



## Julia Bullock, soprano

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#### At Ojai, Peter Sellars Has a Personal Yet Global Playlist

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Julia Bullock in "Josephine Baker: A Portrait."

Credit: David Bazemore/Ojai Music Festival

As the music director of this year's Ojai Music Festival, which ended Sunday, June 12, Peter Sellars included both Carnatic singing from southern India and French Spectralism, voices from Cairo and from Mexico, a toy piano and a block party. Most striking about the program he created was that almost all of the music was by women. For Mr. Sellars, this was clearly not a matter of meeting quotas or checking demographic boxes. He has been promoting the full diversity of world music for decades. His Ojai wasn't set up to prove the influence of, say, classical Indian singing on contemporary American a cappella vocalism; the weekend's performances and styles seemed to inform one another without imposing themselves on one another.

With the premiere of Julia Bullock and Tyshawn Sorey's "Josephine Baker: A Portrait," the festival produced something with the heart — if not quite yet the proportions — of a masterpiece. Mr. Sorey, a brilliant avant-jazz composer and musician, has arranged a set of songs once performed by Baker, the celebrated singer, dancer, French Resistance operative and civil rights activist, as if he's channeling the composer Morton Feldman. It's a landscape of glacial melancholy, shot through with glinting fragments from an ensemble of six players, solemn resonances in the piano and shudders of drums.

This is a ritual of mourning, not a gay-Paree nostalgia trip, and it is one of the most important works of art yet to emerge from the era of Black Lives Matter. "Si j'Étais Blanche" ("If I Were White"), a suavely swinging two and a half minutes as Baker recorded it, is here a haunting quarter-hour dirge, as harrowing as "Strange Fruit."

Her soprano mellow and flexible, somber yet with a crucial undercurrent of youthful hopefulness, Ms. Bullock was a magnetically still presence — until a sensational climactic break into sinuous Baker-esque choreography (by Michael Schumacher). The pitiless words of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Terre Sèche" were caressed, yet starkly clear.

One problem, however, is the interstitial spoken text, newly written by the poet Claudia Rankine ("Citizen") and recited by Ms. Bullock. Dully underlining points about Baker's relationship with race, it's more obvious and stolid than the ambiguous music. And it keeps pulling us out of Mr. Sorey's hypnotic textures and tempos, making the piece — at 90 minutes already too long, with a particularly unwieldy, cloying late instrumental interlude — feel even longer.

It might be advisable, in what I hope will be many future performances, to flesh out the visual element. Perhaps fractured or slowed footage of Baker dancing could convey her artistry without sacrificing Mr. Sorey and Ms. Bullock's elegantly spare stylization. But "A Portrait" is already, in this early form, a work that demands to be heard and wrestled with, a space of pain and contemplation.