



Rave Review for Premiere by

David Hertzberg, *composer*

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New York Debut Review: *Julia Bullock and Renate Rohlfing*

Young Concert Artists | Merkin Concert Hall

Joshua Rosenblum | Opera News | June 2014

Julia Bullock, a 2012 Young Concert Artists winner, demonstrated both profound artistry and impressive originality in her New York debut recital at Merkin Hall on March 11. Both qualities were obvious in her first set, which alternated early Berio folk song arrangements with late Rossini songs. Bullock's radiant soprano shines brightly and unfailingly. She also summons a rich, earthy, mezzo-ish quality in her low register. Most compellingly, however, she communicates intense, authentic feeling, as if she were singing right from her soul. The two Rossini selections were contrasting settings of the same short text; the Berio pieces were from the composer's early *Quattro Canzoni Popolari*. These brief, similarly themed songs by two Italians from different centuries illuminated each other in unexpected ways, and Bullock sang them with a fervent sincerity, leavened with a dash of knowing humor.

A new piece by the opulently gifted twenty-three-year-old David Hertzberg, the Young Concert Artists' Composer-in-Residence, used two Wallace Stevens poems as his text, and overflowed with a refreshingly explorative harmonic language that was an intriguing match for Stevens' dense, eloquent imagery. Bullock, for her part, sang as if in a state of unfolding amazement at the otherworldly musical and visual universe she herself was evoking. She sang this difficult but mesmerizing work from memory, as if it were a familiar repertory item, and pianist Renate Rohlfing showed similar mastery of the richly cascading, often cataclysmically dissonant accompaniment.

This premiere was followed by five characteristically stark and powerful songs of Messiaen, a composer who has clearly had an influence on Hertzberg. In "R surrection," Bullock sang climactic phrases like "I sing: for you, my Father, for you, my God" with a shattering intensity, her ringing, resplendent tone demonstrating the heights of artistry that can be attained at this level of emotional rawness.

Bullock's second half opened with a tribute to Josephine Baker, an artist whom Bullock, as she related in spoken remarks, has long admired and identified with. (Both were born in St. Louis, for starters.) Bullock has the right vocal stylings and even some of the moves to evoke Baker and her era; she had the audience eating out of her hand. Of the six Baker-associated songs, all in delectable jazzy arrangements by Jeremy Siskind, the most memorable was "Si j' tais blanche" ("If I were white"). Bullock's performance was girlishly tongue-in-cheek, a playful presentation of a serious issue, but the knowledge that Baker left New York for Paris after realizing the U.S. at the time "was a country only for white people" offset the number's lightheartedness. Bullock segued without pause into three songs from Xavier Montsalvatge's *Cinco Canciones Negras*, whose vivid characters took on enhanced dimensionality in the context of Baker's racial struggles. "Cradle Song for a Little Black Boy," in particular, was heartbreaking.

Once again without pause, Bullock segued right into a set of three spirituals, also in arrangements by Siskind. At this point it was no surprise that Bullock could sing these with as much soulfulness and authenticity as anyone. In these sometimes pain-filled renditions, she summoned a mournful, occasionally raspy quality that she layered naturally onto her already multi-hued timbral palette. In the same spirit, she rendered her encore, Bernstein's "Somewhere," with an emphatic, deep-seated yearning, as if the present were almost unbearable.