

The Art Song Festival:

Thirty Years of Art Song in Ohio

BY JASON VEST

Read what this 30-year-old program has in store for 2016, including advice from one of the special guest artists on bringing art song to life.



I often remind my students how lucky they are to be singers. While other musicians play beautiful melodies from great composers, we get the words. This conveys a great responsibility for us to be excellent musicians as well as effective actors who can express the meanings of the text.

For 30 years, the Art Song Festival has been hosting some of the greatest international artists and training the next generation of singers to improve their musical and textual interpretation skills. The festival was hosted at the Cleveland Institute of Music for its first 20 years and since then has been held at Baldwin Wallace University. The names of guest artists and participants is a “who’s who” in the world of classical

singing: Gérard Souzay, Marilyn Horne, Stanford Olsen, Stephanie Blythe, Susanna Phillips, Dalton Baldwin, Elly Ameling, Barbara Bonney, Warren Jones, Martin Katz, Roger Vignoles, Kurt Ollmann, John Aler, Håkan Hagegård, Tom Krause, Sarah Walker . . . and the list goes on.

Why would so many of the world’s important artists devote themselves to art song, a musical form that many consider the province of the academy? “The problem is that the students now are being trained for mostly opera and art song is being neglected, which I think is a shame,” says George Vassos, who founded the Art Song Festival. “People give young singers arias when they really should be learning

art songs!” Indeed, it is in art songs that singers can hone their ability not just to sing but to accent the language appropriately and to color each word to reflect its meaning.

One of this year’s highlighted performers and master clinicians is Edwin Crossley-Mercer, a French-Irish baritone who has been featured at the Paris Opéra, the Glyndebourne Festival, and many other prestigious venues. He agrees about the importance of art song, especially in the training of singers: “It was easier when I began my training to focus on art songs, which are more adapted to a young voice, instead of hammering the big operatic repertoire when I was too young. It was good for me to get musical and vocal education through that kind of repertoire. When I went to Berlin to study, one of the reasons I wanted to go there was to study the Lieder repertoire. I went to a couple of competitions and that was mainly what I did.”

What Is the Art Song Festival at Baldwin Wallace?

This week-long festival just outside of Cleveland grants 10 singer-pianist teams the opportunity to work together with highly esteemed guest singers and pianists as they strive to create a meaningful performance. For those who are accepted, the experience is tuition-free and the impact on their careers is undeniable.

Vassos explains how the singer-pianist teams are chosen for the program. “We pick 10 singer-piano teams, and the pianist must be just as skilled as the

George Vassos with Dalton Baldwin (left photo) and Elly Ameling (right photo)



the guest piano artists.” Those who are accepted this year will be working with Susan Graham, Edwin Crossley-Mercer, Eduardo Valdes, Jason Paul Peterson, and Bradley Moore.

“Sometimes you meet people that are very impressed with themselves,” says Vassos. “However, our artists have been such fabulous people. Most of the artists we bring love what they’re doing. It’s not about singing arias, but it’s their true love of the art song and poetry and instilling that into the students.

“The pianist and singer are able to learn from each other during the week in a different way than other programs,” Vassos continues. “There is a recital at the end of the week where each singer presents two or three of the songs that they have coached that week, and most have said that this was a highlight of the week for them.”

vocalist for the team to make it. We usually have four judges, including singers and pianists, and we try to make sure that both singer and pianist are advanced enough to be coached. The singers have a half hour each with the major guest singers and the guest pianist works with the singers, but also with

Art Song as Advanced Study

Opera is for the audience, art song is for us as performers. That is perhaps too simplified, but it highlights that art song is a more personal art form than opera. Most of the singers I



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have spoken with have talked about how they love the intimate conversation that happens between them and the audience when they perform art song.

What are the challenges of art song? “I think it’s a really important thing for young singers to learn and love the poetry and the great composers that wrote these marvelous songs,” says Vassos. The poem is a smaller, more intimate art form and its meaning is not always immediately clear. As singers, we have to figure out the poet’s intentions, look at the music and see how the composer interpreted the poem, and then bring our own take within that context.

In an opera, much of the character is given to you. You often know their history, their current setting, their situation—and you know the outcome. In many cases, you can even read the novel that the opera was based on. With art song, you are creating a world from the poem that comes from a much more personal place, as well as from a distinct national style and artistic aesthetic. The character arises from your understanding of those elements, but ultimately comes directly from you and your experience.

In addition, the difficulty of the music can vary widely within a recital program. “There’s everything there from the humongous Wagners and Dupares to the very light, so it depends on what you choose,” Crossley-Mercer says. “Even the kind of art song I have chosen has changed as I have gotten older. There are things I can try now that I wouldn’t have when I was younger.”

Crossley-Mercer recently starred as Eurymaque in Fauré’s rarely performed *Pénélope*, and he spoke of how differently one must interpret even the songs of one composer depending upon the date of composition. “Fauré’s *Pénélope* was written very late, so he is moving away from tonality, and it is written continuously from beginning to end,” he says. “He required much wider and heroic singing than in his *mélodies*. I also think that with Duparc and Berlioz.

“People think of French as clear and light, which I agree with, but the size of the phrasing is so long and there can’t be any accents,” he continues. “It requires very long use of the breath, which is what I call the heaviness of the musical phrase. It demands a specific breath control and also has a very thick orchestra. It’s very difficult music.”

Working as a Team

When asked if he works differently with a pianist in art song than he does with a conductor in opera, Crossley-Mercer is quick to respond in the affirmative. “Generally, when I work with a conductor, I want to know what his take on the music is before I impose my view—unless it’s of course Rossini or something like that where you take your tempo,” he explains. “With a conductor, you have to obey their wishes more. With a pianist, I like to be more of the conductor myself. I ask the pianist to exchange much more. It’s more like teamwork, and

Vassos and Swedish baritone Håkan Hagegård



that's the interesting thing about it. Improvisation is also a big part of art song in the performance, and you have to have someone who follows quickly what you are doing. One has to be a real musician to have that kind of musical conversation."

What can participants expect from Crossley-Mercer's recital and masterclass? "For the recital, I believe we will be presenting a program around the theme of nocturnes," he says. "I will also be giving a masterclass. What I would like students to achieve is instead of 'Please go through the torture of singing for me so I can tell you what you're doing

wrong' . . . I want to help them sing well for the public. I may point out some right and wrong, but I want to help their performance."

A Proud History

George Vassos speaks glowingly about the students who have passed through his program and what they have gone on to accomplish in their careers. He sees the festival as a way to perpetuate the use of classical voice and spread the beauty of a "slow" art form in a very quickly moving world.

Vassos contrasts this with the way singing is taught now, even in the

university. "I know that musical theatre is important, but they don't train those people's voices like they should," he says. "When I was in New York in the '50s and '60s, we didn't have amplification in the theatres, and the musical theatre singers had fabulous voices. They didn't need a mic around their head. You should learn how to really sing—and when you do that, you can sing any style."

Singers interested in participating in the 2016 Art Song Festival at Baldwin Wallace University should note that the application deadline is February 5. All audition requirements can be found at www.bw.edu/schools/conservatory-music/events/art-song/. For any singers who want to improve their use of language, find a more personal voice as an artist, and understand how to work as a team with their pianist, this is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Jason Vest was recently hailed for his performances in Les Misérables as being "a splendid Valjean" (River City News) who "easily handles the role's demanding singing" (talkinbroadway.com). Jason has sung in England, Austria, Madagascar, Bulgaria, and throughout the United States. He is an assistant professor of voice at Northern Kentucky University and graduated with a doctor of musical arts degree from the University of Kentucky. Find out more at tenorjasonvest.com.

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