

Kathleen Battle, backed by the DSO, puts new life in songs

By MARK STRYKER
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Soprano Kathleen Battle sang Andre Previn's song cycle "Honey and Rue" with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1996, and she was back at Orchestra Hall last weekend performing it again as part of the orchestra's annual Classical Roots concerts, which shine a spotlight on African-American performers and composers.

This is very good news, because Previn's sumptuous

DETROIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

★★★

out of four stars

Friday, Orchestra Hall, Max M. Fisher Music Center

score, with evocative texts by Toni Morrison and written expressly for Battle in 1992, deserves a place in the repertory, and Battle, 57, is singing as well as ever, maybe better. She may have to work a bit harder to produce her famously gossamer sound, but the notes still seem to hover in the air as if propped up by clouds, glisten-

ing like sunlight reflecting across a lake at dawn.

Moreover, there was a relaxed and improvisatory air about her phrasing and presence Friday that seemed new, adding an easy gait and profound directness of expression to the vernacular-tinged idiom of "Honey and Rue."

Battle also sang three glorious spirituals with sensitive accompaniment by resident conductor Thomas Wilkins and the DSO, followed by a surprising version of Stevie Wonder's "If

The noted soprano is 57 and sounds great, though she may have to work a bit harder to do so than she has in the past.

It's Magic" with just harp and, finally, an a cappella version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

The "Overture to Theater Set" by Ulysses Simpson Kay (1917-95) is a gem by this unfair-

ly neglected composer. It packs a striking number of ideas into five minutes, filtering an acidic harmonic bite and muscular lyricism into a unique voice.

Wilkins and the DSO turned the premiere of Rick Robinson's Essay No. 1 ("After Sibelius") into an enthusiastic coming out party. Robinson, a bassist in the DSO, is an armchair composer with promise and a taste for fleshy romantic textures and orchestration. The 20-minute piece opens with a recurring quote from Sibelius'

Third Symphony and later winks at Shostakovich, Mahler and Brahms. The programmatic sweep echoes Strauss.

The Brazeal Dennard Chorale sang John Wesley Work's "The Singers" and several spirituals with its typical passion, charisma, silky blend and fine soloists. Duke Ellington's "Beige" was an anticlimatic closer. Execution was too loose around the edges and a soggy businessman's bounce replaced what should have been deep-groove swing.