

Festival Highlights Talent From Harlem's 1920s Renaissance

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NEW YORK FESTIVAL OF SONG. "At Harlem's Height," songs from the Harlem Renaissance. Dana Hanchard, soprano. Darius de Haas, tenor, and James Martin, baritone. Steven Blier and Michael Barrett, piano. Aaron Davis Hall, 135th Street and Convent Avenue, Manhattan. Attended Monday night.

LIKE VIENNA in the 1890s and Paris in the 1910s, Harlem in the 1920s experienced an alignment of art, music, literature and forms of fun that gave it the feeling of a mythic time. On Monday, the New York Festival Of Song brought the decade known as the Harlem Renaissance back to Harlem, mixing a selection of period pieces and perennials in a performance at City College's Aaron Davis Hall. There's always something wistful about evoking vanished glory, but the music sounded much too effervescent, too immediate - too alive - to allow for much nostalgia.

The festival may be the most reliably excellent musical organization in New York. What orchestra, ensemble or opera company can make every show so special or count on such meticulous research, such infallible humor and such a sure sense of style? Granted, the bare-bones outfit - essentially made up of the loquacious pianist Steven Blier, his silent partner Michael Barrett, an executive director and whatever singers they can cajole into participating - only does a handful of concerts every year.

But each gets luxury treatment. The singers are ideally matched to the music and so thoroughly rehearsed that the performances acquire an easy spontaneity. Blier, who conceived the program, researched the repertoire, arranged the music, wrote an engaging essay and punctuated the evening with a few judicious and charming explanations, treats each concert as an opportunity to become more expert in another corner of his field.

For the Harlem evening, Blier and Barrett resisted the temptation to anthologize the few famous songs from that era and pepper the program with Duke Ellington. Only two of Ellington's tunes - "In a Sentimental Mood" and "I'm Just a Lucky So-and-So," - made the cut, along with a cloudy, suggestive and intricate song by the Duke's squire, Billy Strayhorn, "Day Dream." This is an extraordinary piece, rich in smoky harmonies and a snaking, elusive line. With his sinuous tenor, Darius de Haas conjured up an air of weary and battered glamour.

The program jumped from broad and bawdy rollicking tunes like Luckey Roberts' "Mo' Lasses" to serious art songs like Florence Price's "Song to the Dark Virgin," biting arias, including Fats Waller and Andy Razaf's "Black and Blue," and danceable numbers like Waller's "The Joint is Jumpin'." Soprano Dana Hanchard, De Haas and baritone James Martin divvied up the play list, and no one could have asked for anything more. Martin, a splendid opera singer who also croons with the best of them and does a mean soft-shoe besides, veered from the solemn to the silly without breaking a sweat. Hanchard put her baroque music training to good use in Eubie Blake's sly lament, "My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More." And De Haas wrapped himself around some high and difficult melodies with impeccable charisma and technique.