

McGill, Huang & Perroni sing at Cleveland Chamber Music Society (March 28)

by Peter Feher



Clarinetist Anthony McGill brought star power to the Cleveland Chamber Music Society on March 28. In a concert that was all about singing — that, in fact, included two pieces with soprano — McGill stood out as the most prominent voice.

This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the clarinetist, who, since taking the principal chair with the New York Philharmonic in 2014, has cultivated the kind of celebrity career more often reserved for singers, string players, and

pianists. McGill's penchant for vocal music is no secret either. He previously served as principal clarinet of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and the style and sound he picked up in the pit are still present in his playing today.

For the program at Disciples Christian Church in Cleveland Heights, McGill chose works that let his instrument sing — softly, sensitively, and only occasionally uneasily. He had a solid partner in pianist Myra Huang, a go-to vocal accompanist and Head of Music for the Met's young artist program, and a fitting foil in soprano Elena Perroni, a rising singer in the opera world.

The trio of soprano, clarinet, and piano has persisted thanks to a singular piece, Franz Schubert's *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* ("The Shepherd on the Rock"), D. 965. Schubert had a fully developed approach to songwriting by the time he was working on this Lied in 1828 during the last months of his life. The score possesses all his signature virtues of simplicity, restraint, and introspection, even when it deviates from the typical Schubert song, like in its more ornate sections and in its introduction of another instrument.

The clarinet here plays not so much an obligato part as a dueling solo line, which was perfect for McGill. He invested his phrases with the same intensity of poetic meaning that Perroni found in the text, and his fleet passages of 16th notes were a virtuoso match for the soprano's coloratura delivery at the end.

Schubert's song was the model for James Lee III's *Chavah's Daughters Speak*, scored for the same trio. McGill is clearly committed to this piece, reprogramming it here after giving its world premiere in 2021. It has both more material to sort through than the Schubert, and fewer opportunities to show off.

Chavah's Daughters Speak sets five humble poems on religious themes by Sister Lou Ella Hickman, who was in the audience for Tuesday's performance. Lee treats his source somewhat literally, faithfully adapting each line of text — sometimes with a distinctive musical gesture, like a cascade of piano notes on the word “unraveled” — but also ignoring the essential repetition that can give a song shape and make it stick in your memory.

William Grant Still's *Romance* is striking because of its economy of material. McGill interpreted the simple melody gorgeously, and Huang unfurled the intriguing harmonies underneath — together lending this purely instrumental work all the expressivity of a vocal one.

In contrast, McGill did a disservice to the theme of his program by starting with Schubert's “Arpeggione” Sonata, a piece that's just too delicate and demanding to be used as a warm-up like that. It was the one moment Tuesday that didn't sing.

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