

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

by Mike Telin



When composer [Nkeiru Okoye](#) first began thinking about setting the life of Harriet Tubman to music she was certain it would take the form of an oratorio. “When I first had the idea to tell her story in music, I thought I would link spirituals together with some dialogue, and I would have this amazing piece,” Okoye told us during a telephone conversation from New Paltz, N.Y., where she is Director of Music Theory and Composition at

SUNY New Paltz. “But I found out that *that* piece had been written already, so I needed to find a different angle.”

Over the next two weekends, Northeast Ohio audiences can experience the story of Harriet Tubman 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. *Harriet Tubman*, 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.

A New York native of African American and Nigerian descent, Nkeiru Okoye (pronounced in-KEAR-roo oh-KOY-yeh) has had her compositions performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Detroit Symphony, Virginia Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, Grand Rapids Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, and numerous regional

orchestras. In addition to receiving awards, her music has been commissioned by Meet the Composer, MetLife Creative Connections, the John Duffy Composer Institute, the Women's Philharmonic, Composer's Collaborative, Inc., the Walt Whitman Project, Yvar Mikhashov Trust for New Music, and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) — to name only a few. She holds degrees from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Rutgers University.

Okoye's ten-year journey writing *Harriet Tubman* began while she was teaching at a school in the south. "I was never into writing opera, but when I was at that school I fell in love with the 'black' voice. The students who were in the massed choir sang like they were in church. They were able to hit the high notes but they could also reach down to those extended ranges that are such a part of the vernacular performance practice. I thought, 'Wow, what a gorgeous sound.'"

Certain that her new work would take the shape of an educational piece that could be used as a curriculum in African American Music, Okoye said she decided to dig deeper into Harriet Tubman's motivations in order to find answers to questions like 'Why did Tubman make so many trips along the Northeast corridor'? "At that time there was no substantive research available about Tubman's biography. There were several fictionalized books, but nothing substantive, so I started to do my own. I was determined to find out why she did what she did."

Okoye pointed out that a large part of her research was spent playing the role of ethnomusicologist, which led her to discover a community on the eastern shore of Maryland who love Harriet Tubman. "The people there who are in the know will tell you that 'Harriet lived here and did this.' So that community helped me along." Okoye's research also led her to author [Kate Clifford Larson](#), who had written her dissertation on Tubman. That dissertation would later become the book *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*. "All this was like Harriet herself had steered me in the right direction. But as I gathered more information, I realized that this was not oratorio material. It was material for an opera — and I didn't know how to write the opera."

Although Okoye wasn't certain how to begin creating an opera, once she had completed her research she had finished a song-cycle entitled *The Songs of Harriet Tubman*. The cycle has been [recorded](#) by Louise Toppin and the Dvořák Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Julius P. Williams, who will conduct the Northeast Ohio performances of the opera.

Okoye was determined to see her project through to completion. With the help of [The American Opera Project](#), and funding from the National Endowment for the Arts,

Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom became a reality. The Cleveland area performances will be a shortened version of the full, two-hour opera. “The opera was workshopped in New York, and as part of that process a couple of shortened versions were developed that tell the story, but don’t include each and every aspect of it.”

Nkeiru Okoye is known for writing music with pop and West African/African American flavor intertwined with Schoenberg, and her colorful score for the opera is no exception. How did she acquire her taste for such a large sound palette? “I think that music is music, and I do have all of these different influences: the Black Church, all of the different folk musics, along with jazz and blues. They’re all just a part of me, although it did take some time for me to understand how to weave them all together.”

She cites the late Wendell Logan, who created the jazz department at the Oberlin Conservatory, as one of her major influences. “He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and he was such a wonderful human being,” Okoye said. “But I remember going to a symposium that was held by the Detroit Symphony. They had an amazing session on black music — classical music by black and African American composers — and Wendell played a piece of his called *Runagate, Runagate*, (a setting of Robert E. Hayden’s poem about a fugitive slave.) It combined all of these different musical styles. It put me right there on the Underground Railroad and I thought, ‘Wow, I want to do that’. That was kind of my ‘mountaintop’ experience.”

Another strong influence on the formation of her compositional style came from the late Noel DaCosta, with whom she studied at Rutgers. “He showed me so many examples of classical music composed by African Americans. I thought, ‘This is interesting. Nobody has ever shown me this stuff before.’”

On March 1, 2016, Nkeiru Okoye’s second opera, *We’ve Got Our Eye On You*, will receive its premiere at in the Julien J. Studley Theatre on the campus of SUNY New Paltz. The comic opera is part Monty Python and part Gilbert and Sullivan, with a little bit of Broadway.

Okoye laughs when I tell her that she’s been bitten by the opera bug. “I know, but right after *Harriet Tubman* premiered I was kind of lost. I think that happens to all composers, because you’ve been working on an extended project then you have this void after having completed a work that was ten years in the making.”

That void was filled when a voice teacher colleague approached her to write a one-act opera for three of the sopranos in his studio. “He suggested the topic of sisterhood and I said, ‘Yeah, I can do that.’ I went home and thought about it — but for me, sisterhood

means that somebody dies. In *Harriet Tubman*, her sister Rachel dies, and it was so traumatic to write that moment — I just sat there with tears trying to summon up the courage for Harriet to move on, and I knew I could not go through that again.”

Okoye began looking at a number of story possibilities when a new version of *Clash of the Titans* came out. “I was very partial to the 1980s version, so I watched it, and came across this scene with three women which is absolutely hilarious. They are sisters, so that’s sisterhood, and I decided to tell their story. It’s a comedy about the ancient Greeks, but instead of the hero deflowering the virgins, they decide *they* want something from *him*. When you get to the ‘why’ of the story it does raise a lot of topics about women’s rights and what happens when these girls start hooking up. *We’ve Got Our Eye On You* actually has an anti-hooking-up message, but it is quite funny. My librettist David Cote and I met through American Opera Projects.”

Concluding our conversation, I ask Nkeiru Okoye if she ever thought she would become an opera composer? “No, no, no,” she said chuckling. “I was way over in the symphonic world.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 26, 2016.

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