

McFerrin's Magic

by Chris Foss

Bass singer from Cantus inspired by Bobby McFerrin's adventuresome vocals

It doesn't get much better than listening to a choir singing their hearts out and baring their souls for all to hear. There is something so primal about the naked human voice, that when you hear several individuals come together to form a perfect harmony or unison, it gives you a little vacation from the negative cacophony of news feeds and "art-ertainment" that constantly barrage our daily lives. Experiencing music made simply from the human body is a relaxing, humbling journey.

As far as performing only with the voice, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more talented individual than

Bobby McFerrin. Over the years, McFerrin has given thousands of concerts featuring just himself and one microphone on an empty stage. He has been known to captivate audiences of all ages by vocally performing every part of a song in any genre from classical to pop, not to mention those of his own ingenious composition. He rumbles the lowest basslines and seemingly at the same time soars through clouds above the highest soprano range. Dearest still are the times he coaxes the entire crowd into song, allowing everyone in the hall to experience the magic that happens when human beings sing together.

McFerrin's newest album, *VOCAbuLarieS*, is really neither a live experience nor a standard, straightforward collection of three-minute songs; rather, it contains the best of both worlds.

To those familiar with Bobby's career, a collabora-



tion album is no surprise. In the past, McFerrin had success with such heavyweights as Yo Yo Ma, Chick Corea and our own Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (McFerrin served as creative chair from 1994 - 99). This time, the gauntlet falls to Roger Treece, a producer/arranger/vocal-wunderkind out of New York.

What results is unlike anything you've ever heard before. Present, of course, are McFerrin's soaring vocal timbres, playful melodies, signature

rhythms turned on their respective heads, and love of the unexpected. Add in Treece's uncanny vocal arranging skills, and the result is a lush, constantly evolving musical journey like something out of Tolkien or Rushdie. Not surprisingly, *VOCAbuLarieS* has picked up several Grammy nominations, including a nod for best classical crossover album.

With Treece's involvement, there has never been a greater sum of evidence to make the case that the mixing console is indeed a musical instrument. Over the course of seven years, more than 1,400 vocal tracks were recorded and mixed by Treece and his partner-in-crime, Alan Sides. An all-star cast from the likes of New York Voices, Manhattan Transfer and Voicestra (including Minnesota resident Judi Donaghy) sing in more than 15 different languages. In fact, Treece spent hundreds of hours exhaustively listening to McFerrin's archived live concerts, getting what McFerrin's manager calls "a triple PhD in Bobby McFerrinisms."

So if you are into complexity, it's there. Simplicity, too. Rhythm, pop, world music and jazz all have their places (mostly at the same time!) in amongst otherworldly symphonic soundscapes. In short, there is truly something for everyone, especially those who love singing. ●



Photo by Carol Friedman

Bobby McFerrin

Chris Foss is a member of the vocal ensemble Cantus, Classical Minnesota Public Radio's

2010 - 2011 Artists-in-Residence. Cantus performs in Grand Rapids on March 29 and in Crookston on March 31.

For more information about Cantus' residency, visit ClassicalMPR.org/air.