

Baldwin Wallace Conservatory Opera: *Speed Dating Tonight!* (Feb. 15)

by Peter Feher



In 2023, *Axios* reported that according to a recent poll, only about 20 percent of college students said they regularly used dating apps. The survey didn't ask if anyone had ever tried good old-fashioned speed dating — presumably, that number would have been even lower.

The undergraduate performers in Baldwin Wallace Conservatory's opera studies program can therefore claim a special distinction. More than a dozen BW singers took the stage at the Cleveland

Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium over Valentine's Day weekend for the local premiere of *Speed Dating Tonight!*

This quirky one-act opera, with words and music by composer Michael Ching, has received upward of 100 small productions since its 2013 premiere, and it's easy to see why. If Ching's concept is somewhat outmoded, the dramatic setup he contrives is perfect for a college or community organization that has talent and ambition to spare.

In fact, the opera's modular structure of mini scenes — Ching has written 100 short numbers that are intended to be selected from and then customized for the performers in question — resembles nothing so much as a series of auditions.

Some attendant pressure was palpable during the students' performance on Saturday afternoon, Feb. 15. At the same time, *Speed Dating Tonight!* afforded numerous opportunities for these young voices and personalities to share a bit of themselves and shine.

Scott Skiba, BW's director of opera studies and the chief force behind this production, arranged Ching's score tactfully so that every singer got a solo moment. Lounging on plush red furniture spread out on the Gartner stage, the cast took turns in the spotlight

and with prospective partners, each character divulged a personal history over the course of just a couple of minutes. Some stories seemed completely sensible — being afraid to marry, feeling a little uncomfortable — while others were downright strange. Most memorably, we met a wildlife rehabilitator who later revealed that she likes to dress up as a raccoon.

The men unquestionably had the better material. Bass Aidan Eddy sang a simple, satisfying number about liking the bar where everyone sat. Musical theater students Kaymond Ivey and AJ Wansack delivered a feeling and fast-paced duet that sounded like an homage to Stephen Sondheim. Busting out a guitar and some pop vocals, Ryan James Sweeney rocked out to a song called “Crush Apples With Me,” which even saw conductor Dean Buck getting in on the act, briefly stepping away from the small chamber orchestra he was leading to take a tenor sax solo.

The women were tasked with trickier roles but acquitted themselves graciously. Soprano Leah Kania, playing the character of the dating coordinator, rode around on a bicycle while giving out carefully sung instructions. Lia Aceto passionately performed her part of the opening number, conveying complex emotion even in passages where Ching’s lyrics were pat (“Someday soon all dates will be online ... Virtual sex, that’s what’s next”). Martina De Luccio brought style and confidence to a sequence titled “Mansplainer!” — one of two new scenes that Ching composed especially for the Cleveland premiere.

The most moving moment of the afternoon came after all the initial dates had concluded. Standing at the front of the stage, the cast joined together in an a cappella number whose refrain was “If not now, when?” Certain individual voices rose above the chorus in a meaningful way, seeming to underscore the universal emotion being shared.

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