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The South Shoe Opera Company: Devoted, charming and exciting range of singers

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What do you do if you have a hankering to perform rock music? Well, you could get together with a few like-minded pals and practice in the garage or maybe your parents' basement. You could perform for free in your backyard or someone's barbecue and show up for amateur night at bars and clubs. Play at weddings and anniversary parties. If you are very good and extremely lucky you might even make a living of it. But even the mediocre can amuse themselves for years in a group with no real prospects while they slake their thirst for music.

But what do you do if you have a hankering to perform opera? There aren't many garage opera companies. In fact, even in large cities the number of opera venues is pretty limited. And what if you're an African American singer? Aren't your chances even more limited?

Dr. Marvin Lynn, who has a doctorate in education from UCLA and teaches at UIC, decided to do something about it and his vision was much bigger than a basement. Less than two years ago he founded the South Shore Opera Company and already they regularly perform before hundreds of people in the South Shore Cultural Center (SSCC).

On the last Saturday in June at the Robeson Theater in the SSCC the South Shore Opera Company put on "A Summer Night at the Opera." What makes this group so charming and so exciting is that they gather together not only older, experienced singers but young hopefuls as well as a few folks who've traded in other careers in order to devote their life to opera.

In an interview a few days before the performance, Lynn explained that some Black singers, even though trained and talented, feel "locked out of the system." But at the South Shore Cultural Center, the stage was theirs and they made the most of it. A well-chosen set of staged excerpts from popular operas proved that Lynn's idea is a winner.

The festivities opened with a duet from Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers." This opera is short on extended musical ideas and has a plot that is ridiculous even by opera standards. But "Au fond du temple saint" is one of the great moments in opera and was a fitting way to kick things off. With Lynn taking the baritone and Sean Harris singing tenor, this duet pledging friendship and loyalty had the oomph to create a lump in your throat.

The quartet from Verdi's "Rigoletto," "Un di se ben rammentomi ... Bella Figlia," showed Kimberly Jones as Gilda to marvelous effect. Her sterling soprano – full, controlled, and gleaming – rushed through the room, grabbed you and never let you go. Also notable was the South Shore Opera Company's music director. Cornelius Johnson offered a sly portrayal of the Duke.

The Act II finale of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro," was a glorious romp. Standouts included soprano Qiana McNary, whose polished singing created an engaging Countess; Arthur D. Griffin Jr. who displayed a wonderful rumbling bass for the befuddled Bartolo; a humorous Marcellina in Shanka Falls and a well-acted Count created by Lynn.

Dana Campbell made for a magnificent Carmen, in three excerpts from Bizet's most famous opera. Her smoky, sultry voice was expertly deployed and her nimble dancing and flirting created the character in full. She was ably assisted by Pamela Spann as Frasquita and Bernadette Garza as Mercedes.

One of the moments that brought home to me the genius of the South Shore Opera Company was the famous aria "Vissi D'arte" from Puccini's "Tosca" sung by Michelle Woods. She's a young soprano (and a graduate of our own Kenwood Academy) with a big voice. While she was a little unsteady in her diction and phrasing, these are things that will come with experience. What was so exciting was her power and enthusiasm, coupled with a beautiful voice able to express subtlety of emotion.

The concert closed with "A Real Slow Drag" from Scott Joplin's "Treemonisha." A complete performance of the opera is on Lynn's Wish List, and this tiny excerpt showed that it's a work worth championing. The dancing, lilting music was still buffeting around my brain hours later, always making me smile and remembering a splendid summer night at the opera.

To learn more about the South Shore Opera Company, or its benefit gala on Oct. 23 featuring highlight from "Porgy and Bess," visit SouthShoreOpera.org.