



THE NEWS/RODRIGO OROPEZA

Camellia Johnson is the featured soloist in Richard Strauss' "Four Last Songs" with the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional.

U.S. vocalist to sing with Nat'l Orchestra

BY JIM JOHNSTON
Special to The News

The Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional presents its second program of the year this weekend, featuring "Caminos" by Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas, "Symphony no. 6" by Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev, and "The Four Last Songs" by German composer Richard Strauss. U.S. soprano Camellia Johnson is the featured soloist in the Strauss work.

"The Four Last Songs" for soprano and orchestra, written in 1948, are among the final works of this composer. For many they are considered the most beautiful expression of the female voice in all of classical music.

Richard Strauss is best known for his operas "Salome" (1905), "Der Rosenkavalier" (1910) and the orchestral tone poem "Thus Sprach Zarathustra" (1896), which became popular as the sound track for Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

Set to three poems by Herman Hesse - entitled "Spring," "September" and "Going to Sleep" - and one by Joseph von Eichendorff - "At Sunset" - all four compositions show the aging Strauss at the peak of his artistic powers.

The poems speak of death, parting and loss, and the music is suffused with a sense of calm, acceptance and purity. Strauss' soaring melodies are at once achingly profound and soothingly simple, filled with both heartbreak and elation.

I met with Camellia Johnson at her hotel near the Zócalo to talk about the upcoming concert and her career.

She has performed around the world, including at the Metropolitan Opera, the San Francisco Opera, and the Glyndebourne Festival, singing

with such illustrious conductors as Charles Dutoit, Simon Rattle and Michael Tilson Thomas.

"I don't come from a musical family, but I can't remember not singing," she said. "I sang at church, at parties, at my mother's club meetings. It just came naturally to me."

After singing the U.S. national anthem at a high school football game, a local judge came up and offered her a scholarship to Bethune-Cookman University, an all-black college in Florida.

"I had heard the choir from that school and I was swept away by it. I dreamed of going there, and then this man comes up and makes it happen - it was like magic.

"Hearing Leontyne Price sing live inspired me greatly, as did another great, but lesser known African-American singer, Joyce Bryant. For anyone curious about music, I say go hear it live! It's the only way to really understand what it's all about."

She later attended the Manhattan School of Music, where she sang as an alto, but was soon encouraged to sing soprano roles.

She made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1989 in "Porgy and Bess" and sang "Aida" with the Michigan Opera. But she prefers concerts and recitals to opera and frequently sings in such works as Beethoven's 9th Symphony and the Verdi Requiem.

"The Four Last Songs' was one of the first things I learned, and I've sung it so many times I can't remember. The beauty of that music is endless, and I love the challenge of working with new conductors.

"I couldn't imagine any other life than being a singer," she said. "It's a gift, even though it requires a lot of work."

Being a professional singer means

PROGRAM INFO

Don't miss the renowned singer perform this weekend in the D.F.

Camellia Johnson sings with the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional at 8 p.m. today and at 12:15 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 1, at the Teatro Hidalgo, Avenida Hidalgo #23, Centro Histórico (behind the Palacio de Bellas Artes). Tickets are 100 pesos, available at the box offices of the Teatro Hidalgo and the Palacio de Bellas Artes. There is a 50 percent discount for accredited students and teachers.

The Web site for the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional is www.osn.bellasartes.org.mx.

always taking care of yourself, and she regrets that she won't get to see much of Mexico City as a tourist.

"I can't afford to go out and get a cold, and just getting used to the altitude here is a job in itself!

"There are 107 instruments playing in the orchestra behind me in those Strauss songs. It takes a lot of force and preparation to sing this music, but it's so worth it."

After discussing music, I asked her what she thought about the new U.S. president, and her face lit up.

"I spoke to my 88-year old mother on Obama's inauguration day. She was watching TV, and suddenly she became silent. The emotion was just too much.

"There's a universal sense of hope out there like nothing I've seen in my life."