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Cheers for Kathleen Battle in July 6 Music and Beyond recital

By [SMAZEY](#) WED, JUL 7 2010 [CLASSICAL OTTAWA](#)

When was the last time you heard someone yell out "We love you!" at a classical music recital?

That was a cheer that greeted soprano Kathleen Battle as she returned for a second encore at the National Arts Centre July 6 amid whoops, whistles and cries of "Brava", and it was an example of the spell that this star singer can still create at age 61. The performance was presented by Ottawa cellist Julian Armour's new Music and Beyond classical music festival.

Battle still knows how to work the kind of magic in recital for which she has long been known. The shout of affection from one enthusiastic listener came following her first encore, a spellbinding and spectacularly sung unaccompanied version of *Were You There?* Battle's voice soared and she held the crowd in utter silence. A woman near me was wiping away tears.

It would be unfair to expect any singer to have the same sheen in her voice at 61 that she had at 31. Time and age produce changes. I attended Battle's Toronto recitals regularly in the 1980s and 1990s but had not heard her in concert for more than a decade, and I was wondering how the voice would be holding up. I was very pleasantly surprised.

Early in the recital, there was occasional huskiness in Battle's tone that was not there when she was younger. But at its best that night, Battle's singing still had an impressive amount of the beauty, purity and control that won her so many fans.

"A voice like that makes you believe in God," I heard one person near me commenting to a friend say as we were exiting.

Battle had an excellent accompanist in pianist Ted Taylor, who was in sensitive form. Battle was obviously happy as well, repeatedly acknowledging and applauding Taylor.

One of Battle's finest recordings, dating from the 1980s, was a disc of beautifully sung Schubert lieder for DG. In the Schubert set that opened her recital and included some of the pieces on that disc, she naturally did not have the flawlessly lustrous tone that she had 30 years ago. But Battle still has a sensitivity to feeling and mood, and what was impressive, as she progressed and her voice warmed up, was how much beauty she could still create in a haunting piece like Schubert's *Nacht und Träume*.

Her voice opened up steadily as the night wore on, and she particularly shone in a set of Rachmaninov songs near the end of the program, with warm, rounded tones and some beautiful singing.

Her set of spirituals was equally impressive, including Hale Smith's celestial arrangement of *This Little Light of Mine*, in which Battle sang with an affecting simplicity and directness and Taylor produced a delicately shimmering accompaniment.

Her encores, along with the *Were You There*, included a simple and lovingly sung *O mio babbino caro* from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*.

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