

Life Section, September 9, 2005

Charles Mays, Jr.- American SongFest Woodstock Fringe Festival of Theater & Song

Reviewer: Kitty Montgomery

Operatic impresarios are hounding after Charles Mays, a bass baritone of more than ordinary splendor, who stood as the sole male among a spectrum of soprano Grand Finalists on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in the 2004 National Council Auditions. Since his debut last season in the Woodstock fringe festival of theatre and song, Mays has performed operatic roles in Cairo, Egypt and Vienna, at the Aspen Opera Theater, and Hartford, Connecticut – the above, a short list of numerous appearances.

Fans welcoming Mays back to the Fringe's American SongFest – (once he wraps you in the thrall of his mesmerizing presence, you remain a “fan” forever) – are delighted to note this artist possessed of gifts for which his voice is mere vehicle, has so far eluded the confinement of a single focused career. His performance of two sets of Lieder, partnered on piano by Marguerita Oundjian-Smith, marks a possible renaissance in this publicly perceived anachronistic genre

Imagine basso Hans Hotter, possessed of a spiritual profundity to match his depth of tone, or baritone Dietrich Fischer Dieskau with tenderness equal to his vocal lyricism. Mays, offering up four Schubert songs – Heidenroslein, An Sylvia, Standchen, Die Taubenpost- and Three Michelangelo Lieder by Hugo Wolf, encompasses the vocal spectrum of the songs with mastery, insinuating the delight, the hunger and despair of the poems' content as his own, our own, passion.

Continuing with Four Cabaret Songs by William Bolcom, another foursome from the Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers and four spirituals arranged by Hall Johnson – Mays was joined by SongFest artistic director and composer in residence Larry Allen Smith on piano in these last two sets – you sense this singer's singular light is

out of time and unfixd to any genre, whatsoever. He's from the tradition of Celtic shanachies, gypsy soul singers and shamanic griots who have the psychic capacity to incarnate and transfer visions via song. It's a mystical bardic thing, recognized in Mays by Smith, who shares something of the gift, himself.

No space for the career credits of a teacher who has led students to their finest light in major conservatories of the country, or his compositional credits either. That will be fine with Smith, who lives life with a poet's “be-here-now” immediacy. We witness this in his cycle, Songs of Time, Patience and Longing, given a world premiere at the Woodstock concert. It is a fascination to watch Smith play anything at the keyboard. He seems to catch his notes live on the fly, connected to the same animate instinctual that inhabits Mays' interpretations.

Presently full time composer and professor of composition at Hartt School of Music, where Mays currently pursues a doctorate in vocal performance, Smith brought in a couple of cutting edge dudes called “the perceval duo” whose act – Songs for the Sane – could stand up against the weirdness of New York's bang on a can stuff or hold its own in the chaos of Edinburgh's Fringe. Russell Podgorsek and Dennis Sullivan, who actually have chops on the instruments they deploy – violin, percussion “objets” and human voice - do a mind blowing set of routines, Podgorsek's riff on “Dubbya's” 2004 Presidential acceptance speech, including his interior mental static, among them. Call it extremely brilliant, articulate, yo, satiric, white boy rap. Sullivan, who makes a vocal duo in Appalachia Set Pot, exhibits a killer's sensual connection to the brake drums he wakes in Stuart Saunders Smith's In Bingham and Return and Recall.