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Spirited musical tribute to Octavius Catto

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Composer Uri Caine and soprano Barbara Walker perform "The Passion of Octavius Catto" at the Mann. (ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer)

By Karl Stark, Inquirer Staff Writer

POSTED: July 22, 2014

The first thing to know about composer and pianist Uri Caine is that he started young in the Philadelphia jazz scene, learning from masters like saxophonists Bootsie Barnes and the late Grover Washington Jr. Caine, now 58, went on to develop modernist classical chops and do daring reinterpretations of classical works from Wagner, Beethoven, and Bach, becoming almost a genre unto himself.

The world premiere of Caine's *The Passion of Octavius Catto* on Saturday night at the Mann Center was in some ways a summary of the composer's eclectic career as well as a celebration of an epic life.

It had the bounce of gospel, the derring-do of jazz and blues, and enough flaming dissonance to conjure up the difficulties in Catto's amazing life.

Catto, who was assassinated at age 32 on Election Day in Philadelphia in 1871, was an early Martin Luther King who taught math and Greek, campaigned for voting rights, led a successful battle to integrate the city's streetcars, and even played on and managed one of the nation's first African American baseball teams, the Pythians.

Caine, a Philadelphia native, said he was inspired by the 2010 book, *Tasting Freedom*, by Inquirer editor Daniel Biddle and former Inquirer reporter Murray Dubin.

The composer's 25-minute piece, with singer Barbara Walker, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Philadelphia Freedom Festival

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Community Choir, was delivered in 10 sections, ending with the lament of Catto's fiancée.

The amazing thing was how much life and vitality was conveyed in the music. The sold-out audience, many of whom were getting an early jump on church, exulted to the gospel-drenched importunings of "We Know No East nor West," drawn from a Catto speech on voting rights.

Gospel kept returning in the piece, raising the roof on "There Must Come a Change," drawn from another Catto speech.

From the piano, Caine used dissonance to convey the streetcar protests and Catto's very public murder, for which no one was ever convicted.

Walker, the lead singer whose voice has explained the alphabet on public television's *Sesame Street*, was magisterial at times, shouting out "Now I can ride!" on the streetcar section.

It all had the feel of a civil rights rally - part church, part civics lesson - reminding us artfully what has been earned through blood and toil. Catto, who taught at a school that would become Cheyney University, would have appreciated that.

He also would have appreciated gospel star Marvin Sapp, whose vocal pyrotechnics showcased the evening's second half. Sapp, senior pastor of the Lighthouse Full Life Center Church in Western Michigan, held forth with the orchestra and community choir on such hits as "Never Would Have Made It," from his 2007 release *Thirsty*. It made for a big, glossy coda to a spirited evening.

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