

**M.U.S.i.C. at Cleveland Museum of Art (Dec. 12)**

by Kevin McLaughlin



By six o'clock on December 12, winter light was already draining from the Ames Family Atrium at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Museumgoers crossed paths with concertgoers as chairs were added for late arrivals.

The pale stone space, faintly scented with art, shifted from public square

to indoor gathering place — a civic thoroughfare briefly claimed for music and dance.

Much of the evening's ease was due to Stars in the Classics artistic director Jodi Kanter, who assembled the roster of rising artists and guided the program with a light touch — offering brief remarks and filling a transition while the stage was readied for the dancers.

*A Musical Prelude for the Holidays* delivered both seasonal cheer and something rarer: the pleasure of discovery. Chamber music, vocal selections, Broadway, tango, klezmer, and Nutcracker dances followed one another without strain. The mission of M.U.S.i.C. (Musical Upcoming Stars in the Classics) — bridging education and the profession — was made tangible by a roster of early-career musicians and dancers performing at a high level, and by a shared sense of belonging onstage.

Founded in 2005, M.U.S.i.C. has now presented more than 180 events, offering young artists professional experience and meaningful exposure. Friday's

international roster suggested a healthy pipeline from conservatories and training programs into Northeast Ohio's musical life.

Mozart opened the evening with the first movement of the *Trio in B-flat*, K. 502, followed by "Sleigh Ride" from his *Three German Dances*. Violinist Zachary Brandon, cellist Brendon Phelps, and pianist Anna Grudskaya played both works with alert ensemble and natural blend. The Atrium's acoustic rewarded clarity over weight. Grudskaya played with liteness and remarkable poise and her partners matched her cool restraint. The same trio returned later for Piazzolla, making a striking contrast in style and demeanor.

Winter then came indoors in contrasting guises. Minchae Kim's reading of Vivaldi's "Winter" was crisp and focused, its hushed opening suggesting a cold wind before the quick movements burst into controlled fury. Piazzolla's "Invierno porteño" followed, turning the temperature decisively upward. Brandon and Phelps, joined by pianist Jackson Naglick, played with bite and volatility and Brandon's impassioned solo flights nearly stopped the show.

Dance threaded itself naturally into the program. Ohio Contemporary Ballet — formerly Verb Ballets — made a strong impression in a suite assembled from *The Nutcracker*, under the direction of Margaret Carlson.

With pianists Alexander Kostritsa and Jackson Naglick dispatching the overture with flair and polish, the dancers stepped confidently into Tchaikovsky's world. The Sugar Plum Fairy soloist moved with long-limbed grace, the Russian Dance bounded and stamped with exuberance. The Chinese Dance flicked and strutted with quick wit and the Waltz of the Flowers gathered into a buoyant swirl, closing the sequence in full bloom.

Soprano Chuting Huang lit up Lerner and Loewe's "I Could Have Danced All Night" and Lehár's "Lippen schweigen," adopting a demurely playful stance opposite baritone Colin DeMatteo, who held his own as Count Danilo. Huang projected confidently in a space not kind to singers, though her diction softened in "I Could Have Danced All Night."

The finale brought a surprise. Béla Kovács' *Sholem-Alekhem, rov Feidman!* for soprano saxophone and piano closed the program with flair. Perry Roth's saxophone, a convincing stand-in for klezmer clarinet, wailed, laughed, and resonated with startling power. The audience rose to its feet, drawing the full cast quickly back for a final bow.

The Atrium's openness posed challenges — dry for strings and piano, unforgiving for voices — yet performers adjusted intelligently. The program's variety proved an asset: tradition and holiday spirit — ohne Kitsch.

As audiences stepped back into the December night, musicians and dancers lingered, flushed and smiling. This was not a student showcase, but an evening of fully realized music making — and good cheer.

*Photo by Frank Buck*

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