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Playing Langston Hughes's Jazzy Verse

By STEVE SMITH

Among the challenges confronting any composer intent on setting to music "Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz," a set of poems completed by [Langston Hughes](#) in 1961, probably the most daunting is that Hughes already called the tunes. His dazzling poems, by turns earnest, raffish and folksy, bulge with references to famous musicians and familiar sounds. Alongside verse set entirely in capital letters, Hughes provided detailed musical cues, some referring to specific songs or instruments, others pointing to general modes and tones.

Hughes, who began the work while attending the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival, reportedly planned to create a musical version with the jazz bassist and composer [Charles Mingus](#), among others, but died before seeing it through.

In "Ask Your Mama!," a new setting presented to a capacity audience at [Carnegie Hall](#) on Monday night as part of the soprano [Jessye Norman](#)'s Honor! series, Laura Karpman, the composer, took Hughes's indications at face value.

In a program note, Ms. Karpman, primarily active as a composer for television, film and video games, likened the process of setting Hughes's text to "working with a brilliant, erudite 'director.' "

In a sense, her approach seemed akin to that of a cinematographer, selecting the proper tools to implement Hughes's instructions. When the text called for a flute or maracas, she provided them. Where Hughes stipulated "When the Saints Go Marching In," you heard it.

Ms. Karpman's primary narrator was Hughes himself, his dry, refined, recorded speech summoned with a sampling keyboard. Another sampler controlled recordings of [Leontyne Price](#), [Charlie Parker](#), [Bo Diddley](#) and other luminaries cited in the text, and of Ms. Norman herself.

Hughes never specified a jazz group; Ms. Karpman deployed a sizable orchestra, abetted by the drummer Questlove (Ahmir Thompson) from [the Roots](#), the hip-hop group. Verses not narrated by Hughes were divided among four vocalists: Ms. Norman; Tracie Luck, a mezzo-soprano; de'Adre Aziza, an actress and jazz singer; and the Roots rapper Black Thought (Tarik Trotter).

Ms. Karpman's music, melding Ivesian collage with club-culture remixing, morphed from one vivid section to the next in a dreamlike flow, with repeated phrases and motifs lending a strand of continuity. Compounding the overall density was a steady stream of vintage film clips and fuzzy abstractions fashioned by Kate Howard, a video artist. Rico Gatson, another video artist, gave one section ("Is It True?") a refreshingly spare clarity.

The barrage of sensations could be overwhelming, and not everything worked; a combination of musical and visual clichés in "Gospel Cha-Cha" lapsed into kitsch. Moreover, anyone acquainted with Mr. Thompson's mighty prowess knew he was sorely underutilized.

Still, it was hard not to be impressed by the audacity of Ms. Karpman's undertaking, and there were genuinely striking passages throughout. The [Orchestra of St. Luke's](#) exceeded its usual high standard for versatility; George Manahan, the conductor, did an outstanding job of keeping everything in sync.

The vocalists performed with copious spirit and style, Ms. Norman in particular tapping into seemingly bottomless reserves of eloquence and soul. Wayward and literal-minded as "Ask Your Mama!" might be, Ms. Norman's personal magnetism went a long way toward making it stick. The audience thundered its approval.