

MUSIC REVIEW

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Choirs keep MLK's dream alive in song

By Linda Laban, Globe Correspondent | January 23, 2008

Nearly 100 children and teenagers from the Boston Children's Chorus and Chicago Children's Choir lined up onstage at Jordan Hall Monday, each wearing a red blazer and black pants. On cue, television cameras were in action and a glorious harmonic murmur rolled out.

Backed by only two tabla players, the fifth annual Martin Luther King Jr. concert, which was televised live on WCVB-TV (Channel 5), began with the hypnotic South African folk song "Tshotsholoza."

The choir then split, leaving some of the Chicago singers to perform a haunting a cappella rendition of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." Though somber, this version of the song - about racially motivated lynching - lost the pained mourning captured in Holiday's bluesy paean; but then, she had witnessed that strange fruit firsthand.

There were plenty of pauses for serious thought during this Martin Luther King Jr. Day memorial celebration, which the delightful host, ABC News anchor Ron Claiborne, said was not just about honoring a great African-American, but about "honoring a great human being." Governor Deval Patrick and Mayor Thomas Menino were in the audience, adding a poignant political presence.

The atmosphere was somber as the BCC debuted a new work, "Dreams," which transcribed the words of African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar into a hard, staccato choral piece accompanied by piano. More traditional devotional songs had elements of Southern spirituals and European baroque and were backed at various points by a band, horn and string sections, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra's principal harpist, Ann Hobson Pilot.

The celebration brightened when several dancers from Boston Arts Academy mixed interpretive and traditional Indian dance in the sassy "Dravidian Dithyramb" and in a medley of Stax Records soul and funk, which celebrated what Claiborne said was "the first racially integrated studio."

The concert's theme of "Remembering Yesterday, Inspiring Tomorrow" was underscored by several testimonials from people old enough to remember yesterday. One, however, was not. Nine-year-old Christina Yee said that she attended an ethnically mixed school and that she was living King's dream of a unified, multiracial society.

King's mentor, Gandhi, so profoundly said, "Be the change you seek in your world." Singing about unity together seemed a good start. But only a start. ■

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