

Cleveland & Oberlin Opera Theaters to produce Nkeiru Okoye's *Harriet Tubman* opera: first of two articles

by Mike Telin



Over the next two weekends Northeast Ohio audiences are in for an operatic treat when Cleveland Opera Theater's New Opera Works, in collaboration with Oberlin Opera Theater, presents the Midwest premiere of Nkeiru Okoye's *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom*. The opera is presented as part of Oberlin College's Africana Unity and Celebration Month.

"What grabbed me about the opera is its accessibility, and the fact that it is a genuine opera that was meant to be sung by operatic voices. It's the kind of opera that an audience can really get caught up in.

Everybody is going to enjoy it," stage director Jonathon Field said during a recent conversation.

"What I find fascinating about the music of [Nkeiru Okoye](#) [pronounced *in KEAR roo oh KOY yeh*], and

we've talked about this, is that her musical roots are in Schoenberg. But the opera also has a little bit of blues and a little bit of ragtime. She has drawn quite a colorful palette."

Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom, which premiered in New York City in February 2014, tells the story of the influential former slave and her rise to a pivotal role in the Underground Railroad. Based on recent biographical research, the opera focuses on Tubman's close bond with her family and celebrates the universal themes of sisterhood, courage, sacrifice, and familial devotion. The five free-of-charge area performances begin on Friday, January 29 and continue through Sunday, February 7. Check our Concert Listings [page](#) for times and locations.

The cast and orchestra include professional Cleveland artists as well as Oberlin students under the direction of conductor Julius P. Williams. "I've worked with Brian Keith Johnson, who will be singing the role of John Tubman, many times and he's wonderful,"

Field said. “We also have David Hughey, an Oberlin Conservatory alum, in the role of Ben Ross, and conductor Julius Williams is from the Berklee College of Music. So we’ve got some very good professionals working alongside the students.”



Another aspect of the opera Field finds attractive is its structure. “The piece is like a Donizetti opera where you have a little recitative and then an aria. But at the end of the aria, the orchestra cuts out and you have this great coloratura passage. So Nkeiru Okoye is using a traditional format with an amalgam of musical styles, most of which will be familiar to a modern American audience.”

Because the opera will be performed in multiple venues, including churches, Field explained that the staging will be minimalist. “We have a really great cast, and I think it’s all going to work beautifully. I staged Benjamin Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* in San Francisco, so the idea of doing religious pieces in religious settings is appealing to me. Because Harriet Tubman was a woman of profound faith, presenting the opera to a community of faith in Northeast Ohio will be a wonderful moment. Instead of bringing people to the opera house, bring the opera to the people.”

Part two will be an extended interview with composer Nkeiru Okoye.

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