

Tenor Jonathan Pierce Rhodes makes Cleveland-area debut with Apollo's Fire

by Stephanie Manning



Jonathan Pierce Rhodes is a musician with many interests — so many, in fact, that he almost didn't pursue a career in music at all.

“I was really close to being a lawyer,” the tenor explained in a recent interview. As an undergraduate, he earned degrees in both music and political science. “Then the pandemic hit, and I got into grad school for music. So I was like, ‘Well, that door is opening, so let's just keep going in that direction.’”

That direction is steadily heading upward, thanks in part to his work with the Washington National Opera's Cafritz Young Artists, multiple summers at the Glimmerglass Festival, and now an appearance with Apollo's Fire.

Later this month, Rhodes will make his debut with the early music ensemble in “Classical Sparks,” singing arias by Mozart and Joseph Bologne. Rounding out the program is Haydn's *Symphony No. 8*, “Le Soir,” Mozart's Overture to *La Finta semplice*, and Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 3* with soloist Alan Choo. The four performances will tour the area with appearances in Akron (February 27 at 7:30 pm), Bay Village (February 28 at 7:30 pm), Shaker Heights (March 1 at 7:30 pm), and the Cleveland Museum of Art (March 2 at 3:00 pm).

Mozart's “Amici miei... Il Mio Tesoro” from *Don Giovanni* is paired with Joseph Bologne's “Depuis longtemps” from *L'Amant Anonyme* (“The Anonymous Lover”). Premiered in 1780, *L'Amant Anonyme* is the only surviving opera by the French composer known as the Chevalier de Saint-Georges.

Rhodes hadn't sung anything from the Bologne work before preparing for Apollo's Fire. But, he said, “it actually fits my voice really well. I would say it's more for a light lyric tenor. More like Haydn than Mozart in my opinion.”

Learning the music took him back to his undergrad days of studying traditional opera repertoire. “I’ve done a lot of contemporary opera in my early career, and now musical theater, so going back to my roots and doing a more traditional operatic piece like this — I feel like I reconnected with my upbringing,” he said.

Rhodes is still very much at an early point in his career, having graduated from WNO’s Cafritz Young Artists last May. In his two years there, he found that his age posed an extra challenge — he started the program at 24, while most of his peers were in their late twenties or early thirties.

“I had a lot of catching up to do in terms of developing my identity as an artist, the kind of repertoire that I sing, and my overall technique. There’s a lot of different moving parts,” he said. “But they were so kind to me in my development and always kept me on the straight and narrow.”

His first year as a full-time freelancer has also come with some adjustments. Outside the structured environment of school or a residency program, “no one’s behind your back telling you, ‘This is what you should sing, this what you should do.’ It becomes a lot of independent work, and that’s been the biggest jarring experience of all.”

But with that independence comes the freedom to explore new things. “It’s been fun finding out what kind of repertoire I like and what resonates with me as an artist,” he said. In November, he sang in Jeanine Tesori’s *Blue* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. In May, he’ll make his Carnegie Hall debut with the Oratorio Society of New York. And when we spoke, he had just finished an audition for the off-Broadway production of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

“I consider myself a storyteller first, more than anything,” he said. “So whatever medium that takes me to, I just enjoy the ride.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 19, 2025.

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