

Weekend Review

OPERA: Doss Shines As 'Malcolm X' Lead

What listeners thought of the concert version of Anthony Davis' opera, "X, the Life and Times of Malcolm X," may have depended on where they sat Saturday afternoon in Orchestra Hall.

Excerpts from the opera kicked off Chicago Humanities Festival III, a two-day event organized by the Illinois Humanities Council. The schedule included a keynote address Sunday morning by writer John Updike and programs at locations ranging from the Newberry Library to the Field Museum. "X," performed by about 35 members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a small choir of singers from the Chicago Symphony and Kennedy-King Community choruses, and vocal soloists, was repeated Sunday afternoon. Michael Morgan, CSO assistant conductor, conducted.

For the first half of "X," the entire Act I, I sat toward the rear under the overhang of the next level's box seats—an acoustical weak spot in Orchestra Hall. The chorus sounded weak, often overpowered by the orchestra, the libretto's tiny print was all but unreadable in the dim light, and the soloists sounded harsh at times and weak at others. When I moved out of the overhang's shadow, the sound improved somewhat and the libretto was readable.

The opera had its world premiere in 1986 at the New York City Opera, and it may be a work that needs to be fully staged to have maximum impact. Davis blends classical music idioms such as wide-leaping, unsettled melodies and harsh, dissonant chords with the rhythms and colors of

jazz and blues. The blend is easy and uncontrived, but the orchestra's repetitive patterns began to sound thin after a while. Limited rehearsal time probably dictated that Davis play the lengthy overture himself on piano, but it limited the opera's initial impact.

The libretto, written by Davis' cousin, poet Thulani Davis, was well-crafted. It opens with the killing of young Malcolm's father in the South, moves on to the young man's life as a hustler on the streets of New York and eventually covers his conversion and rise in the Nation of Islam.

The afternoon's vocal standout was Mark S. Doss, a member of the original cast, who sang Malcolm. With his penetrating but not too booming baritone, his clear enunciation and dignified presence, he helped a lackluster Act I close on a polished note. His Act I aria, with its concluding line to white interrogators, "You want the truth, but you don't want to know," was memorable.

Also notable among the singers were William Moize as Street and Elijah and Kevin G. Deas as Reginald. Moize sang with a loose, jazzy ease as the hustling Street, but his light tenor took on an otherworldly glow in Elijah's music. As Malcolm's brother, Reginald, Deas met Doss with an equally strong, eloquent voice.

Davis has written some compelling passages for the chorus, expressing the outrage of Southern blacks, urban prisoners and Elijah's followers. But the 50-voice chorus of men and women was simply too small to be effective.

Wynne Delacoma