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03/03/2013 -

Journey toward Freedom: Songs and choruses by various composers

Denyce Graves (mezzo-soprano), Lisa Daltirus (soprano), Kevin Deas (bass-baritone), Rev. Charles Rice (narrator) Singing City Chamber Choir, Jeffrey Brillhart (choir director), Singing City Children's Choir, Steven Fisher (choir director), Laura Ward (piano), Keenan Boswell (organ)



D. Graves (Courtesy of Lyric Fest)

Lyric Fest designs concerts with scope and historical significance so well that it often results in uniquely vital programming. Earlier this year, their single performance of a deep field survey of music from Spanish, Latin and South American composers, brought academic and aesthetic depth to unique repertoire, not to mention making it sumptuously entertaining. The same qualities were present for *Journey Toward Freedom-A History of the Civil Rights Movement*, through music and word, an eloquent musical narrative of the black civil rights movement in America.

The main focus framed the inspiring and tragic events of the Martin Luther King, Jr. era through the violent resistance against freedom fighters of Montgomery and Selma, to the galvanizing March on Washington, to the

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peaks of success to the depths of despair in Dallas and Memphis.

The concert also marked the return of mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves to Philadelphia, since her performance in Opera Philadelphia's Margaret Garner and a concert at the Mann Center several years ago. Graves could have easily been spotlighted in a star turn, but it was evident that her commitment to this music and concept, that she was among one of the chorus of many. Graves opened the concert, with a subdued, even nervous reading from Maya Angelou's manifesto *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and followed with the song *O Freedom* the first of several spirituals she sang. Later, Graves was seemed more focused on Edwin Hawkins gospel classic *Oh Happy Day* but it was Duke Ellington's *Come Sunday* that framed Graves vocal quality best.

Graves alternated solos with soprano Lisa Daltirus, a technically accomplished and stratospheric soprano who crafted such spiritual songs as *O What a Beautiful City* and *He's got the whole world in his hands* impressively knew how to modulate her huge voice to the church's bouncy acoustics.

The Singing City Chamber Choir and their Children's Choir, providing resounding quality and choral esprit support throughout the performance. The Rev. Charles Rice narrated the historical texts between numbers, and invoked the words of Dr. King, reflecting some of the most tragic events of the civil-rights era. He recited the beginning of King's Dream speech at the Lincoln Memorial, then the soaring final lines were alternated by members of the choir, representing many different ages, races and nationalities alternating the lines in a stirring group recitation.

Also moving hearts, the clarion bass-baritone Kevin Deas, giving Billie Holiday's *God Bless the Child* in a quiet gospelly rendition. After historical text about King's assassination, Deas gave such quiet power to *O Precious Lord* made most famous by gospel great Mahalia Jackson.

Dave Brubeck's 1969 composition *Lord, Lord, What Will Tomorrow Bring*, a song of unity, with lead vocals by Deas and Thomas Lloyd, was a moving musical dialogue between African-American sacred music and Jewish cantorial and the combined choruses in stirring vocal crescendos. Laura Ward, Lyric Fest's pianist is in the moment with stellar accompaniment for every singer.

Lewis Whittington

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