

"Uplifting" Community Concert performance rings to baritone

By Carol Arnold

"Uplifting" is the word which best describes last Sunday afternoon's concert in UW-Western's Beier Auditorium. From the first selection, the patriotic "Glory, Glory Hallelujah," all the way to the encore "God Bless America," Robert Sims' auditorium-filling, robust lyric-baritone voice sang to an appreciative audience of Community Concert Series ticket-holders.

Sims' childhood dream of becoming an opera singer first led him to classical voice training and music education, then on to the singing of some twenty operatic roles. More recently, he came to feel that "classical art-music is too highbrow" for many people and that he wanted to sing music that speaks on an emotional level directly to audiences.

"Spirituals are immediate and personal," Sims said. "People do not just want to be entertained in these times; they are seeking to have their spirits uplifted." And Sunday's concert did just that.

Sims sang a varied program of African American spirituals and gospel music, Broadway show tunes and other American songs. Many of these songs were arranged especially for Sims. He was sensitively accompanied by pianist Lee Koonce.

The selection "Underground Railroad Songs," a series of three offerings, spoke from a time when courageous people were seeking basic freedom at great personal risk.

Sims' song-as-story-telling style allowed the audience to understand every word of every song. His amazing vocal range also was heard--from the clear falsetto of the highest notes through the solidity of his middle range to the strength of his impressive lower octave.

After intermission, the entertaining "Broadway Theater Songs" began with an artfully intertwined

arrangement of the perennial favorite Richard Rogers tune, "The Sound of Music" with Harvey Schmidt's "Try to Remember" from "The Fantasticks."

George Gershwin's "I Got Plenty O Nuttin" from "Porgy and Bess" and Jerome Kern's "O! Man River" from the musical "Showboat" followed.

Sims' moving renditions of these songs brought to mind the memorable voices of Paul Robeson and William Warfield, respectively, and their famous versions of these songs.

Sims, in fact, has recently had the opportunity to study with William Warfield who is now eighty-two years old.

Aaron Copland's "Old American Songs" came next. Sims' singing of Copland's arrangement of the traditional Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts" was a study of tender simplicity, while his rendition of "I Bought Me a Cat" added an enjoyable measure of whimsy to the repertorial mix.

"Songs of Conviction" was the final element in the program and consisted of two moving selections. Mr. Sims shared with the audience the importance of his grandmother's love and guidance to his life and he concluded the concert with her favorite song, "Is There Anybody Here Who Loves My Jesus?"

"I feel lucky to sing music like this," Sims said, "and to be able to bring it to audiences like this."

We feel lucky, too, to have been treated to such a fine performance right here in Dillon on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, thanks to the Dillon Community Concert Association.

Season tickets for the Community Concerts 2002-2003 season, its 55th, are now on sale. Prices are \$30 for adults, \$10 for college students and \$6 for all other students. To obtain tickets, or for information, call Liane Forrester at 683-6650 or Steve Dawson at 683-6242.