

A Moving ‘River Journey’ With the Vocal Trio Moipei, Identical Triplets Out of Nairobi

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Moipei, a vocal trio of identical triplets from Nairobi, Kenya. Howard Melton



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“I’ve known rivers,” Langston Hughes wrote in one of his first — circa 1919 — and most famous poems, which is formally titled “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” He continues, “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.”

I kept thinking about that classic text, which is more usually known by its opening line, during the performance of Moipei at 54 Below on Monday evening. That was the most significant and relevant work that they somehow didn't include in what was a beautiful and highly moving program that used the image of the river as a metaphor for a journey to enlightenment.

Moipei is a vocal trio of identical triplets from Nairobi, Kenya, and their surname, pronounced "moy-pay," doubles as the ensemble's title. As the three young women introduce themselves, they are "Mary, the oldest and the organized one," followed by "Maggy, the middle child. Need I say more?" and finally, "Marta, the cute one."

Like many New Yorker cabaret-goers, I first experienced Moipei at the annual [Mabel Mercer Foundation convention concert in 2021 and then 2022](#); more recently, they've also performed at the [Kennedy Center](#).

Their "river journey," as they described it, took us all collectively not only through the depths of their souls and ours but also across the geographical map, from the Nile to the Mississippi, as well as the entire map of music from the African diaspora.

Their voices are stunning, opera-worthy sopranos all, and they take in everything from pop and soul to gospel, jazz, and, surprisingly, a few show tunes along the waterway. Their voices blend together so sonorously that often it's hard to tell who, if anyone, is singing lead.

The major aspect that nearly all the songs have in common is the spirituality of rivers, the water as a baptizing and healing force, which resonates gloriously in lyrics that split the difference between the sacred and the secular: "Down by the Riverside," "Down to the River to Pray," "[Wade in the Water](#)," and "The Water is Wide," among them.

Not that show was entirely concerned with matters of the spirit. The trio bookmarked the program with two jazz classics of the 1930s that celebrated the pure joy of music as an end unto itself, Louis Prima's "Sing! Sing! Sing," which detoured into a highly baroque, *a capella* cadenza, and Duke Ellington's "[It Don't Mean a](#)

Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." It's as if the riverboat stopped briefly to pull into port for a party.

Likewise, they treated us to exquisite arrangements of several Kenyan songs, including Roger Whittaker's "My Land is Kenya" and others, including "Safari Ya Barna" and "Malaika," which exploded kaleidoscopically, expanding from one central melody into three contrapuntal lines as drummer Perry Cavari played African hand percussion.

In their treatment, "Proud Mary" - more Ike and Tina Turner than Creedence Clearwater Revival - and "Moon River" became profoundly moving, and even "Up a Lazy River" was transformed into something spiritual. Stephen Schwartz's "Corner of the Sky" and Stephen Sondheim's "Sunday" were unexpected choices, not least because the river references are in the texts, not the titles.

The official closer was a largely rubato, "concert" style treatment of "01' Man River" - underscored by bassist Michael Kuennen bowing arco. The three sisters, according to their manager, Matthew Inge, conceive their own vocal charts in collaboration with musical director and pianist Joseph Thalken. (Four other arrangers are also credited.)

"Sunday," which arrived as an encore, was among the most original. It sounded nothing like it does in "Sunday in the Park with George," but it cut to the inner core of what Stephen Sondheim had in mind no less effectively.

By this point, at the end of the 75 minutes of the show, we all felt, to paraphrase Langston Hughes, like all of our souls had "grown deep like the rivers."