

**Nkeiru Okoye's opera *Harriet Tubman:
When I Crossed the Line to Freedom* (Feb. 6)**

by Nicholas Jones



Opera is a great medium for exploring the courage of acting for freedom and the personal cost of heroic resistance. There is something built into the art form that deepens our view of even the most resolute of actions, showing us the often tragic consequences of taking the courageous path. We can hardly hear *Vissi d'arte* without understanding both Tosca's heroism and the pain that comes with it.

Heroism and its costs are at the center of a new opera about Harriet Tubman, written by Nkeiru Okoye and premiered in its condensed, one-hour version this month in Cleveland and Oberlin. Presented jointly by the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the Oberlin Opera Theater, and Cleveland Opera Theater, *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom* tells the familiar story of the escaped slave and liberator, who made some thirteen dangerous journeys across “the line” back to slavery, in order to free her family and many others.

Okoye, who wrote both the score and the libretto, gives plenty of scope to Tubman's iconic courage. She also shows the pain — physical and spiritual — of the young girl discovering that courage through the brutal abuses of slavery; through the anguish of her dangerous and lonely journey toward freedom; and through the alienation of a life in freedom far from home and family, where she finds herself “a stranger in a strange land.” This Tubman is not just a Moses-like liberator, but also an individual from whom we learn about the accumulated hurts and losses of slavery. As she sings in the powerful finale of Act I: “When I crossed that line, into freedom, I was without my family. I'll keep crossing that line to freedom, until we are all free.”



Okoye, who teaches music theory and composition at the State University of New York at New Paltz, has written an attractive and highly accessible score. The musical style is varied, even eclectic: at one moment, it's bluesy, at others it sounds like ragtime, like jazz, like spirituals, like Andrew Lloyd Webber, and like Benjamin Britten. This production presented only a one-hour version of what is a full-length opera. But from this selection of arias and choruses interspersed with spoken narration, I came away with a sense of Okoye as a composer of considerable range and a particular sensitivity to the rhythms of text setting.



Okoye also shows a special affinity for gospel music, with its free and soaring melismas and its connotations of a robust and undaunted faith. Her use of gospel motifs gives Tubman's great speeches a fittingly indelible intensity, especially when delivered by Oberlin student and Youngstown native Amber Monroe. She shows sizeable talent even at this early stage in what promises to be a strong career.

The rest of the cast was a well-balanced mix of students and professionals. As Rachel, the sister who lacks Tubman's fierce desire for freedom, Victoria Ellington powerfully delivered two songs, one a steamy blues number about finding a man, the other a moving aria about her choice to stay in slavery. Local baritone Brian Keith Johnson brought a comic, sensual brashness to the role of John Tubman, the husband with a wandering eye. Tenor David Hughey lent elegance and flexibility to the two roles he sang — Tubman's pragmatic if unprincipled father, Ben, and the dignified Philadelphia abolitionist William Still. A small chorus supported the principals, creating a lively set of communities. A trio of Tubman's brothers was particularly effective in exposing the falsehoods of slavery in "I Heard About Kind Masters."

The onstage ensemble, a reduction from the full opera, was a string quintet with piano, their playing exceptionally tight and well-balanced under the distinguished conductor Julius Williams.



The stage direction by Jonathon Field was economical and highly readable, expressive when it needed to be but without drawing attention to itself. In a welcome gesture, the program included the words of the libretto. Appropriately, the production gave four of its five performances in churches in Oberlin and Cleveland; I saw it at Oberlin's Finney Chapel, where a large and diverse audience gave the performers an immediate and warm ovation.



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Nicholas Jones is Professor of English at Oberlin College, where he teaches courses on Shakespeare, Milton, and British Romantic Literature. In recent years, he has pioneered courses that link Oberlin's College of Arts and Sciences with the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Nick is an avid amateur musician, currently studying baroque recorder and viola da gamba as well as playing violin and viola. He has sung in a number of choruses and participated in workshops at Amherst Early Music, Oberlin's Baroque Performance Institute, and Early Music Week at Pinewoods. Nick grew up in the Cleveland area and still remembers George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra playing Beethoven's Seventh Symphony at Severance Hall. He also remembers the Beatles singing at Lakefront Stadium, but because of the screaming, he couldn't hear a note.

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