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Music Review/by Kitty Montgomery

Singer sings like a mighty river—with power, flow

BASS BARITONE Charles Mays Jr. is a young man on a journey just begun.

Winner of the Metropolitan Opera's 2004 New England Regional auditions, and a finalist at Lincoln Center, he's headed off to Egypt this September to perform a major role, before he circles back to the Hartt School, where he pursues a doctorate in vocal performance.

Meatime, he tripped down to Woodstock to collaborate with pianist composer Larry Allen Smith in the final concert of the Woodstock Fringe's American Songfest, titled "I've Known Rivers."

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR and composer in residence at the festival, Smith encountered Mays in a course he teaches at Hartt on Nadia Boulanger, whom he studied with in Paris. A working composer who performs and conducts his music around the globe, Smith has inspired students at the Juilliard School, the Boston Conservatory and served Hartt as its Dean for several lucky years, before backing off to his present post as composition professor. Not the least of what he's been up to, in a lifetime of music making which the above scarcely touches, is a marriage to pianist Marguerita Oundjian of a dynasty that boast her fiddling brother, Peter, currently an international conductor. Oundjian-Smith appeared as pianist in the Songfest's opening presentation—"Viva la boulangerie."

Perhaps the program title of the Mays-Smith concert was drawn from composer Howard Swanson's profoundly beautiful setting of the Langston Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," or H.T. Burleigh's arrangement of "Deep River," included at this performance. It seems suited to the singer himself, whose gift is "might like a river" in its power and flow, and

surely carries his life's destiny. Wherever Mays's passing presence graces an audience, sitting by the wayside like some fixed river town, they will know a joyous flood, not just of grand stentorian tone, but of human spirit.

POET'S make a case for the spoken word.

Hear Mays telling Samuel Barber's musical illumination of James Steven's Daisies," A.E. Housman's "With" rues my heart is laden, and another Steven's poem, Bessie Bobtail, and you'll know the only way to share poetry is with song. Provided the singing sharer has this man's capacity to envelope heart and soul like ambient atmosphere with tone where beauty and tenderness fuse as one. Mays' compassion suffused the bitterest lyrics of Bessie Bobtail, swelling profound, in Hughes' magnificent "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

Pianist and singer had a blast with Copland's Old American Songs, excepting "The Little Horses" lullaby, sung with a sweetness that spul a prayer wrap of safe keeping around us all. Smith is a man who lives the sentiments of the songs he plays, adding an empathetic dimension to Mays' set of spirituals. The duo performed Smith's three-part cycle, based on Jeffrey Evens' poem "Forever the Token." And Smith reached back among his piano compositions to paint storm, mighty bird and sunny break-through, ina work inspired by a cookie, titled "Fortune."

No question, in his mid-20s, Mays is destined to play great houses in lead roles, swept along by his magnificent instrument. Through his coming career, we hope he finds time for more poetry sharing—let's don't call it Lieder singing—and let the intimate side of his soul shine out for those of us on the wayside, in his wake.