

OPERA NEWS

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"Concert for Unity"

ATLANTA

Atlanta Opera & True Colors Theatre Company

5/8/21

IN COLLABORATION WITH True Colors Theatre Company, the Atlanta Opera featured some of the city's most formidable Black voices under the big tent just outside the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre (seen May 8). Billed as a "Concert for Unity," the program was a mélange of opera arias and spirituals curated by bass Morris Robinson, featuring mezzo-soprano Ronnita Miller, soprano Jasmine Habersham, baritone Joshua Conyers, and pianist/composer Damien Sneed. (The singers performed without masks and appeared onstage with two ASL interpreters.)

Actor Enoch King began the afternoon with a moving monologue entitled, "The Black Artist's Experience." King has graced the stage of Atlanta's Tony Award winning Alliance Theatre and has appeared frequently in both film and television. King spoke of his artistry, self-doubt, and cultural accountability, deftly making a connection with the musical selections on the program. King told about an all-Black performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that he cherished, after which Habersham sang a sparkling rendition of Charles Gounod's "Juliette's Waltz," capping it off with a high C that would be the envy of any soprano in today's opera world.

Over the course of the afternoon, baritone Joshua Conyers offered The Count's Act III aria and recitative from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, "Hai già vinta la causa ... Vedrò mentr'io sospiro" as well as Enrico Ashton's Act I aria, "Cruda, funesta smania," from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Equally at home with the dynamism of both Mozart and Donizetti, Conyers's investment in the text was manifest, yet his lofty vocalism avoided coarseness or over-emphasis. Conyers shone brightest in the spirituals "Ride on, King Jesus" and "Witness."

After King gave us Macbeth's Act III, scene i monologue, "To be thus is nothing ..." Morris Robinson countered with Banquo's romanza, "Come dal ciel precipita," from Act II of Verdi's *Macbeth* and seemed to shake the earth below our feet with Banquo's words, "il mio pensiero ingombrano." Endowed with a voice that reverberates impressively, even in a circus tent with an unfavorable absorption coefficient, Robinson also sang "Il lacerato spirito" from the prologue of *Simon Boccanegra*, and the spiritual "Total Praise," which served as the capstone of the afternoon.

Soprano Ronnita Miller who was the diva of the hour. Statuesque and sublime, Miller offered Pauline's Act I romance from Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, the Brahms lied "Von ewiger Liebe" and two iconic spirituals, "Give me Jesus" and "Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child." Miller stood absolutely still while singing, rooted to the ground beneath her; it's as if she summons her voice from some wellspring to which only she has access. Miller is a singular talent, and one can only hope that she will sing on Atlanta's main stage again, when the time is right. —*Stephanie Adrian*