-acted as it was sung. No supertitles needed.

Austin made a big impression from his first appearance. In *Oh Freedom*, arranged by Shawn Okpebholo, Austin’s velvety-dark baritone was instantly captivating, the emotional commitment to his performance chill-inducing. The physicality of his acting played a big part in his stage presence, whether it was portraying an ecstatic Scott Joplin in “It Is Done” from Sneed’s upcoming opera *Treemonisha* (about Joplin’s opera of the

same name) or a tormented Charles Blow in “There Was A Storm” from Terence Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*.

But no moment was quite so emotional as another selection, described in the program only as a duet from that Blanchard opera. Echols and Austin gave an engrossing performance of a scene that deals with some heavy themes, including Austin’s character opening up about his experience with sexual abuse. With such a raw and sensitive topic, it would have been appropriate to include some sort of content warning, either verbal or written. Regardless, it certainly set my heart racing.

Playing the role of accompanists in this selection, and about half the program in total, was the spirited Griot String Quartet. About midway through the program, they got a moment to themselves with a joyful rendition of the Allegro from Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s *String Quartet No. 1*. Their connection to the larger group was sometimes a bit tenuous, with moments of uncertain entrances with the piano (Richard Strauss’s *Morgen*) and overbalancing the soprano soloist (Margaret Bonds’s arrangement of *He’s Got The Whole World in His Hands*). Sneed, for his part, proved an apt collaborator with his fellow artists, although his delivery occasionally became a little heavy in songs like Harry T. Burleigh’s *Till I Wake*.

At two hours, the program would have benefited from even a brief intermission, but understandably there was a lot of ground to cover. Each piece felt equally meaningful as the last, both musically and contextually — making for a memorable start to Black History Month.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 8, 2022.*

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