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From a Diva and Choir, Hope, Sass and Obbligatos

By JON PARELES

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It's no wonder that black opera divas from Marian Anderson to Jessye Norman have extended their repertoires to include spirituals. The songs have indelible melodies, honed by generations of tradition while they salute an African-American legacy. And spectacular vocal displays are as much a part of gospel music as they are of opera. Grace Bumbry, the internationally known mezzo-soprano, has taken the connection further. She has started the Grace Bumbry Black Musical Heritage Ensemble, a choir that sang spirituals and gospel songs at Carnegie Hall on Friday night.

It was a quixotic program. Perhaps to recognize Black History Month, it opened with traditionalist Senegalese dances by the Albany Dance Ensemble: hyperactive leaps and kicks and waving arms, propelled by breakneck drumming. The dancers then became captive slaves, with dragging chains and desperate mothers calling for their children. Rhoyma Hope Crozier recited verses about African-American tribulations and cultural tenacity.

Ms. Bumbry sang four spirituals: three accompanied by Jonathan Morris, the choir's conductor, at the piano, and one by the choir. She dived into the bottom of her range for an abject "Poor Me," then climbed through mezzo and soprano ranges in the increasingly hopeful "I'm Gonna Tell God All My Trouble" and an almost sassy "You Can Tell the World"; for "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," she floated high obbligatos over the choir.

Then the chorus was on its own. It sang concert arrangements of spirituals, including a contrapuntal "Elijah Rock" and a luminously chordal "I've Been Buked," neatly articulating down-home dialect: "Dere is trouble all over dis world." And with Larry Robinson's majestic and florid piano accompaniments, it sang gospel songs, as soloists stepped out of the ensemble and sang with a microphone (unlike Ms. Bumbry).

That material showed the separation between the gospel and classical spheres. Each requires virtuosity, but with a different syntax. Classical music is diatonic and minutely planned, made for a passive concert audience. Gospel uses bent, bluesy notes, and it calls for improvisation to represent divine inspiration. Gospel also swings, to pull the audience into the spirit; it is made for churches, not concert halls. The Black Musical Heritage Ensemble showed the balance and precision of a classical chorus, but also the rhythmic stiffness.

Yet the last few songs loosened up, with promising soloists: Jean Murphy, a smoky-voiced alto; **Russell Saint John, an assured, soothing baritone**, and Kenneth Brandon, who had Stevie Wonder's flair for turning nearly every note into a rippling melisma. Ms. Bumbry returned, singing an oddly mournful introduction to "Oh, Happy Day!," but the choir, joined by dancers and drummers, finally drew the audience into a modest celebration, perhaps all that concert gospel can hope for.

Photo: Grace Bumbry and her Black Musical Heritage Ensemble at Carnegie Hall, where they performed a spirituals and gospel program.  
(Chris Lee for The New York Times)