

Sunday, February 25, 2018

DSO's Third Chamber Concert Celebrates Black History Month

By Christine Facciolo

The Delaware Symphony Orchestra used the occasion of its third chamber series concert of the season to commemorate both Black History Month and the 50th anniversary of the passing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The February 20 program, titled "Triumph over Adversity," featured an eclectic mix of solo piano pieces, chamber music, German Lieder and African-American spirituals performed by symphony members David Southorn (concertmaster), Philo Lee (principal cello), Lura Johnson (principal piano) and guest artist bass-baritone Kevin Deas.

Johnson opened the concert with a performance of Mendelssohn's *Rondo Capriccioso in E major*. This is a work that contains the meaty technical challenges that showcase Johnson's virtuosity, something DSO audiences rarely get to hear. She delivered the *Andante* section with suitable solemnity then launched into the *Presto* without hesitation.

Johnson was then joined by Southorn and Lee in a performance of the composer's *Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor*. One could not help but be impressed by the unflagging passion and athleticism of the musicians. They gave it their considerable all. From the darkly etched and fiery opening movement, to the emotional slower passages and the skittering scherzo, they generated a palpable energy that culminated in a rousing and brilliant finale.

After intermission, bass-baritone Kevin Deas processed into the Gold Ballroom singing *Wayfaring Stranger*, an entrée to the segment of the program devoted to the spiritual. If Paul Robeson is considered to be the gold standard of this vocal fash, then Deas is not far behind. Deas' voice was nothing short of breathtaking, as he applied it to some of the repertoire's best-loved spirituals, including *Wade in the Water* and *City Called Heaven*.

Deas proved to be a most gracious artist as well, taking to the microphone to inform the audience about the function of the Negro spiritual as well as the unlikely collaboration between Czech composer Antonin Dvorak and the African-American classical composer Henry Burleigh, who made the arrangements of the spirituals heard this concert.

Deas also offered some personal insights into his selections, as in how his mother hated to hear him sing *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, until he explained that the song wasn't a personal commentary on their relationship but rather an expression of despair and hopelessness.

Deas then offered several selections of Schubert Lieder that were in keeping with the concerts overall theme of life's long journey, including *Der Wegweiser* (from "Die Winterreise"), *Wohin* (from "Die Schone Mullerin"), *Im Abendrot* and *Dem Unendlichen*. Johnson prefaced this section with an expressive yet unsentimental rendering of the composer's lyrical *Impromptu in G-flat major*.

Deas also performed *I Heard the Cry of Wild Geese*, an expression of longing for home and loved ones, from *Four Songs on Chinese Poetry* by Pavel Haas, the Czech composer who perished in the Holocaust.

Johnson also performed Liszt's transcription of *Widmung* ("Dedication"), a song that Robert Schumann had originally in 1856 for Clara Wieck, whom he married that year. Although her technical mastery would allow her to grandstand the more virtuosic passages, Johnson downplayed this aspect of the piece in favor of the fervor of Schumann's music. She prefaced her performance with a reading of the German text and its accompanying English translation.

Deas concluded the concert with *Deep River*, a selection he called probably the best-known and best-loved spiritual.

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