

A brilliant debut for HSO at the Apollo

Since 2004, the outstanding violist Amadi Hummings has devoted much of his time to the creation of the Harlem Symphony Orchestra. Last Saturday afternoon, a large and enthusiastic audience gathered at the Apollo Theater to hear a program devoted to classical music played by some of the finest African American instrumentalists and conducted by Hummings. This was part of the Apollo Theater Family Series.



The program itself was especially chosen to engage the attention of young people. It opened with a brilliant performance of the overture to Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute." This was followed by Benjamin Britten's "Young People's Guide to the Orchestra" (Opus 34), which provided an overview of the full orchestra and each instrument's special characteristics, most charmingly narrated by S. Epatha Merkerson.

Following a brief pause, Hummings led the orchestra in a beautiful reading of "Lyric for Strings" by George Walker, the first African American composer to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in music. The distinguished violinist Diane Monroe offered a solo arrangement of the hymn "Amazing Grace," filled with many virtuoso embellishments. The audience rewarded her with a well-deserved ovation.

Closing the program was Pablo Sarasate's "Carmen

Fantasy" for solo violin and orchestra, based on melodies from Bizet's opera "Carmen." Monroe pulled out of the stops in her execution of the solo part. There were theatrical nuances which showed that she was well-acquainted with the persona of the Bizet heroine. She was given superb support by Hummings and his remarkable instrumental ensemble.

As I listened to this concert on Saturday afternoon, I remembered several other occasions when classical music was heard at the Apollo. Many years ago, during the golden years of Saturday Night at the Apollo, the operatic soprano Camilla Williams sang "Un bel di" from Puccini's opera "Madama Butterfly" and received a standing ovation. And, it wasn't that long ago that the New York Philharmonic gave a concert on its stage before a sold-out audience.