



Battle joined by Kern at Segerstrom Concert Hall

By TIMOTHY MANGAN
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Kathleen Battle, who sang a recital Tuesday night in Segerstrom Concert Hall, still has it. The voice remains a wonder. The bearing remains royal. The music making remains meticulous.

Those looking for chinks in the armor of the 61-year-old soprano's voice Tuesday night (and we did) had to look hard. Problems reported in her recent Carnegie Hall recital -- with pitch and diction; restarting one a number a couple of times -- did not surface. There was a dry patch here and there, a break in the legato line once or twice, even a little air in the sound in the middle and lower range once in a while. But never mind. These were fleeting.

Russian pianist Olga Kern, winner of the 2001 Van Cliburn Piano Competition, was her gold-plated accompanist. Battle prohibited photography of the event, but when the two of them finally came on after several minutes wait, they looked like a million bucks. They changed their look after intermission. Battle opted for a stunning fuchsia wrap of some 10-feet in length to go with her simple black dress, draping it around her like a Roman statesman. Kern donned a stunning black sequined number.

The fashion is worth mentioning, because high-class was a part of the show. The whole thing was très elegant, like a set of jewels arranged beautifully on a velvet display. Battle is regal when she comes on stage, regal when she sings, striking poses, using her arms in grand sweeping gestures. But it is at one with her singing. It could all be a little precious at times, also a little odd. Battle seems to have to compose herself between each song, getting into a zone, and exchanged whispers and nervous looks with Kern.

Before the recital began, Dean Corey, president of the Philharmonic Society, told the audience, explicitly, not to clap between every song, but to wait for the end of each grouping. The audience clapped between every song. Battle and Kern acknowledged the applause with smiles and looks that said 'Oh well.' But between all the clapping, the performers constantly going on and off stage, the careful preparation of Kern's piano for her solos, the equally careful re-setting of it to accompany the songs, and the waiting, it seemed as if the concert was equally split between music and business.

Battle sang songs by Schubert, Liszt and Rachmaninoff. Exquisitely. She unfurled long, flowing phrases that caught the light as they twisted and turned. She warmed to the emotions in a song without pushing it, getting there by incremental natural steps, breathing with the music. The pauses were dramatic and pregnant. Kern proved a gorgeous supporter, bringing a large range of a soloist's color and touch to bear, without overdoing it.

But the program lacked a certain variety. The songs limned the same emotions, the texts expressing the joys and sorrows of love, the beauty and wonder of nature and the stars. Allegro tempos were hard to come by, as were gritty fortes. It was all beautiful to be sure, but in the same way.

The Schubert set led incrementally to its finale, "Gretchen am Spinnrade," which in turn nicely led up to its climactic "Kuss!," the diction pointed, the pace relaxed but never lagging. With their richly detailed piano accompaniments, the set of four Liszt songs were especially satisfying, again peaking with the voluptuous silkiness of the last number, "O quand je dors."

Both pianist and soprano plumbed a deeper sound and emotion in six songs by Rachmaninoff after intermission, the singer's diction perhaps not quite as strong here. She sang the composer's "Vesennije vody" in English for some reason.

Kern was allowed to perform two pieces on her own: an ample, lyrical account of Liszt's transcription of Schubert's "Litanei auf das Fest Aller Seelen" and a thoroughly dramatic, noble rendition of Rachmaninoff's Moment Musicaux, Op. 16, No. 4.

The printed agenda ended with three spirituals -- "Way Up in Heaven," "This Little Light of Mine," and "Ev'rytime I Feel the Spirit -- which displayed Battle's special talent with this repertoire, a balance of magic and precision, tone and feeling. There were three encores -- two more spirituals, "Witness" and "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" (the biggest wow of the night) and "O mio babbino caro" from Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi."

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