

Voices from the Other Side: a celebratory album release concert full of local talent (Feb. 25)

by Stephanie Manning



An entire album of pieces for eight cellos and one soprano might seem like a daunting prospect. But *Voices from the Other Side* clocks in at more than an hour's worth of music — so there's more out there for this instrument combination than you might think.

Released in September 2024, the album features soprano Gabrielle Haigh and the Erie Coast Cellists in music by Margi Griebeling-Haigh, Arvo Pärt, and Heitor Villa-Lobos, all

conducted by Steven Smith. The group made the recording at Federated Church in Chagrin Falls — and on February 25, they gathered in that same venue to present the music in concert for the first time.

Presented as part of the Federated Church Performing Arts Series, with support from the Cleveland Cello Society, the album release concert took its audience on a journey of varied, accessible, and enjoyable contemporary music.

Voices from the Other Side gets its title from Margi Griebeling-Haigh's piece of the same name, which landed in the opening slot for both the album and the performance. The Cleveland composer's setting of the lyrics by poet Edna St. Vincent Millay catches the ear immediately. The driving rhythm of "Some Things Are Dark" shifts into sections of pizzicato, a triplet meter, and then back again, while the murkiness of "Prayer to Persephone" resembles the realm inhabited by that queen of the underworld.

Soprano Gabrielle Haigh carried herself with an elegant posture and a focused, clear voice. The full force of eight cellos sometimes swallowed up her lower register, a balance issue that isn't present in the recording. Cellist Khari Joyner echoed the vocal melody in the third movement, "The Curse," accented with a growling low octave from Richard Weiss.

Joyner, Weiss, David Ellis, Julie Meyers King, Robert Nicholson, Jacqueline Pegis, Gabriel Ramos, and Jeff Singler had no trouble blending together as one unit. Conductor Steven Smith led the cello ensemble in two pieces without soprano, one of them being Greibling-Haigh's other piece on the program: *Cantilena*.

A fugal theme ping-ponged from player to player before some interesting, competing textures arose from different sections of the ensemble. An uncanny, repeated harmonic note from Joyner sounded almost like a car alarm before a passage of steady but furious plucking announced the piece's end.

Eerie harmonics were also top of mind in Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*, a flexible piece that can be performed with any combination of instruments. Coordination here faltered a bit — the gentle drumbeats made as the cellists tapped their instruments weren't always in sync. But the group carefully built the layers of patterns over each repetition, producing a meditative effect that gently slowed the heart rate as the momentum eventually descended.

Another work by Pärt, *L'abbé Agathon*, also featured some percussive traits, with sections of sharp strikes of bows on strings that eventually dissolved into more pizzicato. Here, Gabrielle Haigh gave her strongest performance of the night, with the sections for soprano alone giving plenty of opportunities to admire her smooth and radiant voice.

Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*, the most well-known piece on the program, came off more unevenly. The dense textures and swift-moving lines made the words in both movements hard to follow. But, Richard Weiss made a lovely turn as Haigh's mirror and duet partner in the first movement, with tasteful rubato in his extended solo sections. And Haigh's enthusiasm remained both unwavering and contagious.

Photo by Mark Nelson

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 11, 2025.

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