

Gershwin's magic plays out in stellar concert performance of 'Porgy and Bess'

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As a steady diet, opera in concert may not be every purist's cup of tea, but when it's done with as much professionalism and vocal muscle as "Porgy and Bess" was Friday, it easily gives credence to a new art form.

It helps that George Gershwin's classic has some of most memorable tunes and luscious orchestration ever penned by an American composer, but when they're performed with as much power and poignancy as they were by the Alabama Symphony, Birmingham Concert Chorale and eight internationally known soloists, it can draw in listeners nearly as much as a fully staged production.

Kishna Davis were superb, her sweet, supple voice and subtle facial and body gestures portraying the sassy, strong-willed Bess convincing. Kevin's Short's "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" was buoyant and bright, the banjo accompaniment emerging from the violin section making all the difference. Together, Davis and Short were a magical pair in the passionate duet, "Bess, You Is My Woman Now."

Chauncey Parker played Sportin' Life with humor and a bit of a swagger, adding a few vocal yips to his dance steps in "It Ain't Necessarily So."

Singing several roles, Birmingham native Elias Hendricks III revealed a rich, focused tenor voice and confident stage presence, though at times he was outmuscled by the all-star cast around him. At 21, he has a promising future.

The show stopper was Angela Simpson, who brought the house down with her tearful and passionate rendition of "My Man's Gone Now."

The Mark Ridings-led Birmingham Concert Chorale sang with earthy presence. The ASO gave alternately virile and tender, Music Director Justin Brown tautly leading the show to its gripping finale.