



Julia Bullock, soprano

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Julia Bullock at IRIS

by [JON W. SPARKS](#)



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This weekend's IRIS Orchestra program is an American tribute with all works from the first half of the 20th century. But a thoroughly 21st century presence will come with guest performer Julia Bullock interpreting several tunes.

Bullock is a rising star: The soprano is the recipient of the 2016 Sphinx Medal of Excellence and other major awards. Critics have praised her powerful emotional presence revealed in performances in operas and with symphonies worldwide.

She recently immersed herself in *Josephine Baker: A Portrait* by composer Tyshawn Sorey.

The operatic study of the iconic singer was presented at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival and helmed by acclaimed director Peter Sellars. At this weekend's concerts, Bullock will perform two songs popularized by Baker: "J'ai deux amours" and "La Conga Blicoti."

Bullock didn't like it when a college teacher compared her to the legendary singer during a voice lesson. "I didn't want to be thought of as simply a 'black singer,'" she says. "But I discovered where the paths of our lives paralleled in some respects, and was moved by the fact that she placed her role as an entertainer alongside her work as an activist and humanitarian. The themes of exploitation, demoralization, and discrimination that followed much of Baker's life were something I wanted to look at onstage, because strangely, by deciding to go into a field that is predominantly run, produced, written, and performed by white people, that helped me want to take ownership of all that I am — a woman of mixed heritage [white and black], who has many influences and doesn't need to deny any of them."

Bullock wanted to explore the themes of exploitation and objectification, particularly of black women. "Baker was the perfect vehicle," she says, "because of how inviting and innocuous seeming her material was — most people only remember Baker as a black Venus in a banana skirt." The New World Symphony invited Bullock to perform Baker's songs on one of their club concerts, and they commissioned the orchestrations of the two songs she'll be performing with IRIS. Sellars took an interest and offered to work with her on developing the program.

"I spent hours researching all of Baker's recordings, organizing them by themes, and sitting with Tyshawn to talk through the music that I most wanted to reimagine," she says. "I continue to edit the text and experiment with different cuts."

Bullock is also performing the Gershwin classic "Summertime," and she says, she has to remind herself that it's a lullaby, not a show piece. "I approach this material like everything else," she says. "The lyrics are what inspired the music [other than Brahms — he wrote his melodies first and then found poems to accompany them]. But either way, I must ensure that the text and vocalism exist side by side and that one doesn't overshadow or overwhelm the other."

Michael Stern, the music director of IRIS, met Bullock when they performed Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* together at the Young Concert Artists Gala in New York in 2016. He wanted her to perform with IRIS, and the scheduling finally worked out — and *Knoxville* is also on this weekend's program.

Bullock's journey began in a home where the arts were essential.

"Music was always playing in my house," she says. "My father had a beautiful baritone voice and played several instruments as an amateur; and my mother loved to dance, so I'd go with her to tap classes and shuffle along in the back before I was enrolled myself."

And her influences?

"I'd say the performer who first influenced me was Tina Turner," Bullock says. "I'd simply weep if I met her today — yes, I am that big of a fan." Other singers who got her attention from the first listen are Regine Créspin, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, and Kathleen Ferrier. "They were all great communicators," she says. "There was a passion and ferocity in their delivery; there was a clarity in their sound, and a focus of intention."

It wasn't until well into her teens that she began to get into classical music. "I was floored by the intensity of the material, both musical and poetic," she says.

From this emerged her own intellectual grounding in her art. "My parents instilled the credo that if I'm not providing a service in my work, then it's not worthy work," she says. "There are invaluable byproducts from making music that make it vital. Music helps us listen more closely, it encourages us to engage with one another and ourselves, it asks us to act with intention and make choices, despite not knowing the future outcome."

[IRIS Presents: America in Song featuring Julia Bullock](#) @ Germantown Performing Arts Center
Sat., March 10, 8-10 p.m. and Sun., March 11, 2-4 p.m. \$40-\$65

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