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Song cycle explores presidential tryst
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Harolyn Blackwell and Florence Quivar

Reviewed: Tuesday, Feb. 5, at the Lied Center

Attendance: 900 (approx.)

Historians might never resolve the painful controversy over Thomas Jefferson's relationship with his slave-mistress, Sally Hemings. Were the two in love, or was such a thing even possible in this context?

But it seems clear that there was a relationship, and it forms the substance of a powerful new song cycle by William Bolcom, on a text by Sandra Seaton.

First performed last year in Washington, D.C., "From the Diary of Sally Hemings" on Tuesday at the Lied Center in Lawrence formed the centerpiece of "America Sings," a program of works by and about the struggles of African-Americans featuring Florence Quivar and Harolyn Blackwell.

As sung by mezzo-soprano Quivar, for whom it was composed, Bolcom's 40-minute set for voice and piano subtly worked the imagination with inventive musical and literary devices. When Hemings spoke of the stately Parisian society she visited, the music grew pompous. When she sang of feeling "safe in his arms," it grew tender but not cloying. Bolcom's music took unobvious approaches to an unobvious subject.

Quivar's velvet voice and experienced dramatic touch made the piece seem more like a miniature opera than a song cycle. Pianist J.J. Penna made the intricate accompaniment seem like a well-crafted narrative, even on the Lied Center's clangorous piano.

The rest of the evening was more traditionally fashioned. Soprano Blackwell's rendering of Andre Previn's six-song "Honey and Rue" was clear and strong, though the gentle music gave her perhaps too little substance to work with.

Her diction was vivid and Broadway-esque in the lower registers but grew indistinct in her upper range. She played it straight in two songs by African-American composers - William Grant Still's Puccinian "Songs of Separation" and two spiritual-tinged songs by Florence B. Price.

To conclude were fine renditions of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hand" and "My Lord

What a Morning" (together) and individual encores of "I Have Wrapped My Dreams" (Quivar) and "Joy" (Blackwell).

But it was the Hemings tale that stuck in the mind. Would that this piece could find its way into the permanent repertoire, for both its music and its message deserve many hearings.

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