

McFerrin, Shirley, Warfield in concert

by Kathy Wolfe

The effort to establish a "National Conservatory of Music Movement" in honor of America's premier singer Marian Anderson was begun with a concert at the Rankin Memorial Chapel of Howard University on May 27. It featured four of the nation's leading African-American artists performing a unique combination of African-American spirituals, German lieder, oratorio, and opera at the "Verdi" or "scientific" pitch of middle C=256 Hz.

The concert was, as featured Metropolitan Opera tenor George Shirley said of the repertoire at the conference the next day, "both spiritual and Classical."

Former Metropolitan Opera baritone Robert McFerrin, who in 1955 was the first black male artist to perform at the Metropolitan Opera after Miss Anderson paved the way that year, was in particularly fine voice, as several standing ovations attested.

The other featured soloists were baritone William Warfield, renowned concert artist and immediate past president of the National Association of Negro Musicians (1985-90); Sylvia Olden Lee, pianist and vocal coach, and the first black professional musician at the Metropolitan Opera; Howard University performance chairman and pianist Raymond Jackson; mezzosoprano Kehembe (Valerie Eichelberger), head of the Howard University voice department; and soprano Detra Battle, who won the 1993 D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities Mayor's Award for Outstanding Emerging Artists.

"This is an honor for the chapel," said Dr. Bernard Richardson, Dean of Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel, in his opening remarks, "because once again we've become part of history. This movement is a significant movement, and I want to commend the Schiller Institute for keeping your dream alive, that young people will benefit from this talent, history, and so much more as a result of the work you have done. God bless you." Howard University is one of America's top African-American colleges, and Rankin Chapel has been the scene of some of the outstanding milestones in the history of black American education.

Mrs. Olden Lee, who, as master of ceremonies Dennis Speed noted, "teaches only the best," opened the singing by leading the audience in a rousing version of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the Negro national anthem.

Detra Battle, one of Washington's leading upcoming sopranos, opened the solo portion with the first movement of

J.S. Bach's Cantata No. 51, "Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen" ("Praise God, All Ye Nations"). Miss Battle sings with great joy no matter the repertoire, be it florid Bach, the languid Mozart of "Ach, ich fühl's" from *The Magic Flute*, which followed, or Brahms lieder ("Meine Liebe ist grün"). In Brahms, she showed the makings of an expert lieder singer.

Especially fine were the singing tones of Clarence Mitchell II, soloist of the U.S. Air Force Band, on the obbligato cornet in the Bach aria.

Mezzosoprano Kehembe and pianist Raymond Jackson followed with several selections. Her rendition of "He Was Despiséd" from Handel's *Messiah* was particularly remarkable. Few singers are capable of performing this extended *da capo* work at such a slow and dignified pace.

Qualities of voice

George Shirley joined them for a duet from the *Messiah*, and Mr. Shirley and Dr. Jackson then offered Schubert's monumental "Die Allmacht" and the spiritual "Lit'l Boy" in the arrangement by the great tenor Roland Hayes, who had been the original inspiration for Marian Anderson. Every time Mr. Shirley sings "Lit'l Boy," he recomposes it anew. At each repeat, as he asks of the Christ child, "How old are you?" he creates so many distinct qualities of voice that the eternal nature of the question is really brought home.

Mr. Jackson opened the second half with Schubert's piano Impromptu in G-flat major, played with the delicacy and



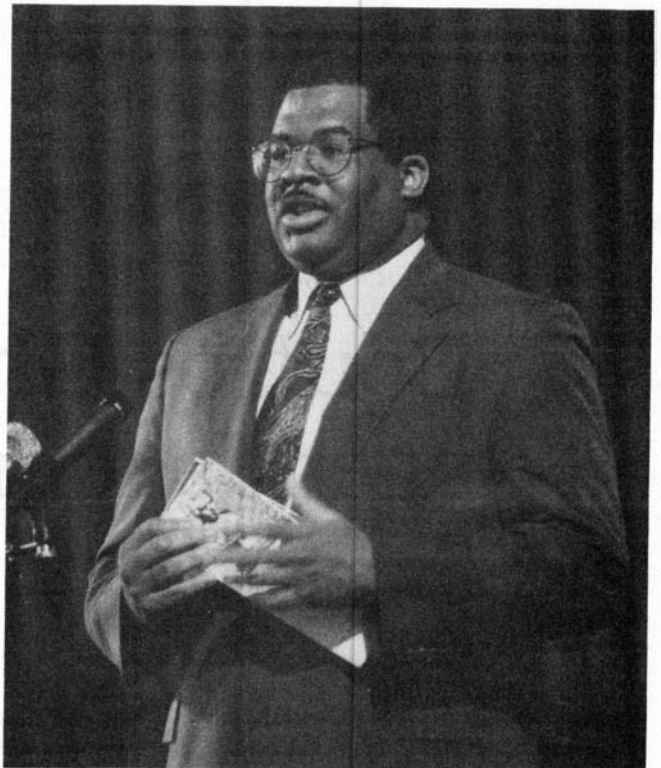
Mezzosoprano Kehembe (Valerie Eichelberger).

grace of phrasing which Washington audiences have come to expect of him.

Dr. Warfield and Mrs. Olden Lee then took to the stage to present Schubert's beloved "Erlkönig" ("The Elf-King"), W.A. Fisher's "Goin' Home" from Antonin Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, and a selection of Negro spirituals. Judging from his facial gestures and acting alone, it is evident that Dr. Warfield is one of America's most beloved concert singers. Of the four "characters" in the Erlkönig—the narrator, the father, the child, and the elf-king—he brought out every distinct nuance of expression, idea, and voicing. Considering how rapidly the singer is forced to shift from one character to another, his change of expression and complete change of face was close to miraculous. Mrs. Olden Lee's piano voicing of this, one of the most difficult of all lied accompaniments, was no less than demonic at all the right places.

In conclusion, the audience heard baritone Robert McFerrin, Mrs. Olden Lee, and Clarence Mitchell, with "The Trumpet Shall Sound" from the *Messiah*, "Cortegiani, vil razza" from Verdi's *Rigoletto*, and spirituals arranged by Mr. McFerrin's dear friend Hall Johnson. "O Glory" was especially powerful.

All the performers and the audience were pleased to conclude with a joint singing of Margaret Bond's "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" which, after a concert such as this, we were sure He does.



Dr. Bernard Richardson, dean of the Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel where the conference and concert were held, delivered official greetings and praised the Schiller Institute's efforts.



At the concert's conclusion, all soloists joined in singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Left to right: Rev. James Cokley, Detra Battle, Kehembe (Valerie Eichelberger), William Warfield, Robert McFerrin.