

# Sims opens Community Concerts with rousing recital

**A musical review by Judith Musafia**

On Sunday evening, Sept. 16, the 53rd season of the Community Concert Series started with a bang at Delta Middle School, with a rousing solo recital by Robert Sims, lyric baritone, from Chicago.

He began with the American political favorite, "God Bless America," sung not as a Broadway tune but as a calm and supplicating prayer. He proceeded to then win his audience with everything that came out of his mouth.

The man sings like an angel, a devil, and everything in between, as required. He has a voice that is mellifluous, flexible, powerful, and wide of range. He is extremely well trained in the genre of classical song.

But most of all, he has heart. He sang everything — lots of spirituals, a bunch of Broadway theater songs, a series of Aaron Copland's Old American songs, and a whole raft of religious songs — with the ultimate in artistry, conviction and musical taste.

The audience was not large, and was rather spread out, but Mr. Sims overcame this disadvantage to an artist with a style of communication that was enthusiastic, highly energized, well focused, totally authentic and sincere. He addressed the audience from his genuine spiritual con-

viction with both words and music.

He knows how to wring a phrase for every bit of juice it has, so that songs — from "Try to Remember" (Harvey Schmidt) to "Steal Away" — had the audience in the palm of his hand. So much so that I had never heard an auditorium so quiet during a performance. At the end of the recital he was rewarded with a well-deserved standing ovation.

He looks so young, but he has a lot of varied musical experience under his belt, everything from opera and art songs to Broadway. He projects the kind of innocence that comes from a thorough religious background, but can belt out "O! Man River" with a style highly reminiscent of the late Paul Robeson, who made the song famous. After recent national events, a recital of strictly but richly American music was just what the doctor ordered.

And because of recent events, Sims' East Coast accompanist couldn't actually make it to the concert, so Mesa State's resident piano genius Michael Baron was a graceful, cool and collected pinch-hitter, accompanying at the piano having received the music an hour and a half before the performance. One would not have known that Baron was reading from reduced orchestral scores, and scored marked up with personal changes by the

artist, since nary a clinker was heard from his direction. He played rather softly and conservatively, as might be expected under the circumstances, but was totally undér the circumstances, but was totally with Mr. Sims on everything he did, and was fully supportive in every way. As with Mr. Sims, not a phrase issued from Baron that was not artfully interpreted, although seen and then played for the first time.

For his part, Sims gave Baron every opportunity to follow him, with his impeccably clear interpretations. Baron later quipped, "I really liked all his well-expanded phrases; it gave me time to see what was coming up next in the piano score."

Every listener will have their memorable highlights of this recital. Mine include "O! Man River," "The Sound of Music," "Simple Gifts," and "I got Plenty O' Nuttin."

The elements of the American spiritual continue to give contemporary composers and arrangers fertile ground for personal expression and arrangement. One song cycle on the program, arranged by Roland Hayes (1887-1976) was a case in point. Entitled "The Life of Christ," it contained the song "He Never Said a Mumberlin Word," which was the most eloquent expression of the crucifixion this listener has heard.

While Sims is a lyric baritone and not a bass, his recital gave one the opportunity to revisit, in memory, the musical and spiritual greatness of Paul Robeson. Sims suffers not at all from this kind of comparison, as he has all the musical and spiritual components for enduring artistic greatness, in his own unique expression.