



## Julia Bullock, soprano

### The New York Times

#### Harlem Classics, Presented With New Force

New York Festival of Song at Merkin Concert Hall

Vivien Schweitzer | *The New York Times* | December 12, 2014

Before the tenor Darius de Haas sang Fats Waller's "Black and Blue" at Merkin Concert Hall with the New York Festival of Song on Tuesday evening, the pianist Steven Blier noted that the program, "Harlem Renaissance," was last performed one month after Sept. 11, 2001. In light of the recent events in Ferguson, Mo., and Staten Island, it seemed ironic timing, he said, that the program was being heard anew now.

Mr. de Haas sang with commitment throughout the song, imbuing the final line with palpable emotion: "My only sin is in my skin/What did I do to be so black and blue?" The program explored the vocal and literary contributions of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance, interspersing poems by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston with vocal selections traversing a range of styles, from jazz and blues to art song.

The program highlighted the impressive gifts of the soprano Julia Bullock – a mesmerizing performer who combines an alluring voice with a natural theatricality. During recitals, singers often stand uneasily onstage, their movements appearing calculated. But Ms. Bullock imbued every song with myriad physical nuances that seemed natural and spontaneous; subtly unclenching a fist, arching her eyebrows, pointing a finger, or narrowing her gaze.

Her vocal technique is equally refined. During "The Breath of a Rose," by William Grant Still, set to a poem by Hughes, she shaped the final phrase – "Love is no more than the breath of a rose/No more/Than the breath of a rose" – with gorgeous simplicity, the final word dissolving with the delicacy of a falling petal. Another highlight was "I've Heard of a City Called Heaven," in which she sang with both dramatic fervor and quiet poignancy.

Mr. Blier and Michael Barrett were the able accompanists; Mr. Blier provided engaging commentary about the historical background of the pieces and the artists involved. He described Billy Strayhorn's "Day Dream," expressively sung by Mr. de Haas, as the "most beautiful, intricate chord progression of any popular song I know."

Mr. de Haas and the baritone James Martin didn't always sing with the polish and sophistication of Ms. Bullock, though both made worthy contributions – including Mr. Martin's lively rendition of Luckey Roberts's "Mo' Lasses." The lineup also included selections by Eubie Blake, Cecil Cohen, Duke Ellington, William Weldon and Florence Price.

Mr. Blier paid homage to the contributions of Andy Razaf, a prolific lyricist who, in addition to the words to "Black and Blue," wrote the words to Russell Wooding and Paul Denniker's "What Harlem Is to Me," which the three singers offered as a fitting conclusion to the evening.