



Julia Bullock, soprano

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Opera Singer Julia Bullock Finds Her Voice **Acclaimed Young Soprano Sings Music by and for Powerful Women**

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BY TOM JACOBS

Run down the set list for soprano Julia Bullock's April 3 recital at the Music Academy of the West, and you'll see some familiar names. Schubert, of course. Gabriel Fauré. Samuel Barber. But keep reading, and you may be a bit startled to find Billie Holiday, Alberta Hunter, and Nina Simone.

Yes, Bullock will be singing the blues, as well as song cycles by classical masters. Like so many performers of her age (she's in her early thirties), she isn't all that confined by genre boundaries. What's important to her is that those songs were all cowritten and originally performed by powerful women. "One overarching theme in this program highlights the complex journey towards self-actualization, and releasing your unbridled voice," she said in a recent email interview with the *Independent*.

Widely acclaimed for her gorgeous voice and emotionally charged performances — *Opera News* compared her to Dawn Upshaw, declaring "every note Bullock sings is charged with meaning" — the biracial St. Louis native is no stranger to this area. She sang with the New York Philharmonic during a 2015 concert at the Santa Barbara Bowl and performed a new work by jazz composer Tyshawn Sorey at last year's Ojai Music Festival.

Her Santa Barbara recital debut, which is presented by UCSB Arts & Lectures, was programmed well before the #MeToo movement, but it fits perfectly into this particular moment, starting with the very first song she sings. "The poetry for Schubert's *Suleika* was originally credited to one of the greatest German poets and intellectuals, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe," she said. "In actuality it was written by [Goethe's] close confidant Marianne von Willemer. That got me thinking about how historically women often aren't credited for their work, even if culturally, we greatly value what the voices of women offer."

With that in mind, she decided to follow her Schubert set with Fauré's *La chanson d'Eve*, "which looks at the story of Eve, but without the voice of God or Adam interjecting." Then come the Barber songs — inspired and originally sung by pioneering African-American soprano Leontyne Price — capped off by the contemporary blues.

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“Several years ago, I researched the writing of blues singers and musicians,” she said. “I was surprised to find how many fierce songs and how much lyrical wit had been contributed by black women, several of whom are largely not celebrated or even remembered today. This is in part because of their ‘risqué’ content. These women were socially and sexually liberated within themselves and wrote unabashedly about it!”

Bullock was introduced to Holiday and Simone in her early teens by the man who would become her stepfather. “The more I listened, the more I fell in love with her sound, her delivery, and her musicianship,” she recalled. “Most amazing is that two years later, when I started to become interested in classical vocal music and I went back to listen to Simone, I was delighted because I could hear Bach and Mozart in her piano improvisations. I was simply hooked. Still am.” She continued, “I choreographed a dance to Simone’s ‘Four Women’ in high school for myself and three other unique and beautiful black students. After seeing the dance, my mom said, ‘Maybe you should sing this too.’ A rush of fear raced through me. Oh, no. I’d never! No one can sing Simone but Simone. But here we are,” she added. “I’ve got some things I want to express through her material, and a bit more courage to do it.”

Soprano Julia Bullock and pianist John Arida perform Tuesday, April 3, at 7 p.m. at the Music Academy of the West’s Hahn Hall (1070 Fairway Rd.). Tickets are \$37 (\$10 for UCSB students). Call (805) 893-3535 or see artsandlectures.ucsb.edu.

<https://www.independent.com/news/2018/mar/26/opera-singer-julia-bullock-finds-her-voice/>