

Kathleen Battle in Rio

By Eduardo Fradkin

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All things indicate that interviewing Kathleen Battle – who, after a decade of absence, is back in Rio for two performances in the series *O GLOBO/Dell ' Art* with sponsorship from Bradesco Seguros e Previdencia with the Brazilian Symphony Orchestra, today and on May 19th, – would not be easy. The talented American soprano was famous for the purity and agility of her voice as well as for tantrums and absurd demands. She barely agreed to give an interview to the Brazilian press and asked to be sent samples of earlier pieces by journalists with whom she'd speak. But the person on the phone is a Kathleen Battle very different from the myth. She is friendly and cordial.

In concerts that will be performed here, she will combine Opera arias with Spirituals, *Melodia sentimental* by Villa-Lobos and the song *Azulão* by Jayme Ovalle and Manuel Bandeira for which the accompaniment by a group of 20 to 25 children from needy communities was requested, giving birth to the Children's Choir of UFRJ. Eclecticism is always a hallmark of her repertoire. You can't help but admire that she sang last week in a pop concert at Carnegie Hall at the invitation of Sting to raise funds for the Rainforest Foundation.

“I'd like to show that good music is not just music written directly on a score. Spirituals, which come from an oral tradition and from improvisation, have value, worth alongside other types of music. Those who were at Carnegie Hall were attracted to pop artists, but enjoyed listening to Classical music and Spirituals, and I think this is a good way of bringing these musical genres to a new audience,” said Kathleen Battle, who performed on the same stage onto which Billy Joel, James Taylor, Feist (whom she calls “fabulous”) and others stepped foot.

Slave grandfather inspires a passion for Spirituals

The music of Brazilian composers, included in the program of Rio concerts, accompanies Kathleen Battle for a good portion of the time. *Azulão*, for example, has already been recorded onto CD. And she is such an advocate of Villa-Lobos that she recounts having visited the museum dedicated to the composer the last time she came to Rio.

“I could not go to Rio, the cradle of Villa-Lobos, without giving my regards to him. I love him. I haven't sung the aria of *Bachianas brasileiras no. 5* lately, which is beautiful. Perhaps I will sing it again in the future. But I selected another piece of his, *Melodia sentimental*. As for *Azulão*, every time I sing it live, I see a clear reaction from people of all ages. Even if they don't understand the text, they react. This music speaks to the soul. It's like Spirituals,” the singer shares. She has not released a CD for some years, but has a project to record a new CD with only those songs created by Blacks enslaved in the United States.

“My grandfather was a slave. For this and other reasons, I have a strong connection to Spirituals. But, at the beginning of my career, I didn't sing them. It is risky for a young person to include popular music in a program of Classical music, due to the fact that singers tend to be judged differently when they put a classical interpretation [on Spirituals or popular music.]”

For Kathleen Battle, selecting repertoire is part of singing well; it must be suited to both the interpreter's voice and the performance venue.

“My voice is suited to Spirituals and popular songs such as *Azulão*. At the Carnegie Hall benefit, for example, everyone used amplification, but my portion was acoustic. My voice is not big, but in a good acoustic space, it is suitable. There is no risk of the voice getting too large in my case (laughs). A light voice needs the right acoustics and the right repertoire. There is no need to scream, to force the voice, as some young singers do. When you are young and starting out, it is common for people to tell you to sing loudly or you will not be heard. This leads many young people to force their voice and end the chances of having a long career,” the Soprano explains.

From church halls to concert halls

Good advice is valuable, and the support of a great artist is even more so. Kathleen Battle, who was propelled to fame by conductor Thomas Schippers, recognizes this. After him, other conductors of renown worked with her such as James Levine and Herbert von Karajan.

“Had I not received this support, this help, I would not have a career today” she states, before recounting how she fell in the good graces of Schippers.

“I was a teacher. I had graduated and had a degree in musical education, not in vocal performance. I was in my second year as a public school teacher in Cincinnati, Ohio. I received a phone call from a girlfriend who sang in the church choir with me. She was Thomas Schippers' secretary and told me that he was holding auditions for local singers. I was about to leave my apartment and go back home (to another city) when this happened. At the audition Schippers told my friend, Barbara, that he would like to hear me sing the *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Brahms, but wasn't sure that I knew it. Barbara said that I had sung the *Requiem* recently in church and would be able to do it. When I started, Schippers got up, took the place of the pianist and played for me. At the end, he asked me: ‘Wanna go to Italy?’ It was very coincidental and by chance. It was God.”

Listening to the soprano speak openly about her life, it seems like a good time to ask what she thought of past problems – she was dismissed from the New York Metropolitan Opera for "unprofessional conduct," skirmishes with the house technical staff, singers and conductors and is rumored to have phoned her agent so the limousine driver would lower the air conditioning. Kathleen Battle, upon hearing the introduction, “I do not wish to bring this matter to the surface, but since you're already being so open ...” elegantly disarms the journalist: “If you do not wish to, perhaps it would be best not to ...”

She even gives great advice.

Translation: Dave Williams
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