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The Songs of Harlem, Informally Informative

By ANNE MIDGETTE

The New York Festival Of Song brought such a wealth of character and information to its "At Harlem's Height" concert on Thursday night at The Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College that the lingering impression afterward was of having seen a work of theater. This was achieved with an economy of means: two pianists, some well-chosen readings and three vocal soloists of individual and striking talents.

One reason the evening left a personal impression is that it was conducted with a personal touch. The festival is in its 14th year, and Steven Blier, its co-founder, addresses the audience with such familiarity that it's like hanging out in the living room of a very smart and informative friend. He's also evidently, bravely, battling the physical limitations of illness, and his willingness to soldier on contributed to the evening's profound sense of character.

Together with Michael Barrett, also a founder, Mr. Blier accompanied a program that featured works by Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, William Grant Still, Florence Price and others. Interspersed were readings from writers including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

All three singers did quite wonderfully, each in a different style. Dana Hanchard has a lovely light soprano that she took into breathy cabaret mode, which served her expressive purposes but constrained the voice when bluesy power was called for (as in the very funny "My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More" by Blake). Darius de Haas, a tenor, had the bad habit of starting long notes tightly, so their full beauty didn't open out until he was partway through, an unnecessary handicap for this fine Broadway singer. And opera buffs should watch for James Martin, a baritone with a big, beautiful, easy rolling voice. Mr. Martin also tap-dances, as he showed in "Mo' Lasses" by Charles Roberts; the program cited a "tap-dancing Papageno." Bring it on.