



Julia Bullock, soprano

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The Artistry of the Soprano Julia Bullock

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It is rare to find a classical singer who can truly project an aura onstage. Julia Bullock, a young soprano who performed her Naumburg Foundation recital last Tuesday at the Metropolitan Museum, definitely has it, and she is off to a fine career.

Bullock, an African-American singer from St. Louis who trained at Eastman, Bard, and Juilliard, won first prize last year in the Naumburg International Vocal Competition. Over the years, the Naumburg, through its various awards, has had a penchant for honoring interesting singers who don't fit easily into the standard operatic categories: trailblazers such as Regina Sarfaty, Dawn Upshaw, Barbara Hendricks, and Lucy Shelton, for example. I can't yet imagine Bullock walking the boards as Tosca or Violetta, but she has made several strategic forays into opera — such as the title role in Purcell's "The Indian Queen" at Madrid's Teatro Real and at the English National Opera, and, later this month, she will appear in Saariaho's "La Passion de Simone," at the Deutsche Oper Berlin (directed by Peter Sellars). But her recital had its own kind of drama, not the less effective for being so refined.



Julia Bullock combines a rare onstage aura with a style that is exacting but not fussy, with hardly an unturned phrase.

Photo: Christian Steiner

The first half found her aura on the cool side, displayed in French songs by Ravel, Pierre Revel (she discovered his songs by mistake while at school, looking for work by his more famous semi-namesake), and Poulenc. Advising the audience in comprehending the Louise de Vilmorin texts used by Poulenc in "Metamorphoses," Bullock was firm yet funny: "They are erotic, they are sensual, and they are completely surreal — so, good luck." Her style was equally assured: exacting but not fussy, with hardly an unturned phrase.

That style warmed up in her second half, devoted to Scandinavian and American music. If singers are going to talk to the audience between songs (and God knows, not every singer should), then the speech has to have an expressive point. She precluded her rendition of Grieg's "En Svane" ("A Swan") by telling the story behind the Ibsen poem that forms the lyric: Ibsen wrote it after being summoned to the deathbed of a female friend, who then confessed that she had been secretly in love with him for decades. At the song's fortissimo climax —

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— the moment of the silent swan’s sound, the woman’s confession — Bullock’s timbre took on a miraculous hue, merging with the color of the pianist Renate Rohlfing’s harmony. She actually sang into the soundboard of the piano in the mystical middle section of Barber’s “Nuvoletta” — something which, I assure you, is not requested in the score — lending a tragic cast to this virtuosic setting of a fragment from Joyce’s “Finnegans Wake,” a song which possesses, within its gaiety, a somber tinge. (Nuvoletta, the daughter of the water goddess Anna Livia Plurabelle, commits a kind of transformational suicide by turning her cloudy being into water drops, in the most delightfully girlish language imaginable.) But the gesture suited the concert’s modernist undertone — not many singers would pair Barber with a percussive provocation by Cage (“She Is Asleep”) and delightful Americana oddities by the unclassifiable Henry Cowell (“Where She Lies” and “Because the Cat”). Her second Barber item was the composer’s first published song, “The Daisies” (another smart selection, as the text is by Joyce’s friend James Stephens), a sweet and wistful trifle about a romantic encounter, which Bullock turned into a moment of chastened reflection.

By the time she arrived at her valedictory group of Kurt Weill songs — including selections from two of his American musicals, “Lost in the Stars” and “Lady in the Dark” — her voice and temperament were in full flower, so much so that in her encore, a charmingly astringent treatment of the “Princess and the Pea” story by Robert Mann (in which the performers were joined by the violinist Nicholas Mann), she could narrate rather than sing and still maintain her hard-won connection with the audience.