Stand The Storm

Program Notes

This program is dedicated to surveying the rich tradition of African-American vocal composition. It moves from the formal settings of spirituals—themselves bridges between folk music created under dire privation and classical music “art songs”—through modern works of political reckoning.

The evening starts with two songs from the middle of the 20th century by H. Leslie Adams (b. 1932): “For You There is No Song” (1960) and “Sence You Went Away” (1961) set to poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay and the polymathic James Weldon Johnson, a lawyer as well as an author, who in the early 1900s also served as one of the first Black diplomats. Adams, still active at age 88, draws from the emotional resonances of spirituals in these pieces’ lamenting, expressive tenor.

Dave Ragland’s “I Believe” takes its text from an anonymous source, with the philosophical imperative of the words “I believe in the sun” repeated several times, moving on to the revelation, “I believe in the sun — even when it is not shining.”

Dr. Timothy Amukele is a medical doctor and professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, as well as a composer and arranger of vocal music. His soaring setting of the hymn “A Diligent and Grateful Heart” suggests a belief that Christian practice is an active, high-flying pursuit. Through his versions of two spirituals, “Stand the Storm” and “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel”, Dr. Amukele embodies the combination of inquiry and faith, often expressed through the religious arts, as they have been practiced in African-American traditions such as the spiritual.

We Shall Not Be Moved is a 2017 opera by the composer Daniel Bernard Roumain (b. 1971) and the librettist Marc Bamuthi Joseph (b. 1975), taking off from the horrifying 1985 firebombing by the Philadelphia police of the Black separatist group MOVE’s complex of homes. The title plays on the spiritual of that name, “We Shall Not Be Moved”, and responds to the children killed in 1985 with representations of the resistance of Black youth today. The aria for baritone, “OG Say”, performed by Adam Richardson with Opera Philadelphia, is reprised by him tonight.

The program’s one song not written by a Black composer is “Birmingham Sunday” (1965), by the folksinger and novelist Richard Fariña (1937-1966), the brother-in-law of Joan Baez, who died in his twenties in a motorcycle accident. A depiction of the Klan’s 1963 deadly bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church, the music is derived from the traditional Scottish ballad, “I Loved a Lass”. “Birmingham Sunday” was recorded in the sixties by both Fariña and Baez, and has since been performed by a wide variety of vocalists.

“Birmingham Sunday” is paired here with the utterly different *Two Black Churches* (2020), a recent composition by Shawn Okpebholo (b. 1981). The first of two stately movements is entitled “Ballad of Birmingham”, its text drawn from the almost unbearably tragic poem of that name by Dudley Randall, told in the voice of the mother of one of the four little girls murdered in the church that day. That crime is matched musically with another slaying, a half-century later; the 2015 shooting of nine parishioners at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Okpebholo commissioned the Charleston poet laureate, Marcus Amaker (b. 1976), to write a somber, elegiac work depicting that event, entitled “The Rain”. Both movements are anchored by dark chords given to the piano, but the composer leavens the horror in his second movement by interpolating the melody of the hymn, “Tis So Sweet To Trust in

Jesus”, which had been sung, with indomitable grace, at Mother Emanuel at the first service following the massacre, the same service in which President Barack Obama sang “Amazing Grace”.

The program concludes with “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, the immortal song from 1905, written by the brothers James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954). The hymn was adopted by the NAACP a little over a decade later, and dubbed “the Negro national anthem,” for its message of uplift in the face of trial and tribulation. In the century since, the song, which cites both religious faith and the stated ideals of the American nation, has never lost its relevance or popularity.

-Andrew Freund