

## **VOCES8's Oberlin debut: a delightful 20th anniversary program (Oct. 28)**

by Stephanie Manning



VOCES8's 20th anniversary called for plenty of celebration and plenty of humor.

When the British a cappella group visited the Oberlin Artist Recital Series on October 28, they brought a program of audience favorites that delighted the sold-out crowd in Finney Chapel. Known for their ethereal voices and crystal clear harmonies, the octet demonstrated all that and more as they bridged the sacred and secular in “Songs From 20 Years.”

This two-decade milestone gave good reason to celebrate not only the singers, but also their longtime arranger-in-residence, Jim Clements. Responsible for some of the group's most requested pieces, Clements is like “the secret burger sauce in the Big Mac,” joked tenor Blake Morgan.

Kate Rusby's beautiful “Underneath the Stars” held the audience in rapt attention as the crystalline soprano voice of Savannah Porter (VOCES8's newest member) gently rose out of the texture. Later, the group pared down to five members for Don McLean's “Vincent,” where tenor Morgan led the nostalgic and bittersweet melody.

Showcasing Clements' versatility, his two other featured arrangements were both upbeat and surprisingly funny. Otis Blackwell's peppy “Fever” gave brief solos to each member over a bed of snapping, while Nat “King” Cole's “Straighten Up and Fly Right” introduced some scatting and percussion sounds that inspired some delighted laughter from the crowd. Post-intermission, Morgan playfully imitated a drumset during J.S. Bach's “Bourrée” (arranged by Ward Swingle) to great amusement.

No pieces brought quite as much laughter, however, as Thomas Weelkes' “As Vesta Was from Latmos Hill Descending,” where bass Dominic Carver poked fun at his simple and

repetitive part — holding out long notes while exaggeratedly looking at his watch and rolling his eyes.

But for all the playfulness of works like Orlando Di Lasso's "Dessus le marché d'Arras," much of the evening was spent appreciating the sheer vocal beauty of the octet, who sing as if they are one instrument. They paired Sergei Rachmaninov's haunting "Bogoroditse Devo" from his *All-Night Vigil* with contemporary composer Jake Runstad's *Let My Love Be Heard*, an instant program highlight. An awed silence descended, the collective focus only intensifying during the Runstad's big crescendo.

John Cameron's lovely arrangement of Edward Elgar's "Nimrod" from *Enigma Variations* (set to the words of "Lux Aeterna") featured the soaring sopranos of Savannah Porter and Eleonora Poignant. Felix Mendelssohn's "Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen" — a motet which later became part of his oratorio *Elijah* — felt particularly fitting for a chapel setting, as did their other sacred pieces.

Finney Chapel's high ceiling did swallow up some of the intricacies of the octet's sound, with the alto and countertenor voices particularly getting swept up in the blend. However, their side-by-side piece with the Oberlin College Choir — Caroline Shaw's *and the swallow* — had no such issue. Even after exponentially increasing the number of voices, the group blend sounded effortless, and the piece somberly painted the image of a swallow in flight.

Countertenor Barnaby Smith's announcement of the last number produced an instant "aww" of disappointment from those gathered. But the octet sent us off with a trio of jazzy arrangements by Alexander L'Estrange. Lorenz Hart & Richard Rodgers' "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" featured a groovy soprano solo from Poignant and a jumping bass part for Carver.

The theme of travel then connected two mashups: Cole Porter & Fred Ebb's "I Get A Kick Out of You" and Bart Howard, Jimmy Van Heusen, & Sammy Cahn's "Come Fly With Me (to the Moon)." Both felt particularly timely, as the next day VOCES8 would be jet setting to New York City — bringing their decades of delight to audiences in the Big Apple.

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