

## Accent at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Dec. 8)

by Peter Feher



Accent's holiday concert at the Cleveland Museum of Art on December 8 was a hometown affair, even if the six members of this all-male a cappella ensemble had collectively traveled thousands of miles to be there.

The audience in Gartner Auditorium on Friday night cheered on bass Evan Sanders, a South Euclid native who, as the group's lowest voice, has grounded this far-flung collaboration for more than a decade now.

The members of Accent got to know each other, as seemingly everyone does nowadays, on the internet. They all started out solo, posting one-man a cappella arrangements on YouTube — videos in which one singer would record every track of a given song and then layer it all together for a composite performance. Accent began as an extension of these videos, at first only virtual — until the group decided to take the collaboration live.

The ensemble explained all this partway through its CMA program, in an engaging number that also outlined the singers' individual backgrounds, from their countries of origin to their musical influences.

On the lead tenor part, Jean-Baptiste Craipeau maintains a light falsetto that's a mix of altar boy and pop star. He could lean in either direction depending on the repertoire, be it the floating top harmonies in his own arrangement of the French Christmas tune *Petit Papa Noël* or the heartthrob crooning of the Édith Piaf classic *Hymne à l'amour*.

On second tenor, Simon Åkesson brings a rock edge to the group, evident in his delivery of the Crosby, Stills & Nash song *Marrakesh Express*. That is, when he isn't sharing a bit of his own Swedish culture, like in a gentle setting of the carol *Jul, jul, strålande jul*.

Canadian tenors Danny Fong and Andrew Kesler have known each other the longest, going all the way back to high-school choir and an ill-fated barbershop quartet. At its best, Accent's brand of a cappella has some of the same corny but sweet qualities of barbershop, a blend of precision, humor, and jazzy harmonies.

This was the infectious spirit behind numbers like a jazz arrangement of J.S. Bach's *Air on the G String* and the *Swe-Dane Symphony*, a virtuoso tour through the instruments of the orchestra (as lovingly imitated by the voice). Accent's light jazz sound also lets the low end of the ensemble shine, with English baritone James Rose delivering smooth solo after smooth solo, and Sanders often on the vocal equivalent of a walking bass line.

Less successful were songs that, done a cappella, would better suit a glee club (Natalie Cole's *This Will Be*) or a boy band (Maroon 5's *Sugar*). And bizarrely, in an evening otherwise full of perfectly executed harmonies, the ensemble struggled with pitch and balance in a spare arrangement of Alfred Burt's *Some Children See Him*.

But everyone was confidently back on home turf for the finale, a comic mash-up of national anthems representing just how spectacular it can be when these six singers come together.

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