

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

Verrett, Warfield shine at NANM convention

Metropolitan Opera soloist Shirley Verrett, with the noted African-American conductor Warren George Wilson at the keyboard, gave a beautiful concert on Aug. 1 in Oakland, California, to open the Annual Convention of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM). Founded in Washington in 1919 by "people of cultural ideals and music groups of high standards," the association put on eight days of Classical music at its Aug. 1-7 convention, of which this opening Gala Concert was a highlight.

The selections covered the gamut from German lieder by Brahms, French chansons by Bizet and Godard, to American spirituals by Hall Johnson and Italian arias by Verdi, all performed according to high Classical standards. Even the French songs, whose content is normally Romantic mush, were made to sound like music.

Miss Verrett's fine spinto soprano carried effortlessly over the crowd despite the poor conditions of a hotel ballroom's low ceiling and the annoyance of a rock concert next door. The duo's first few notes transfixed everyone.

Especially moving was the ensemble, in which Maestro Wilson's musical long line spoke in such dialogue with Miss Verrett, that it seemed both were singing together. Such is the advantage (not enjoyed by many today) of developing music through a permanent collaboration over many years, such as that of Marian Anderson and Franz Rupp, or Lotte Lehmann and Paul Ulanowsky.

Most outstanding were Brahms's "Von ewiger Liebe," Johnson's "Fix Me," and Desdemona's soliloquy from Verdi's opera *Otello*. "Von ewiger Liebe," one of Brahms's most

passionate songs, is often ruined by smothering its content in Wagnerian bathos. Verrett and Wilson, however, saw the song's idea content unfolds through counterpoint like Beethoven's, and, bringing that out, they created that quality of extended emotional and intellectual space required to render true artistic passion.

Hall Johnson's spiritual "Fix Me" was done with an equal Classical sense of long line, with no extraneous nonsense. Desdemona's farewell, "Salce, salce" ("Willow, willow"), and her final prayer "Ave Maria," perhaps one of the most intense extended scenes in opera, were fitting climax to the concert, with all the beautiful pianissimos and delicate transitional passages necessary to convey the eternal life of the soul depicted by the composer.

Master class conveys 'voicing' of a song

Since his 1950 New York Town Hall debut, William Warfield has been known as one of America's finest baritones. Concentrating upon German lieder, sacred oratorio, and American spirituals, he is also a national leader in expanding opportunities for black musicians, most recently as 1985-90 president of NANM.

Now in his 70s, Dr. Warfield, voice professor at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, shared his knowledge with students and music teachers at a workshop on Aug. 4.

His ability to convey the *voicing* of a song—the creation of distinct vocal colors and characters within one piece, which provokes a "Socratic dialogue" between singer and audience—was riveting. This art, almost lost today, is the soul of the lied and spiritual alike.

After listening to a student baritone sing Schubert's "Erlkönig" with a beautiful voice but not enough differentiation, Warfield made an incisive intervention. He described the four musical voices—the narrator, the father, the boy, and the ghostly Elf King—with such contrast, that his face and voice alike seemed to take on four different personalities.

Dr. Warfield also showed the student how to change from voice to voice instantaneously, so that the song is integrated into a whole. As the student could not copy this immediately, Warfield asked him to differentiate the three voices of the father, son, and Elf King, by singing the father as a bass, the son as a tenor, and the Elf King with only the high overtones of a soprano, to imitate the seductive *nixe* (nymph) side of the evil spirit. The improvement was dramatic.

The American art song

The spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" was then sung by a young soprano with a pretty voice but a "jazzy" rendition. Dr. Warfield explained that the spiritual is an American art song, to be sung with the dignity of a Schubert lied, and that all extraneous gestures and "blue" notes (i.e., notes which efface the distinction between major and minor intervals in the well-tempered musical domain) must be eliminated, to let the beauty of the musical line come through.

He asked her to put her hands quietly on the piano and sing the first verse through "straight," and then allowed her to introduce a few simple vocal embellishments in the second and third verses, but so as to magnify the original thematic material. Again the student's change was profound, and the audience was delighted.