

92nd Street Y Voices of the Spirit

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Program 2, “Cries of Faith” of Dawn Upshaw’s 3-concert series included works from Couperin, Bloch, Bernstein, Druckman, and a staging of Bach Cantata BWV 199 by Peter Sellars. The lighting for the concert was minimal, but usually functional. Most upsetting to me was the absence of a program credit for lighting designer; presumably the “Technical Director,” John Kelly, must have taken care of cueing the show (probably no re-focusing was done), and Peter Sellars must have taken care of the lighting for his staging himself.

The concert hall at the 92nd Street Y has the requisite recessed top lights to illuminate the performer’s scores; there was also one front-of-house pipe at the top of the proscenium about 10 feet back from the front of the apron, and two box positions. There were pipes on the balcony rail, as well, but they were not used.

The first section of the concert was François Couperin’s *Troisième Leçon*, sung by Dawn Upshaw and Lisa Saffer. Accompanying the piece were an organist and a clarinetist. This piece was visually the least creative; a rather generic full-stage wash was used. Top-light from the overhead positions, and even front-light from the front-of-house pipe and the boxes. I couldn’t discern any specials on either the singers or the accompanists.

The second section consisted of Ernest Bloch’s *Psalm 137* and Leonard Bernstein’s *Lamentation*. Lorraine Hunt sang Bernstein, and Dawn Upshaw followed with Bloch. The cue was visually very similar to the preceding; however there was a definite special on the pianist, which I noticed primarily because it was brought up too soon. The special came up after the performers had left the stage for the first time after the first section; when they returned to take their bows again, they walked right through the special and the light

level change was clearly discernible. I couldn't figure out what the circle of light was for until they brought out the piano for the second section, and seated the pianist right in the center of the special. Presumably there was another special for the soloist in the crook of the piano.

Both performers were on-stage at the same time; the one who was not currently singing sat in a chair far downstage, facing the performer, head bowed. The difference in light levels between the two singers helped focus attention away from the inactive performer. The light drop-off at the front edge of the stage, while useful at this point, later robbed Peter Sellars of front-light when he walked to the front edge of the stage to introduce his staging.

The last piece before intermission was Jacob Druckman's *Bō*, a tribute to the Vietnamese boat people. Daniel Druckman, who conducted, explained at the start of the piece that he had seated the three singers facing backstage to reinforce the feeling of anonymity and isolation common to all refugees. Consistent with this concept, the lighting was pulled into the center, creating a pool of light for the performers, surrounded by darkness. I thought the lighting and staging really added to the piece.

Intermission followed. At the top of the second half of the concert, Peter Sellars entered (in the generic full-stage wash) to introduce his staging of the Bach Cantata. As mentioned before, the light drop-off at the downstage edge was not kind to Sellar's earnest downstage appeal; although he wandered around energetically enough that he was well lit for a good bit of the time. Arguably the continued level shifts from center stage to downstage were more distracting than a merely dim face would have been.

After Sellars introduced the piece, the orchestra and Dawn Upshaw entered to audience applause, still in the full-stage wash. They took their positions, the applause died down, and the stage went black; the first time a complete black-out had been done in the program. The cue for the staging then came up: a single cold leko from the balcony box throwing light diagonally across stage to illuminate Dawn, and a warm, fractured light for the orchestra that I initially could not determine the source of. It looked like a break-up in a template unit, but it turned out to simply be the clip-lights for the orchestra members' scores. The color difference was striking, though: the sharp, shadowed, cold blue light for the performer, cutting a sharp box on the floor, contrasted with the very warm amber fractured glow on the walls and floor surrounding the orchestra. The cold light on Dawn complemented her costume perfectly; the visual effect was very striking.

The lighting for the concert was (with the exception perhaps of Sellars' staging) not very creative, but it was very practical and usable concert lighting. The two pieces that really benefitted from lighting were *Bō* and the *Cantata*. The image in the visual rolodex that I will carry away will be from Sellars' staging; and next time I need to have an orchestra on stage I hope to be able to use the orchestra's clip-lights as well as Sellars did, rather than spend a lot of time and bother trying to cover up all the pit light.