



NEWS *from Young Concert Artists, Inc.*

Julia Bullock, soprano

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Julia Bullock and the saga of opera singers of color

By MARK SWED | MUSIC CRITIC | APR 05, 2018 |



Julia Bullock in recital at Hahn Hall, Santa Barbara, with pianist John Arida (Kimberly Citro/UCSB Arts & Lectures)

A year from now we will celebrate the 80th anniversary of one of the most important concerts in American history. Richard Powers set the scene in his epic novel, "The Time of Our Singing," by noting that democracy had not been on the program when, in 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow one of the greatest classical singers of her era, Marian Anderson, to sing at Constitution Hall in our nation's segregated capital because she was African American.

A huge protest followed, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spearheaded a recital by Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, attracting a crowd of 75,000 on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939.

Even so, opera was not integrated overnight. It took an additional 16 years for Anderson to break the color barrier at America's most important opera company. That finally happened when she starred in Verdi's "Un Ballo in Maschera" at the Metropolitan Opera.

It was her only appearance at the Met, but the breakthrough of singers of color had begun. A year earlier, the 27-year-old Leontyne Price, who would become one of the most celebrated sopranos of her generation, made her recital debut at New York's Town Hall singing Samuel Barber's "Hermit Songs." The rest pretty much is history. But is it?

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Tuesday night at Hahn Hall in Santa Barbara, a young African American singer happened to sing "Hermit Songs" in what is the first major recital program of her career. Julia Bullock is being hailed as the rising star of her generation.

You only need look around you to understand there is nothing post-racial about our society. Nor, it turns out, is Bullock even close to rising anymore. She has risen, and to dizzying heights. She's completely aware of and making exceptional use of her identity.

John Adams wrote a starring role for her in his new opera, "Girls of the Golden West," about the California Gold Rush, and she is its radiant center. But this recital Tuesday proved something beyond even that.

Note for note, the singing was sensational. Bullock's voice is deeply rich and richly deep, with both the qualities of Anderson's expressive contralto and Price's electrifying climaxes. Meaning was, word for word, expressed through not only her exacting vocal inflection and her precise facial expression, but even the slightest movement of her hands. Her eyes made contact. Communication was on every level direct.

Beyond this was a sense of artistic identity, Bullock's awareness, as a singer and woman of color, of the music world she comes from and the one she lives in.

Bullock is a complete, empowered singer who has been able to take advantage of all who have struggled before her and to remind us of what the struggle has meant. Her recital was on some levels autobiographical. It was also very much about the empowerment of women, whether in songs by Schubert or Nina Simone.

She made a personal selection from Fauré's cycle "La Chanson d'Ève" where she just wanted the songs of Eve's voice, the flowering of a woman, not those of a narrator or God. She sang of the black experience, through songs sung (and written by) Billie Holiday, Cora "Lovie" Austin, Alberta Hunter and Pat Castleton. She turned Simone's "Revolution" into a kind of a cappella protest spiritual of intense anger and her "Four Women" into the most powerful expression of black women mattering imaginable. But she did all this with love, not anger. She warmly put her hand on the back of her fine pianist, John Arida. She addressed the audience with laughter. She graciously invited us into her world and then showed how there was no one way of interpreting anything. On a single word, her face could show several emotions — sly, happy, sad, disturbed, OK, not OK. She made, to a degree that I think is new in classical music, the black experience a universal one.

Democracy was, exceptionally, on the program.