Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Music in the Wilderness

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, August 30th, 2017

"'Things are not as they seem, nor are they otherwise.'" Derek Menchan quotes the Lankavatara Sutra. He is an international industry-endorsed jazz bassist, a Manhattan School of Music trained cello player, composer, humanities professor, doctoral student in philosophy/religion, prize-winning visual artist, and avid esotericist. He lives and works in Polk County in Central Florida, one of our nation's poorest regions. He has established a chamber music series called Voices of the People, changing this cultural wilderness into an oasis. Recently, the Florida legislature slashed funding for the arts, derailing his successful program. Instead of trimming fat, they trimmed muscle, and this series was part of that muscle.

Music in the Wilderness

If a person believes in the transformative power of art, surely Polk County, Florida, is a landscape that needs transforming. Economically and socially depressed, it has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation. It is also among the lowest counties in the U.S. in government spending per student on public education. Besides Voices of the People, there is no other regular provider of live classical music in Polk County.

A tenured humanities professor at Polk State College, Menchan challenges his students with open discussions. Topics range from racism, police violence, white privilege, to feminism. He says, quoting Nietzsche,"'To make the individual uncomfortable, that is my task.'" In return, Menchan's students have elevated him to almost-cult status.

Voices of the People

Voices of the People concerts feature a varied program of Western art music. Concerts have included the works of Maurice Ravel, Thelonious Monk, New Music Americana composer Eve Beglarian, Charles Ives, Charlie Parker, George Rochberg, and more. They take place monthly at theaters and other halls dotted across the county. The entrance tickets cost at most a $7 "suggested donation."

The composers whose works are played in concert by Voices of the Peoples aren't all that different from those offered by other chamber concert series. The challenge for an artist, according to Menchan, is bringing composers' works to post-modern millennials. "In a society that has a Kanye West declaring himself the new Beethoven," says Menchan, "it's the job of the artist to recast Beethoven, in all his ingenious glory, as the titan of music he really is, in the meme- and GIF-laden syntax of contemporary youth."

Menchan always adds “think-piece” elements to Voices of the People concerts, giving them appeal on multiple levels. For example, this season’s title is “Transfiguration.” One of the more provocative concerts is going to be “AND GOD CREATED GREAT PAIN: Cognitive and Sonic Dissonance in Black Existentialism” (Polk State Winter Haven Arts Theatre, October 5, 2017, 7 p.m., suggested donation $5). Menchan will play and lecture, adding a “meditation.” A previous concert, “I Am the Greatest: Beethoven and the Muhammad Ali Syndrome,” featured Beethoven string quartets, fight film footage of Ali, and Derek Menchan speaking on similarities in Beethoven and Ali’s personalities. Voices of the People concerts have included breaks where musicians deconstructed the music they were performing, comparing and contrasting it to works of literature and visual art.

Funding

Before this year, Polk State College funded Voices of the People, along with small donations from private benefactors. In summer 2017, the Florida legislature drastically cut state education funds earmarked for the arts. Funding for Voices of the People’s fall 2017-spring 2018 concert season dried up. At this point, Menchan scrambled to downsize Voices of the People’s financial commitments. He obtained donations to cover costs of the current season, but future seasons are not funded.

The Rise and Fall of Voices of the People and Transfiguration

Arts programming everywhere is reeling from deep cuts. The story of the rise and fall of Voices of the People has surely been repeated in different variations across the country as the era of public funding for the arts apparently ends. But it’s hard to imagine a stick of dynamite like Menchan resting inactive for long. He’s driven to improve—and inspire–any landscape he finds himself in.

The cover art of the current Voices of the People flyer shows Krishna’s cosmic form when he tells Arjun the archer that he, Sri Krishna, is mighty Time, Destroyer of Worlds, embarked on a path of world annihilation (Bhagavad Gita 11:32). “Fire transforms,” Derek Menchan points out. “When the arts are under siege, it’s time to change some things. I can think of no element capable of rendering more things mutable than fire. It’s Time for Transfiguration.”

Voices of the People’s Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/Voxpopuliplayers/

Voices of the People’s email: voxpopuli.players@gmail.com

Donations to Voices of the People should be made payable to the recording company that oversees Voices of the People, Bluclok Records, 2013 San Marcos Dr. S.E. # 16, Winter Haven, FL 33880.

All photography is by Sanford Betz. He may be reached in care of Voices of the People.

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