
KATHLEEN BATTLE

Soprano

Season 2009-2010

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Program Biography

Soprano Kathleen Battle's luminous voice has been called "...without qualification, one of the very few most beautiful in the world" (The Washington Post). Yet beyond the glory of her singing, in a career filled with countless accolades, honors and major milestones, what has perhaps distinguished her most is her almost magical ability to create an unwavering emotional bond between herself, her music and her audience.

In her youth, this native of Portsmouth, Ohio, the youngest of seven children, sang in church and school, and envisioned a future as a music teacher. Fortunately for audiences around the world, she found other ways to share her love of music—and through her natural gifts, innate intelligence, and hard work, her soaring voice has carried her to the heights of the classical music world. Indeed, throughout a remarkable career that has brought her to the stages of the world's leading opera houses and major concert halls, critics have never tired of rhapsodizing over her limpid, unmistakable sound. In quite poetic terms, they have compared it to "the ethereal beauty of winter moonlight" (The Washington Post), "a paradoxical meeting of earth and sky" (Philadelphia Inquirer), and "cream from a miraculous, bottomless pitcher" (The New York Times).

The range of Miss Battle's repertoire spans three centuries from the Baroque era to contemporary works. She has enjoyed some of her greatest successes in the opera house in repertoire ranging from Handel (Cleopatra in the Metropolitan Opera's premiere staging of *Giulio Cesare*) to Richard Strauss (Sophie, Zdenka, Zerbinetta). For her Covent Garden debut as Zerbinetta in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Miss Battle became the first American to be honored with a Laurence Olivier Award for Best Performance in a New Opera Production. She has similarly distinguished herself as one of our generation's finest interpreters of Mozart (Susanna, Despina, Pamina, and Zerlina), as well as the bel canto operas of Rossini (*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*) and Donizetti (*L'Elisir d'Amore*, *Don Pasquale*, *La Fille du Regiment*). In the words of critic Tim Page, "Miss Battle's natural territory is music of sweetness, serenity, and girlish ecstasy. Within this repertoire she is all but unequalled."

In recital, Kathleen Battle has mesmerized audiences around the globe with her unique artistry and vocal beauty. Of her Carnegie Hall recital debut, New York *Newsday* declared, "In an age when the vocal recital has practically gone the way of the dinosaur, this was a thrilling case for its return." For the CD of this recital, released on DG, Miss Battle received one of three Grammy Awards for Best Classical Vocal Soloist. The Australian echoed the sentiment of critics around the world, saying, "The Sydney Opera House has played host to any number of great singers...but it's unlikely there has ever been (or perhaps ever will be) a performance to match the recital American soprano Kathleen Battle gave."

Kathleen Battle's gifts as a singer extend beyond the realm of classical music. Her work as a great interpreter of spirituals is documented on a joint recital with Jessye Norman, *Spirituals in Concert* (DG). Her pure emotional power in this music of joy and sorrow cuts through all cultural boundaries. As the Vienna *Kurier* put it, "Kathleen Battle sang so beautifully in the spiritual 'Heaven is one beautiful place,' she came pretty close to heaven."

Miss Battle drew considerable attention with the world premiere of *Honey and Rue*, a song cycle with music by Oscar and Grammy-winner composer André Previn and lyrics by Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, commissioned for Miss Battle by Carnegie Hall on the event of their 100th anniversary. Since then, she has performed the work with leading orchestras and in recital throughout the world. The Los Angeles *Times* called her performance of this work "spellbinding,"

while the Cincinnati Herald remarked, “her voice was like the ebb and flow of the seas as an almost sacred silence enclosed the auditorium.” The recording of this cycle was released by DG, on a disc which also includes Barber’s Knoxville: Summer of 1915 and arias from Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess.

Always seeking to expand her artistic horizons, Miss Battle was joined by leading jazz musicians for her first crossover album, *So Many Stars* (Sony Classical), a collection of lullabies, spirituals, and folksongs. Commenting on her extraordinary gifts as a jazz artist, *The Detroit News* noted, “When Battle and her core jazz trio held the stage, the musical splendor was almost more than the ear could take in.”

Since her student years, Kathleen Battle has collaborated with colleagues who rank among the world’s most talented musicians. She has been a favorite soloist with the world’s leading orchestras and esteemed conductors such as Herbert von Karajan, Riccardo Muti, Seiji Ozawa, Leonard Slatkin, André Previn, Claudio Abbado, Sir Georg Solti, James Levine, Lorin Maazel, and Sir Neville Marriner. Her partnerships with soprano Jessye Norman, tenors Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo, violinist Itzhak Perlman, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, guitarist Christopher Parkening, flautists Jean-Pierre Rampal and Hubert Laws, and the late saxophonist Grover Washington, Jr., to name but a few, are documented on numerous recordings and video discs.

Kathleen Battle has established herself as a distinguished recording artist through a wide range of releases encompassing complete opera, concert, choral and solo albums on all major labels. Memorable concerts recorded live and now available on CD and home video include Mozart’s Coronation Mass from the Vatican and the 1987 New Year’s Concert, both with Herbert von Karajan conducting; the CDs are on the DG label with the video versions on Sony. Her performance of the title role in the DG recording of Handel’s *Semele*, with Marilyn Horne, Samuel Ramey, and John Nelson conducting, earned Miss Battle a fifth Grammy Award. This recording commemorates a now legendary concert performance of Handel’s masterpiece, starring Miss Battle and virtually the same cast as the recording, which created such a sensation that Carnegie Hall recognized it as one of its one hundred milestones during its centennial year.

Kathleen Battle has made immeasurable contributions as an ambassador for classical music, performing for Presidents and dignitaries, and attracting diverse new audiences through television broadcasts of her operas and concerts, as well as through appearances on popular network talk shows. Her performance on the PBS broadcast of the Metropolitan Opera’s 1991 season opening gala won her an Emmy for Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Classical Program on Television. A documentary film on the recording of Sony’s Baroque Duet album with Wynton Marsalis and John Nelson conducting the Orchestra of St. Luke’s was nominated for an Emmy. Miss Battle’s critically acclaimed “Metropolitan Opera Presents” performances of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, Donizetti’s *L’Elisir d’Amore*, and Rossini’s *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* are available on DG VHS and DVD, while Sony has captured her Zerlina in Karajan’s production of *Don Giovanni* at the Salzburg Festival as well.

Praised for the keen intelligence which informs her musical sensitivity, Kathleen Battle earned both her Bachelor and Master degrees from the College Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati. She has been awarded seven honorary doctoral degrees—from her Alma Mater, the University of Cincinnati; Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey; Ohio University; Xavier University in Cincinnati; Amherst College; Seton Hall University, Wilberforce University, and the Manhattanville College. In honor of her outstanding artistic achievements, Miss Battle was inducted into the “NAACP Image Award Hall of Fame”, and in 2002 into the “Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame”. She is the first recipient of the “Ray Charles Award” bestowed upon her by Wilberforce University. Heady accomplishments indeed for an artist whose earliest connection to music was simply feeling “blessed to have a voice that somebody else wanted to hear.”

-- Alex Wang