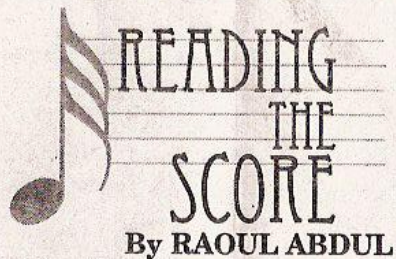


Harlem Opera Theater stars shine at Apollo

On Sunday afternoon, the cellist Esther Mellon returned to New York as guest soloist at the summer chamber music festival at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in West Harlem. This provided her with the opportunity to play works by Max Bruch, Johannes Brahms and Franz Schubert with a group of distinguished colleagues in her "home town."

The program opened with Nos. 2 and 6 from Bruch's Eight Pieces for Clarinet, Viola and Piano (Opus 83), given excellent readings by Liz Player and Charles Dalton and Evelyn Golz. Especially lovely was No. 6, which was appropriately titled "Nachtgesang" (Night Song). I found it breathtaking.

This was followed by Brahms' Trio in A Minor for Piano, Clarinet and Cello



(Opus 114), which was splendidly played by Esther Golz, Liz Player and the honored guest, Esther Mellon. Although the mood of the piece was mostly dark and sad, it was brightened for a moment by a Laendler-like theme in the Andantino grazioso movement.

The program closed with

Schubert's final instrumental work, the Quintet in C Major for 2 Violins, Viola and 2 Cellos (D. 956), composed two months before his death. It was given a masterful performance by Carlos Baptiste, Curtis Stewart, Charles Dalton, Esther Mellon and Seth Woods. The audience gave the artists a standing ovation.

The final concert will take place on Friday, Aug. 8 at 8 p.m. It will be devoted to music by William Grant Still, Miles Davis/Tom Olin (world premiere), Darius Milhaud, George Gershwin and Antonin Dvorak. The directors, Liz Player and Charles Dalton, deserve special praise for creating a new series of which we can be proud.

Last Sunday, the Harlem Opera Theater presented two of the winners of its 2008 Vocal Competition at Convent Avenue Baptist Church. It was of special interest because the contest itself was the first of its kind to take place at the Apollo Theater. It attracted a large audience of connoisseurs of operatic music.

Opening the program was Shermayne Brown, who lent her lovely, pure soprano to arias by Handel and Bach. Later, she gave a gorgeous account of "Mi chiamano Mimi" from Puccini's "La Boheme," the "Jewel Song" from Gounod's "Faust," and two spirituals arranged by Edward Boatner and Hall Johnson.

Baritone Barry Robinson gave a smashing account of the Count's main aria from Mozart's "Le nozze di Figaro" following an aria from Handel's "Berenice." He also offered Schubert's "Die Forelle" and a terrifying account of the same composer's "Gruppe aus dem Tartarus." He closed with a spiritual and a song by John Sacco.

Both artists were assisted at the piano by Robert Wilson who shared some insightful remarks on the arrangements of the spirituals by Boatner and Johnson, both of whom had associations with Convent. There were welcome speeches by Artistic Director Gregory Hopkins and Board President Edwina Meyers Lynch.