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## Kathleen Battle soars with Baltimore Symphony, Morgan State Choir

More than a year ago, when the **Baltimore Symphony Orchestra** announced its 2009-2010 season, two of the eye-poppers involved famed singers.

One, Jessye Norman, never made it; "scheduling conflicts" prevented her appearance in "Ask Your Mama," a multi-media, multi-genre project based on a Langston Hughes poem. But another soprano, Kathleen Battle, arrived this week as planned to join the BSO and Morgan State University Choir for a newly constructed program commemorating the Underground Railroad. It's an ideal vehicle for Battle, as the audience Thursday night at Strathmore discovered. The repeat performance Saturday at the Meyerhoff would be well worth catching.

This event had "must-hear" all over it from the get-go, if only for the opportunity to hear Battle again. Since the soprano's much-publicized dismissal from the Met back in the 1990s, she has not been a presence in the opera world. Recitals and concerts with orchestra don't seem to have been all that numerous, either. And she doesn't exactly have recordings coming out every month. So being able to experience the voice was an irresistible draw, especially since this program was built around spirituals, a genre she has long shown great affection and affinity for.



The first thing evident Thursday night was that Battle, at 61, still retains a remarkable amount of the vocal radiance that made her a sensational star decades ago -- the purity and accuracy of the tone, the clarity of articulation (many a singer could learn from her distinct consonants), the ability to connect with a text and make a listener feel the same connection. Battle never had a large voice, yet was able to be heard in places like the huge Met; her voice penetrated easily at Strathmore. There's just something magical about that sweet sound.

The soprano spun out compelling phrases all night, sometimes with jazzy inflections that had terrific spontaneity and naturalness, sometimes with a disarming, Schubertian gentleness. Top notes didn't come as effortlessly, perhaps, as they used to, but there was an awful lot of loveliness in the timbre just the same.

Battle could not have been more heart-warming than in the a cappella selections, especially "Over My Head" and her encore, "Were You There" (I heard that one from the first balcony, where the voice floated quite beautifully). When the orchestra was involved, Battle projected with little difficulty; conductor Damon Gupton, a sensitive partner throughout, did his best to maintain an effective balance. It may have been frustrating for the players to keep a lid on for most of the evening, but it paid off. The ensemble's admirably nuanced support in such endearing, enduring gems as "This Little Light of Mine" complemented Battle's glowing vocalism fully.

As usual, the Morgan singers sounded splendid, whether adding their voices to a cappella numbers with Battle or to orchestra-accompanied pieces. The choir also got a couple of solo spots; "The Battle of Jericho," in Moses Hogan's brilliant arrangement and conducted by Eric Conway, packed a particular wallop.

A highlight of the evening was "Balm in Gilead," which inspired exquisite phrasing from Battle, a sweet blend from women in the chorus, and silken support from the BSO. In such moments -- and there were many -- the full emotional depth and melodic appeal of spirituals came through with affecting grace.

The BSO had the spotlight to itself a couple times. Gupton led subtly molded performances of "Land of Peace" from William Grant Still's "Africa" (why do we always have to wait for African American-theme programs to hear something by this great 20th century composer?) and some wonderfully atmospheric music by James Lee, III -- "...and on either side of the river" from his "Beyond Rivers of Vision" (we should get more opportunities to hear the works of this contemporary Baltimore-based composer, too).

Interspersed through the program were readings from the work of Frederick Douglas, read by Kweisi Mfume with the mesmerizing vocal richness and telling inflections of a seasoned actor.

As effective as the concert was, there were some little problems -- crossed signals, awkward breaks in the flow. These should be smoothed over before Saturday's performance. And I sure hope the Meyerhoff crowd will pay more attention to silencing cell phones and other noise-makers than the miscreants at Strathmore did (Battle would have been forgiven had she decided to walk off stage).

Ultimately, nothing could diminish the warmth of the music-making and the satisfaction of being in the presence of Kathleen Battle's still-gleaming "little light."

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