

American Record Guide

independent critics reviewing classical recordings and music in concert

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Montreal International Music Competition

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Ojai Festival at Berkeley

Yuja Wang and Evgeny Kissin at Carnegie Hall

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OVER 450
REVIEWS

Moravec and Ranjbaran World Premieres

Oratorio Society of New York

The venerable Oratorio Society of New York has performed Handel's *Messiah* in Carnegie Hall more than anybody else. But for its May concert there it introduced two brand-new oratorios. *We Are One* by the Iranian composer Behzad Ranjbaran carries the familiar theme of hope for world peace. *Sanctuary Road*, composed and written by Pulitzer Prizewinners Paul Moravec and Mark Campbell, was commissioned in honor of Kent Tritle, the group's music director, and is an outstanding addition to the literature. Eloquent and dramatic, it depicts the tribulations of terrified slaves escaping north on the Underground Railroad.

Sanctuary Road is fashioned from detailed notes taken by William Still, a black abolitionist (not related to the 20th-Century composer). A conductor on trains to Philadelphia, Still covertly assisted fugitives, who with desperate ingenuity adopted disguises ranging from sex changes (involving white makeup and heavy veils) to mailing themselves in boxes as freight.

Still noted names, origins, masters, and much else, especially the horrors. (Those sealed into boxes prayed that movers saw on the label which side was up.) He hid his notes on a shelf, retrieved and published them in old age, and got back in touch with some escapees in Canada, who were grateful and doing fine. ("Finally found a place where freedom is not a crime.") It's a crackling story line, acutely crafted and composed with rich lyricism. The chorus text is creatively chosen and set:

CHORUS (OVERLAPPING)

"Can read and write well . . .

Plays on the violin . . .

A confident manner . . .

Quick spoken . . .

Laughs a good deal . . .

Of awkward manners . . .

Stammers, stammers, some."

The marvelous solo quartet also had a narrator, bass-baritone Dashon Burton, whose declamatory power, leading or joining, represented Still and his detailed notes. Soprano Laquita Mitchell has Gershwin's *Bess* among her operatic credits. Mezzo Raehann Bryce-Davis is experienced in European opera.

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Smooth-voiced British tenor Joshua Blue does oratorio and Britten-like repertory. And Malcolm J Merriweather, director of the Desoff Choirs, has strong academic credits.

Particularly affecting was 'Rain,' a passionate soprano aria, followed by 'Come Down Rain,' a substantial quartet. The harder it rains the better because fewer people will be walking in the street to spy the furtive refugee.

As choral conductor, organist, or faculty member in New York institutions, Tritle has earned respect. The Oratorio Society, a 200-voice avocational chorus, sponsors a vocal competition whose winners, which include Blue and Burton, are often its soloists.

We Are One, which opened the program, is in brotherhood-among-nations mode. It was recast from a 2008 idea in observance of the 50th anniversary of the Martin Luther King assassination. After a spirited introduction and trumpet fanfare, the word "peace" is sung in all 5 movements—and in 12 languages. Open fifths of the first, 'Paz,' are used in its full stately orchestration.

Most of the work's tough dissonances occur in the orchestra, with smooth easy intervals reserved for the chorus. Ranjbaran knows how to defer to volunteer choir singers, though this group sounded more on top of things in the second piece. With each different iteration of "peace," the work became more like a proclamation; and the finale was a celebratory setting of the text—not the tune—of 'We Shall Overcome.'

Composers and librettist were in the audience, as were students from New York's public high schools, courtesy of the Oratorio Society.

LESLIE KANDELL

Harlem Chamber Players' 10th Anniversary

New York

Like arson in a rent-controlled building, a spontaneous clap-along started in the balcony and in seconds had spread across a sold-out crowd at Columbia University's Miller Theatre on June 1 as mezzo Lucia Bradford twirled, the Harlem Chamber Players orchestra pulsing along on Georges Bizet's faux-flamenco beat behind her. Sopranos Janinah Burnett and Brandie Sutton trailed her, stage right, the trio joining voices on the aria 'Les Tringles de Sistres Tintaient' from

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Janinah Burnett

Carmen. This was no ordinary rote rehash of one of western opera's greatest hits.

Thomas Pelaton, president of the eclectic uptown chamber orchestra's board, introduced the program as reflecting the central role of the voice in black

American music. After all, he explained, when the slave masters take away your instruments, you make do with what you have. And Harlemites have been singing opera since as far back as the 1880s.

Clarinetist and orchestra founder Liz Player wryly recalled the group's first performance ten years ago, when there were about a dozen people, family included, in the audience. That the ensemble could grow to the point where they



Chauncey Packer

could sell out upper Manhattan's largest concert hall other than the Apollo and the Beacon Theaters speaks for itself. But this was about vocal rather than instrumental fireworks, a series of arias both famous and obscure.

After a rather clever, lilting bit of an introduction (the overture from Mozart's *Impresario*), Burnett meticulously mined the depths of her strikingly powerful low register in 'Deh Vieni, Non Tardar' from a second Mozart work, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Later in the evening, Bradford did just the opposite with 'Re dell'Abisso Affrettati' from Verdi's *Masked Ball*, reaching octaves beyond head voice to a surrealistic, tremulant falsetto. It was a triumphant leap for an artist who typically resides in the lower midrange.

The night's most electrifying moment was Chauncey Packer's gritty, well-worn take of Puccini's 'Addio Fiorito Asil' from *Madama Butterfly*. The tenor brought out every ounce

of raw heartbreak in the tantalizingly brief aria, a comet trail of overtones wafting from his voice as he projected relentless angst.

The program followed neither a predictably crescendoing arc nor any easily definable sequence, spanning the Italian, French, and German traditions. Sutton introduced the night's first pyrotechnics with her soaring take of Donizetti's 'Viene, O Tu Che Ognor Io Chiamo' from *Caterina Cornaro*. She and Bradford joined voices for an exceptionally lush yet subtle rendition of 'Belle Nuit, O Nuit d'Amour' from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*. In the second half of the concert, their version of 'Sous le Dome Epais' from Delibes's *Lakme* was considerably more animated.



Lucia Bradford

Baritone Kenneth Overton's majestically modulated river of an interpretation of 'Per Me Giunto' from Verdi's *Don Carlo* was among the show's most enthusiastically received moments. A bit later he and Packer reached a moody detente with 'Au Fond du Temple Saint' from Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*. Sutton's clenched-fist, imploring 'Ach, Ich Liebte' from Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* set up a mighty coda, all four singers exchanging and intertwining in a triumphant run through Verdi's 'Bella Figlia dell'Amore' from *Rigoletto*.

Conducted with calm understatement by David Gilbert, the orchestra wasn't afforded many opportunities to sparkle, beyond a handful of droll call-and-response bits, until the excerpt from *Carmen*. That's where both the instrumentalists and singers really coalesced. Then again, the orchestra's primary role here was as backdrop rather than centerpiece.

ALAN YOUNG



Brandie Sutton