

TBA '08: Antony and the Johnsons

By [Luciana Lopez, The Oregonian](#)

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There: A change in the quality of shadow, at the front of the stage. Not so much a shape or a color as the suggestion of such. And then: a piano, a voice. In the darkness we are awake to it, a thread of sound. With nothing else to see, nothing else to touch or smell or taste, it's this thread of sound that we must follow; it ties us together.

We know who this is, singing: [Antony Hegarty](#). And we know who are playing the instruments behind him: His band, the Johnsons, as well as [the Oregon Symphony](#). Antony Hegarty's voice has a beacon-like quality, no matter when he sings, a suffusion of emotion that suggests an intensity of feeling. In the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, it fills the space with a soaring potential. It is Friday night, the threshold of the weekend. Things happen on thresholds. It is the [Time-Based Art Festival, from the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art](#); but time feels debatable here, liquid one moment, suspended the next. I can feel my pulse in my throat.

A little light, and now the shadow is Antony Hegarty, draped in some translucent cloth, like a Greek statue, but wearing something - jeans? sneakers? -- obscured underneath. The curtain behind him rises; there is the Oregon Symphony, the Johnsons integrated among them, all in gauzy, liminal light. Antony moves constantly, swaying slightly, or else moving his hands and arms in arcs with the music, turning his face, a visceral expression of what he is singing. We, seated in the audience, are still.

This is not Mozart or Beethoven or Bach, though I think those men would have approved. This is soul and torch and classical and cabaret and chamber, elegant and vulnerable. The Johnsons have put out albums of this music before, of course; many of these songs are what they are playing now. They have been recognized by their peers and the world for this music, with [articles](#), with adoration, with [a Mercury Prize](#), with the show here now. This time the music is being played not by a small group of people, but by a symphony. That light-diffusing curtain separating them from Antony has gone up, and we can see how they fill the stage.

The music has been changed to fit this group, and the change has only increased its power. The symphony sounds more fluid than we might normally think it. Maybe we think of classical music as a form-based art, with the written note in a place of such importance. But here they are superb, playing music that depends little, if at all, on the restrictions of form for its beauty. Cellists use their instruments for percussion; a guitar weaves in and out; there is great respect for silence and for the void. Everyone on stage uses nothing beautifully; that is, they use the spaces of nothing, of a pause, of an absence, to make any presence even more important. Even the lights - they go up, down, dim, brighten. There is an awareness of perception that makes the whole ache.

This music yearns, obviously and unashamedly, for beauty.

In the midst of this, there is... [Beyonce](#)? Wait, is that "Crazy in Love?" It is! And like Beyonce never sang it. "Got me hoping," Antony sings, "you page me right now." We laugh, in a ripple, the thousands of us. We can laugh and feel glee at the same time that our hearts beat high in our chests. This beauty is far more radiant than we might think.

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There is the urge to weep. There is the force of creative vision. This pain? This isn't a heart breaking; it's a heart waking. The waking world is this one, where our senses clear and we feel the power of transformation, we see that the doors along the corridor of possibility are not, after all, closed to us, though they may be far away and heavy and frightening. We can face them and walk through them nonetheless.

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