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June 4, 2007

VOX 3 vocal music collective

At **Bethany United Church of Christ**

4250 N Paulina, Chicago

Admission is free; donations accepted

It can be easy to forget the impact of **Shakespeare** on our culture, who, though he died nearly 400 years ago, leaves an indelible impression on each subsequent generation of art makers. Musicians evidently could not escape his sphere of influence as demonstrated by the June 4 concert of art songs inspired by **Shakespeare** presented by **VOX 3**, a new vocal music collective.

VOX 3 is a group of young musicians recently released back into the wild from the **Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University (CCPA)**. Having had success in their respective Masters programs at **CCPA**, these performers are now navigating the waters of Chicago's cultural ocean in an effort to find artistically and financially viable means to continue doing what they loved doing in school. In many cases, one or the other must suffer: if a gig pays well, then it is artistically suspect; if it is artistically meritorious, then it does not pay the bills. The latter seems to be the case so far for **VOX 3**, which heeding the call of the art while ignoring the need for significant pecuniary gain.

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It is a shame, for sure, that the public at large does not want to spend money and time to listen to lesser-known art songs, and it is even more disheartening that the education system seems poised to make art music an even more elitist pursuit by cutting funding and programs to art and music. It should be the goal of public education, like it is a goal of **VOX 3**, to expand our mental horizons by finding pathways in to thorny material. The members of **VOX 3** clearly understand the conundrum presented by diminishing audiences at venerable cultural institutions like the **Chicago Symphony** and the **Lyric Opera**, and so these fresh and talented singers have made it part of their mission to educate as well as perform.

The program on June 4 began with a beautiful, jazzy a cappella song by **George Shearing** that demonstrated the amazing ability of the singers to stay in tune despite subtly shifting chromatic harmonies. A wonderful piece to begin with, it suffered from the excessive contrast between the supporting and lead voices, leaving the velvet-coated harmonies overpowered by the soprano. The rest of the first half—including pieces by **Gabriel Fauré**, **Erich Korngold**, and **Gerald Finzi**—made me wish that I had either the lyrics or, at the very least, a sentence or two about the context of the song. When soprano **Ashlee Hardgrave** sang (in English), I could easily perceive the mood through the understandable lyrics and the tasteful acting, but the context was almost always obscure—not every song had a name like “Desdemona’s Song.” Most of the songs themselves were relatively obscure. The only song I was hampered by the piano’s low notes being slightly out of tune. Much of the first half of the program, then, ran together: **Korngold** and **Finzi** both seemed to channel the zeitgeist of the mid-Romantic 19th century with only slight coloration from his time and country.

In the second half, each set of songs differentiated itself much better: duets by **Virgil Thompson** moved to two songs by **Ernest Chausson** and then to songs by **Richard Strauss**. The concert concluded with a second song by **Shearing**, which gave the whole concert form and purpose. The interplay between soprano **Rebecca Prescott** and tenor **Brian Hoffman** was alluring and made the conservative **Thompson** songs come to life. The **Chausson** songs were the highlight of the concert for me and were beautifully sung by **Ashlee Hardgrave**, who seemed the most at home in the art song world: a delicate mix of singing and expression, conveying the mood in a tasteful manner. **Rebecca Prescott** followed the French songs with the **Ophelia-Lieder** by **Strauss**. Her voice seemed to shine with the range and mood of **Strauss’** music as she explored the depth of Ophelia’s madness.

The collective will focus on Spanish music and opera in concerts in July. This is a highly talented and precocious group who are still working out the logistics of their plan. It is admirable to attempt to educate and entertain the audience, but maybe that would be more effective with short speeches between songs and printed lyrics. From my perspective as an instrumental composer, the concert seemed to have too many songs, causing them to run together. To art song aficionados more familiar with the literature, the evening may have seemed perfect. **VOX 3** is still searching for that perfect balance of programming that brings any audience in and keeps them engaged without sacrificing artistic integrity. With the energy and passion this group demonstrates, they will travail indefatigably to hone their programming talents just as they have mastered their musical craft.

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June 4, 2007

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