

Tuesday Musical: Joyce DiDonato and Kings Return (Dec. 3)

By Peter Feher



Mariah Carey may be pop music's undisputed "Queen of Christmas." But among classical singers, the title has yet to be taken, and this year, superstar mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato is vying for the crown.

As far as royalty is concerned, DiDonato has a distinct advantage. This isn't to imply any sort of better-than-thou diva demeanor, which she's conspicuously avoided cultivating over the course of a 25-year opera career. Offstage, whether she's coaching a master class or sharing a bit of herself on social media, DiDonato is known for her openhearted, inviting manner.

And that's just the spirit in which she connected with the regal singers of Kings Return, an up-and-coming a cappella quartet from Dallas. After viewing one of the group's YouTube videos, DiDonato reached out, and the result is this holiday program. The five singers are touring the country this month and made their first stop at Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall on Dec. 3 for a concert presented by Tuesday Musical.

If there were still a few bugs to work out in the performance, DiDonato and Kings Return shared a merry time all the same, surveying a range of vocal styles across some two dozen Christmas tunes. A holiday album might be on the horizon, considering their chemistry as a group.

No one could deny the madcap charm of a number that pitted the mezzo-soprano trilling "Rejoice greatly" from Handel's *Messiah* against the quartet harmonizing on the "Hallelujah" chorus. When ensemble and intonation got a little shaky, like in the trio of

carols that opened the program (starting with “Do You Hear What I Hear?”), the group gained strength from singing together.

DiDonato and Kings Return first tenor Vaughn Faison seemed stylistically at odds in back-to-back solos on “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” but when everyone joined in at the end, the balance was smooth and stellar. Faison contributed suave guitar accompaniment for that song — as well as for a solo arrangement of “I Wonder as I Wander” that revealed DiDonato’s more subdued side.

The mezzo-soprano injected opera into the proceedings with her dramatic renditions of “O Holy Night” and Pietro Mascagni’s “Ave Maria” (based on the Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*). She then ventured into somewhat unfamiliar territory with the spiritual “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” and later a campy cabaret version of “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch.” Whatever direction DiDonato went in, her longtime pianist Craig Terry followed gamely.

Kings Return demonstrated its own versatility with a handful of a cappella selections, none more brilliant than a *Nutcracker* arrangement sung largely on doo’s and oo’s with the occasional R&B riff thrown in for good measure. Of course, the ensemble had to reprise its take on Franz Schubert’s “Ave Maria,” the song in the viral video that first attracted DiDonato’s attention. Elsewhere, a Motown medley gave a solo spotlight to each member of the quartet — including second tenor J.E. McKissic, baritone Jamall Williams, and bass Gabe Kunda — but strayed a bit from the program’s holiday focus.

All of the vocalists were mic’d throughout, which is essential for a cappella (the bass notes won’t boom otherwise) but unnecessary for DiDonato, whose solo numbers might have benefitted from a more natural acoustic.

The concert concluded in gentle fashion with an encore that combined “Silent Night” and “Peace, Peace” and featured high school choristers from Firestone Community Learning Center. If DiDonato is going to be the Queen of Christmas, she’s more than happy to share the season.

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