

“Blake” preview a zesty appetizer for real thing

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A new opera customarily is unveiled only when most of the musical and dramatic details have been ironed out and a coating of high-gloss polish has been applied in the production itself. "Blake," an opera with music by H. Leslie Adams, a Cleveland composer, and a libretto by Daniel Mayers, dean of humanities at Brooklyn College, is an exception. For two years now, the work has been given in-progress performances at Cleveland-area locations. The latest preview, and the most elaborate thus far, was offered Thursday night at the Cleveland Play House's Bolton Theater under the sponsorship of the Play House and Karamu House.

About an hour's worth of the "Blake" score was presented by a cast of American singers,

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including Metropolitan Opera soprano Veronica Tyler and the event was telecast live on WVIZ-Ch. 25.

The four-act opera reportedly is complete except for the orchestration, and it is set to be given its formal premiere at some future date.

At this preview, two pianos served as the

orchestra, and the chorus contained a dozen voices. Twenty-four of the opera's numbers were performed, three-quarters of them from the first act.

"Blake," based upon a 19th century novel by Martin R. Delany, recounts the story of a slave who, on the eve of the Civil War, resolves to lead his people out of bondage and to a life of dignity. The libretto presents Blake's quest against a background of intrigues involving the slave's evil master and the separation of Blake and his wife, Miranda, who is given away as a gift.

There is no way, of course to know what kind of impact "Blake" will make once all its pieces are put together and placed onstage. Yet this preview suggested a touching and noble work may result.

Adams' score blends indigenous American ideas with Romantic operatic conventions. Rhythms are bright and often syncopated, and the melodies are freshly lyrical. There are arias, duets, trios and stirring choruses, including a final ensemble that soars exultantly in gospel style.

The score is tied together by a bold, insistent theme that depicts Blake's rebellious spirit. When this phrase suddenly reappears in; "Enough! The Time Has Come" (in Act II) and "Free! Free!" (at the end of Act IV), it exerts a powerful human force.

Among the excerpted highlights were a lovely lullaby for Miranda ("Hush Sweet Baby Chile"), a grand-opera bass aria ("Our Losses Will Be Great") for the hateful plantation owner, and a love duet for Blake and Miranda that is sung twice, both times amidst dire circumstances .

The performance Thursday was given in concert dress, with the principal singers standing before music stands and only suggesting any drama by means of facial expressions. Judith Layng was credited with the stage direction and William Appling conducted. The pianists were Diane Marazzi and Lyubov Beninzon.

The title role was sung by Paul Spencer Adkins, who gave a passionate account of his music, yet whose tenor tended to sound slightly reedy and lacking the heroic quality that a man

of Blake's courage and determination would seem to demand.

Miss Tyler, on the other hand, was ideally cast as Miranda. It's been more than two decades since this soprano made headlines by winning a silver medal at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, and her voice remains an imposing, opulent instrument. She sang lustroously, especially in the lullaby, which ends with a sustained, softly-held high note.

As Major Stevens, the plantation owner, Stephen Saxon delivered his big aria robustly but tended to over sing in ensemble passages. Blake's friends were portrayed by Irwin Reese, a baritone with a ringing voice, and Herbert Perry, whose tenor is small, but attractive.

Jane Vernon sang rather roughly as Isabella, the judge's wife who takes Miranda away as a gift. Kathleen Orr was fine as Stevens' wife, who turns out to be Miranda's half-sister. Gerald Crawford sang well as the judge.

The chorus did its best to convey the slaves' hopes and dreams, but a much larger ensemble obviously will be needed to bring out the full grandeur of the choral music.

For that matter, time will have to pass before anyone--including the creators themselves---finds out

whether "Blake" functions as a cogent piece of musical theatre. These appetizers proved tantalizing enough, however, to make the main course an eagerly awaited event.