



Julia Bullock, *soprano*

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West Side Story review: San Francisco Symphony Inspires

Joshua Kosman

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"West Side Story" is such a miraculous fusion of theatrical elements that any one of them can be hard to assess clearly on its own. One of the great revelations of Thursday's dynamic concert performance by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony was just how remarkable the score sounds in isolation.

In casting the performance, the Symphony turned - with one notable and glorious exception - to veterans of the Broadway stage, whose experience is most relevant to this musical idiom. Vocal amplification, tinny and flattening as always, was the price to be paid for that.

But the vocalists, who sang from a raised stage behind the orchestra, did a superb job of conveying the wit and emotional urgency of Bernstein's writing.

The evening's luminary was Cheyenne Jackson, who brought elegance and romantic ardor to the role of Tony. Jackson's singing - expansive and gorgeously phrased in "Maria," more restrained and supportive in the duet "One Hand, One Heart" - was a beacon of sweetness and grace throughout.

Stunning 'Somewhere'

Alexandra Silber was a fine Maria, reaching up to securely placed high notes and delivering the bubbly strains of "I Feel Pretty" with infectious charm. Jessica Vosk was a formidable vocal powerhouse as Anita, and there were vibrant contributions from Justin Keyes (Action), Kelly Markgraf (Bernardo) and Kevin Vortmann (Riff). Members of Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus helped out as various gang members and their girls.

Yet perhaps the evening's most remarkable showstopper came midway through the second half, when Julia Bullock, a conservatory-trained operatic soprano, appeared out of nowhere to deliver a full-voiced, stunningly paced account of "Somewhere." The entire score of "West Side Story" is full of musical treasures, but for just a moment it seemed as though nothing Bernstein ever wrote was quite as magical as that one song.