



Julia Bullock, soprano

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Music

Adapting the classical with the African American experience

By Andrew Gilbert

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Photo: Christian Steiner

Soprano Julia Bullock's repertoire includes Fauré and Schubert, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

“It’s all about being seen,” says Julia Bullock, the luminous soprano who makes her Cal Performances debut Sunday, March 25, at Hertz Hall with pianist John Arida, exploring material that ranges from Schubert, Barber and Fauré to Billie Holiday, Nina Simone and Alberta Hunter.

The program might seem confoundingly disparate, but as a mixed-race woman navigating a creative field Bullock says she wants to stretch herself to encompass “all of these people wanting to have their voices

heard. I guess that’s a through line connecting these songs.”

It’s a thematic line running through her recent performances in the Bay Area, too, including her San Francisco Opera debut as the de facto narrator Dame Shirley in the world premiere of John Adams and Peter Sellars’ “Girls of the Golden West,” which foregrounds the experiences of people usually overlooked in tales of the West. She made her most vivid impression at Cal Performances 2016 Ojai at Berkeley with “Josephine Baker: A Portrait,”

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portraying the pioneering African American entertainer in a jazz suite by poet Claudia Rankine and composer Tyshawn Sorey.

Bullock combines traditional chamber music material with music that speaks directly to the African American experience, exploring what it means to be a woman of color on stage. In seeking creative freedom, she returns the gaze of audiences that see her as “that exotic woman,” she says. “My fascination with Josephine Baker comes down to do you exploit that, or does it exploit you? I needed to be able to talk about that on stage, and that’s helped me own more of my identity and express myself more freely.”

The first half of her program features lieder by Schubert, selections from Fauré’s “La chanson d’Eve,” and Barber’s “Hermit Songs,” which were famously inspired by soprano Leontyne Price. While she loves Fauré’s entire song cycle, Bullock selected five pieces “that don’t include a narrator,” she says. “I was attracted to the songs that are all about Eve’s voice. God doesn’t speak. Adam doesn’t speak. They’re about a woman finding her place in the world.”

Although a little intimidated by Schubert and the reverence with which he’s often approached, she sees the jazz and blues songs arranged by Jeremy Siskind as a key to finding her place in the world, unlocking “new vocal territory that amounts to an “inner liberation, a releasing of oneself, what you want to see in any performer,” she says.

“I’m taking some risks singing these blues songs. I haven’t shared that part of my instrument in an extended way. It’s a very intense experience for me bringing it out to the public. It may be a total failure, but I’ve been given the space by Cal Performances to really stretch.”

Julia Bullock and John Arida: 3 p.m. Sunday, March 25. Hertz Hall, UC Berkeley. \$46. (510) 642-9988. www.calperformances.org.