



from
Young Concert Artists, Inc.

SASHA COOKE, *mezzo-soprano*

NEW YORK RECITAL DEBUT

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2007

Some Barber, Some Mahler, A Final Note of Sondheim

Sasha Cooke, a mezzo-soprano, saved Stephen Sondheim's "Take Me to the World" for the second encore of her New York recital debut on Tuesday night at Zankel Hall.

MUSIC REVIEW

STEVE
SMITH

But that title could easily have served as a banner for the entire concert. Over the last few years Ms. Cooke's New York appearances in orchestral and chamber settings have consistently earned approving notices. In this program, presented by the Young Concert Artists series, she explored a wide range of mostly overlooked selections by an international cast of composers.

In Samuel Barber's "Four Songs" (Op. 13), Ms. Cooke revealed some of the qualities for which she has earned attention: a rich voice deployed with admirable control, an expressive countenance and a winning ease onstage. Her dark, liquid outpouring of piety in "A Nun Takes the Veil" was countered by the devilish wit of "The Secrets of the Old." A subtly arched brow underscored rapturous sentiments near the end of "Nocturne."

Personable spoken introductions prefaced performances of Poulenc's puckish "Four Poems by Guillaume Apollinaire" and Mahler's soulful "Five Ruckert Songs." From the Mahler, Ms. Cooke's performance of "At Mid-

Sasha Cooke
Zankel Hall

night" was riveting, "I Am Lost to the World" only slightly less so. Her account of Debussy's "Songs of Bilitis" was suffused with poetic ardor.

Where Ms. Cooke's French and German diction was admirable, her English and Russian were exemplary in selections by John Musto and Rachmaninoff. Her bluesy phrasing and subtle swing were ideal in Mr. Musto's "Shadow of the Blues," four settings of poems by Langston Hughes. The three Rachmaninoff songs that closed the recital program — one of which Ms. Cooke herself translated for the program notes — were richly voiced and subtly shaded.

The pianist Pei-Yao Wang provided superb support throughout; her sensuous, half-lighted pastel tones in the Debussy selections and the sheer bravura she displayed in Rachmaninoff's "Floods of Spring" (Op. 14, No. 11) were among the evening's highlights. Two encores, William Bolcom's giddy "Amor" and the Sondheim ballad, suggested that Ms. Cooke might easily pursue a healthy sideline in musical theater. A prediction: Before long, American composers of a lyrical bent will beat a path to her door.



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KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS DEBUT

IONARTS



Washington, D.C.

Young Concert Artists: Sasha Cooke

By Charles T. Downey
Tuesday, October 2, 2007

Anyone at Steven Blier's latest Wolf Trap recital this past August likely wanted to hear more from mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke. Washingtonians had that wish fulfilled by Young Concert Artists, who sponsored her Sunday afternoon recital in the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater. Cooke and her excellent associate artist, pianist Pei-Yao Wang, presented an attractive program of rarities from the 19th- and 20th-century song repertory to a mostly full house.

The concert opened memorably with a composed, calm rendering of the first song of Samuel Barber's *Four Songs*, op. 13, a setting of Gerard Manley Hopkins's *A Nun Takes the Veil*. It is always enlightening to hear a complete set of which one song is particularly well known, in this case, *Sure on This Shining Night* (poem by James Agee). Cooke's English pronunciation and diction made the texts very clear, a strength that helped make the John Musto song cycle, *Shadow of the Blues*, the high point of the afternoon. Here, wisely with no introduction to the music or poetry, Cooke gave us three other songs from the cycle to go along with the extraordinary *Litany* on the Wolf Trap program. Musto has made a

successful hybridization of styles in his absorption of jazz, blues, and Broadway sounds. The listener can recognize the references, but Musto has incorporated them into a new and much more interesting sound world.

The program concluded with a satisfying set of Rachmaninoff songs, including *Zdes' khorosho* (op. 21, no. 7), which recently featured on Anna Netrebko's *Russian Album*. Cooke seems to have good Russian, too: it probably helps that both of her parents teach Russian at Texas A&M. Cooke's voice is a gem and her stage presence and poise are impressive. During the postlude of Barber's *Sure on This Shining Night*, she remained completely engaged, a play of emotions flickering across her face as the music changed behind her. Cooke certainly had a capable partner in Pei-Yao Wang, who painted with a range of color from symbolist grays and pastels in the Debussy *Chansons de Bilitis* to full orchestral technicolor in the concluding Rachmaninoff song. Even better, the pair stuck to their guns in the contemporary theme of the recital by presenting, as the only encore, William Bolcom's *Amor* from *Cabaret Songs*. It is exciting to hear an excellent voice supplemented by a sharp mind and good taste.



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SASHA COOKE, *mezzo-soprano*

The Berkshire Eagle

A young mezzo on the threshold

By John Felton, special to The Eagle
September 29, 2007

PITTSFIELD, Massachusetts — Song recitals often are considered the province of aging opera singers who need to select repertoire that will not stress their voices. **Sasha Cooke, a 25-year-old American mezzo-soprano, made a persuasive case at the Colonial Theatre on Thursday night for the song recital as the province of the young.**

Cooke's appearance in Pittsfield was the first of three concerts at the Colonial this season sponsored by the Young Concert Artists Inc., a New York-based organization that promotes the careers of promising young musicians. Cooke won first prize in the Young Concert Artists auditions earlier this year, an achievement that earned her concerts (with the same program as in Pittsfield) at the Kennedy Center in Washington tomorrow and at Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York on Oct. 16.

With the self-assurance and technique of a veteran, and a supple yet rich voice, Cooke stormed through 23 songs ranging in style from contemporary American jazz to Gustav Mahler's intense "Ruckertlieder." Her performance must have left many in the audience believing they had witnessed an early stage of a potentially great career.

Cooke posed several challenges for herself, notably a sudden shift in the first half of the program from four charming, if nonsensical, songs by Francis Poulenc to the Mahler. Each, in its own way, tests the mettle of any singer. Poulenc's songs, Cooke told the audience in a confident commentary, are "a lot of French that hardly makes any sense." But each song depicts a particular scene, which Cooke conjured up with her voice and an appropriate degree of vamping. In the third song, "Avant la cinema" ("Before the Cinema"), she adopted the posture of what she had described as "an arrogant guy" claiming to see artistry at the movie house.

Mahler's five songs written in 1901-02, and set to the overheated poetry of Friedrich Ruckert, are among the greatest art songs of the 20th century. Three are love songs (one an explicit tribute to Mahler's wife, Alma), and the last two express wrenching thoughts of loss and death.

Cooke was particularly effective in these last two songs ("At midnight" and "I am lost to the world"), both of which can veer easily from drama into pathetic sentimentality. Perhaps the best indication of her control came in the climactic line of the last song: "And I rest in a quiet realm." Quietly, but with total assurance, Cooke perfectly conveyed the haunting beauty of this thought.

Cooke also displayed impressive artistry in three demanding songs by Sergei Rachmaninoff, four lovely songs by Samuel Barber, and three songs of varying moods by Claude Debussy. As if these weren't enough, she fast-forwarded to the work of a living composer, John Musto of New York, who compiled four poems by Langston Hughes into a set called "Shadow of the Blues."

Whether portraying a demure maiden in Debussy's setting of "The Hair" or adopting a sarcastic southern accent to tell Hughes' ironic tale ("Silhouette") of the hanging of a black man, Cooke demonstrated the expressiveness of a much more experienced singer.

As an encore, Cooke dashed off, with verve, William Bolcom's amusing cabaret song, "Amor."

Cooke's accompanist was the young Taiwanese-born pianist Pei-Yao Wang, who in recent years has made a name for herself as an exceptionally fine chamber musician in New York. She had plenty to work with and did so with flair, particularly in the demanding piano parts of the Debussy and Rachmaninoff songs, but also in Musto's skillful writing for the piano in the setting of Langston Hughes' sorrowful poem "Island."