

**Joy, hope, incredible talent
King tribute full of emotional, spiritual highs; 10-year-old Upshaw's
opener stunning
By STEPHEN COOKE**

"If ever there was a time when we needed peace, it's now."

Nova Scotia Mass Choir president Sandra Slawter was emphatic in underlining the theme of the ensemble's annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. tribute concert at Rebecca Cohn Auditorium in Halifax on Saturday. But there was little that was peaceful about a concert that frequently had the packed audience on its feet, swaying to the music and applauding the homegrown talent that joined the East Coast choral institution to deliver a series of knockout performances.

Serenity is not a word you would use to describe the feeling inside the Cohn, although it may have come afterwards with further contemplation of King's message, replayed in video form from his speech on the steps of Washington, D.C.'s, Lincoln Memorial 50 years ago. And that was one of the quieter moments in an evening full of emotional and spiritual highs.

The bar was set high from the start, with 10-year-old Jody Upshaw performing a gospelized rendition of Over the Rainbow, to images of the civil rights struggle from Birmingham to Beijing. Upshaw gave it her all in an unbelievable performance even Judy Garland couldn't have imagined, earning the first of the evening's standing ovations, and we were only one song into the concert.

The key thread through it all was, of course, the choir itself; 40 voices strong giving forth upbeat songs of praise with the backing of drummer Gary Steed, Danny Parker on bass, guitarist Luke Arsenault and keyboardists Ross Billard and Kim Dunn. Out in front, musical director Marko Simmonds was part conductor, part cheerleader and part physical trainer, putting the singers through their paces but also having a wicked time doing it, eventually getting a couple of solo spots himself.

But Simmonds was also careful not to steal focus. The quietest moment of the evening came when an a cappella quintet of choir members paid tribute to last year's losses of Halifax activist Dr. Burnley (Rocky) Jones and South African leader Nelson Mandela with Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika (Lord Bless Africa), a song of freedom adapted into the South African national anthem after the end of apartheid.

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Their harmonies took on a rough-hewn quality that may not bear the stamp of choral perfection but were perfect for this song of triumph.

Sudanese-Egyptian singer and spoken word artist Verena Rizg brought strength to her performance of a poem called Peace and her acoustic song Walk in Love. The two complemented each other, with the former clear and confident, the latter warm and engaging, inspired by parents who went to great lengths to ensure that no one in their household ever went to bed angry.

Another young talent whose name is rapidly becoming better known is Reeny Smith, who first appeared as part of a tribute to Rev. Dr. Donald Skeir, the preacher, teacher and community activist who passed away in 1999. Performing his favourite hymn, How Great Thou Art, Smith displayed incredible power and control, ably accompanied by Arsenault, building to an impressive crescendo while audience members stretched out their hands and cries of "Praise God!" were heard. It was impossible not to feel the spirit moving through her.

Smith also joined Preston Primos, the student jazz and Latin group led by instructor Jeff Goodspeed, but it was her sister, Mahalia, who took the spotlight here, displaying a mature huskiness in her voice on a Cuban melody, and duetting with Reeny on the gospel number Yesterday, displaying a contrast in the sisters' voices that also complemented each other, resulting in a spine-chilling experience.

The second half's King tribute ended with the choir's uptempo We Shall Overcome, bursting with joy, before Gary Beals came out like a champion with a deeply soulful rendition of Jackie Wilson's Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher that immediately had the crowd on its feet and swaying to the '60s R&B classic.

By the end of his brief set, the former Canadian Idol contender had the audience in the palm of his hand but sweetened the deal by including Simmonds and Reeny Smith in his version of R. Kelly's Peace, asking us all to wave a peace sign in the air, and wave it like we just do care.

Joined by the choir, and the rest of the performers, Beals brought the show to a close with a feeling of communal spirit that we could take out into the night and hopefully spread to those around us in the days to follow.