On Campus

Sing Harlem Comes to Columbia

The ten-person choir raises the roof at the Forum.

By
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It was Monday at 6:00 p.m., but to the 150 people seated in the glass-enclosed atrium of the Forum on the Manhattanville campus, it felt like Sunday morning. The high windows trembled with the good vibrations of Sing Harlem, a ten-person choir that brought serious local talent to the Forum's Music Monday series of free concerts. Led by Ahmaya Knoelle Higginson, a Harlem-born performer and educator, Sing Harlem soared through classic R&B songs ("Outstanding" by the Gap Band, "Empire State of Mind" by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys) and gospel essentials like "Down by

the Riverside," "Amazing Grace" (which had more than one listener lifting hands), and "This Little Light of Mine," during which Higginson moved through the crowd, pointing the mic toward random faces for the line *I'm gonna let it shine*. Whether there were talented vocalists in the house that night or whether the music itself had brought out everyone's inner Mahalia, everyone shone.

The choir is made up of graduates of the Mama Foundation for the Arts, a nonprofit music-education program run out of a West 126th Street brownstone that has been in Higginson's family for more than a century. Higginson and her mother, the theater producer Vy Higginsen (they use different spellings of the family name) — who cowrote *Mama, I Want to Sing!*, a musical that debuted at Harlem's Heckscher Theater in 1983 and has since been performed more than three thousand times worldwide — started the nonprofit in 1998, wanting to "preserve the history and culture of our African-American music," Higginson says. Later, to raise money, they created Mama's One Sauce, an all-purpose condiment that comes in "mild," "spicy," and "fire." It became a bestseller at the 125th Street Whole Foods, and Columbia purchased 1,200 bottles for its dining services — a connection that eventually led to the Sing Harlem gig at the Forum.

On the sauce scale of hotness, this choir is fire. The group recently appeared on *America's Got Talent* and *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, and it has a Sunday residency at chef Marcus Samuelsson's restaurant Red Rooster Harlem on Lenox Avenue.

For Higginson, performing at the Forum meant spreading the gospel of Black music throughout the neighborhood she loves. "When I look out at the faces of all the people who are sitting here tonight — you guys feel like community," she told the crowd. "So thank you for coming to experience our piece of Harlem."

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