

Music review: Angélique Kidjo holds the stage on her own

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Josh Groban, Branford Marsalis, Dianne Reeves and Ezra Koenig all appear on Angélique Kidjo's new album, "Spirit Rising." None of them were present Saturday evening when Kidjo performed at George Washington University's Lisner Auditorium — but they weren't missed. The Benin-born singer held the stage almost by herself, with some help from a phenomenal backup quartet, as well as an audience that proved even more eager to participate than Kidjo anticipated.

Leaving her homeland for France and then the United States, Kidjo has undertaken a tour of African-derived music. At Lisner, she ranged from Brazilian samba to Anglo-American rock to traditional jazz. She demonstrated the subtler aspects of her powerful voice by singing Sidney Bechet's "Petite Fleur," accompanied only by electric bass and a few hints of percussion. Most of the 85-minute set's highlights, however, came during such exuberant Afropop numbers as "Kelele" and "Tumba."

Although Kidjo and her band performed storming versions of Curtis Mayfield's "Move on Up" and the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter," little of her material is in English. (She sings in three African languages, as well as one she invented herself.) The vocalist compensated with extensive commentary that mingled the personal and the political. She commended her late father for sending his daughters to school despite social pressure not to. She also extolled education in general, the movies and cross-cultural acceptance, and called for an end to female genital mutilation.

"Sing whenever you feel like it and dance when you want," Kidjo instructed the crowd early in the show, directions that weren't immediately followed. But the atmosphere warmed over the next hour, especially when the singer (and a few handlers) took a stroll through the audience that went almost to the top of the balcony. When Kidjo asked 10 fans to dance onstage for the show's finale, she was overwhelmed by more than 50, ranging from gray-haired men to a tiara-wearing girl who looked to be about four.

The vocalist moved a little gingerly on the crowded stage, but her voice didn't falter. In fact, she seemed elated. As security guards watched nervously, Kidjo saw her vision briefly come to life: People of different worlds and colors, unified by the beat of an African drum.

http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-25/lifestyle/35447400_1_angelique-kidjo-benin-born-singer-afropop