

Poetry meets music at 5 Poets Breaking into Song

Poems naturally lend themselves to song, but how each poem is interpreted can vary wildly from composer to composer, not to mention from singer to singer.

The process can take listeners and artists alike to unexpected places, and local audiences can see this unfold next Wednesday, April 6 when George Elliott Clarke, Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto, presents 5 Poets Breaking into Song, hosted by the Aurora Public Library.

An online presentation, 5 Poets Breaking into Song will bring together poets Giovanna Riccio, Louise Bernice Halfe, Anna Yin, Boyd Warren Chubbs, Astrid Brunner, Andrea Thompson and Clarke himself with pianist Juliet Palmer and composer James Rolfe.

Rolfe, whose most recent opera, *The Overcoat*, was nominated for ten Dora Awards is no stranger to this crowd. Having first collaborated with Clarke on their first opera, *Beatrice Chancy*, he is excited to be back in the arena with his former collaborator as well as these established and up-and-coming voices.

‘I really love collaborating,’ says Rolfe. ‘With each poem and each poet, the wonderful thing is it is very individual. They have their own fingerprints, their own voices, and the first thing I respond to is probably rhythm. A good poet will be conscious with their rhythm and phrasing and it really enables them to take flight from those words. There is something magical about putting notes to words. It’s like you’re breathing spirit into them and their words have their own spirit to start with. It is making them come alive.’

While he concedes that not all poems lend themselves to music, the best ones have a ‘liveliness’ in their words ‘words that almost have a bounce to them already.’

‘I have met some of the poets [assembled for the event] so I haven’t necessarily heard them recite their poems,’ he explains. ‘It is funny because I’ve gotten very familiar with the words through writing music to them, but to hear them say the words it might put it in a completely different light. In a way, I am sort of glad not to hear them in advance because it might jinx my own setting.’

More often than not, Rolfe says he responds intuitively to the words.

‘If I respond with my heart, that’s the main thing.’

But his heart wasn’t always in the genre that has brought him so much acclaim.

Opera was akin to ‘a foreign language at first.’ He couldn’t understand why people were so excited about the storied genre until, he says, he delved into it himself.

‘I realized that, for me, the gateway was song – a song your mother might sing you as an infant, you might be in school and sing in a class or choir, but opera is not the first thing we hear. I really related to opera through song and then I realized we could make songs into a larger structure. I guess it’s the architecture of songs, taking full units of songs and weaving them into a larger structure. The great thing about opera, which I didn’t realize until I had written one, is it really hits people in a much larger way than you expect because in the middle of writing it, you’re putting it together block by block, but once you have a story, characters, and real, live singers on stage, it is much larger than life. It takes over.

‘The main thing for me is that with each of these poems, you take five other composers they would write five different songs – all with the same words. That’s probably the most exciting thing. It’s nice that even though it is online there’s still a sense of being together, a sense of community, a sense of common purpose. That is really what we want to do it for – to connect with people.’

5 Poets Breaking into Song, presented by George Elliott Clarke, will be hosted by the Aurora Public Library online on Wednesday,

April 6, from 7 ? 8.30 p.m. To book your free ticket, visit www.eventbrite.ca/e/5-poets-breaking-into-song-tickets-276105447827.

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