

Lyricfest presents 'Journey Toward Freedom'



Denyce Graves, in rich, compelling voice, had prime placement in the program. (DEVON CASS)

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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With its history of inhabiting and mixing song genres, Lyricfest eventually was bound to find its way to the spiritual and its offshoots, and did so Sunday with singers who packed the First Presbyterian Church: Denyce Graves, Lisa Daltirus, and Kevin Deas.

Lyricfest has a penchant for spoken commentary, and this "Journey Toward Freedom" program had the Rev. Charles Rice sketching the Civil Rights movement's progress, interspersed with songs by Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and more classically slanted pieces by Ricky Ian Gordon, a great champion of Langston Hughes.

The concert was bound to feel like a church service - especially with Singing City and its Children's Choir exploring the harmonic richness of traditional repertoire - which was fine with me, but may not have been with some Lyricfest subscribers.

Graves was especially eagerly awaited, having been largely absent here since the 2006 opera *Margaret Garner*. With changes in her personal life and a faculty appointment at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, she surfaces mostly at special-occasion concerts, though she did premiere Douglas Cuomo's adaptation of the play *Doubt* in Minneapolis in January. While Sunday's show wasn't hers, she had prime placement in the program.

And? The voice isn't quite as pliable as in years past, but it remains rich and compelling, especially when she ended the program with the sublime "Give Me Jesus," showing she has all the substance to resume a major career, should she wish to. Still, at times, she seemed a bit uncomfortable and reticent.

Well, anybody might seem shy next to Daltirus, also absent in recent years while singing such roles as Aida, Bess, and Tosca at various regional opera companies. Her voice hasn't aged a day, fueled by an ecstatic fire that she readily communicates. "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" was unfettered joy.

Amid this high-end competition, Deas gave a fascinating reading of "God Bless the Child," which is often presented as a feel-



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good song. But, as Deas' objective sense of clarity revealed, it's really a scathing critique of a mercantile world.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com.

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