

# 'Is this how it was with Mozart?'

BY GLENN MCNATT  
(SUN STAFF)

From the time she was a little girl, she heard music: in the wind rustling through the trees, in the colors of earth and sky, in the clamor of the streets. Even the children's stories her mother read to her rang like melodies in her ears, and making up songs to go with the words seemed as natural as breathing.

"If I had been born into a musical family they might have recognized that I was a composer," says Nkeiru Okoye (pronounced in-KIR-roo Oh-KOY-yeh). "But I wasn't."

Then, at age 13, Okoye began writing down the notes she heard — and suddenly her gift was recognized. She won prizes, scholarships and trips abroad that gave her opportunities to work with some of the world's leading conductors. She earned a bachelor's degree in composition from Oberlin Conservatory of Music and a master's and a doctorate from Rutgers University.

Today, the tall, slender, 34-year-old Baltimore resident is one of only a handful of African-American women composers whose works are hailed by critics. They are regularly performed by such major American and European orchestras as the Detroit Symphony and the Moscow State Orchestra.

Now Okoye, a native of Massapequa, N.Y., is immersed in her most ambitious project to date: a full-length opera based on the life of Harriet Tubman, who became famous as a conductor on the Underground Railroad that conveyed thousands of African slaves to freedom before the Civil War.

The sweeping musical tapestry is slowly taking shape in a cozy North Eutaw Street studio crammed with computers and recording equipment.

Okoye's work-in-progress is an ensemble of achingly beautiful arias, duets, trios and choruses that recount the major episodes in Tubman's career from her birth in 1822 on a plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore to her death in Auburn, N.Y., in 1913. When completed, this labor of love scored for eight soloists, chorus and orchestra — which, unusually for her, Okoye embarked on without waiting for a formal commission from an orchestra or opera company — will be approximately two hours long, comparable to the classics of the standard Italian, French and German operatic repertory.



Nkeiru Okoye, who is writing an opera about Harriet Tubman, says, "I think we should celebrate all American music."  
ELIZABETH MALBY (SUN PHOTOGRAPHER)

**How do you feel when you're actually writing down what you hear for the Tubman opera?**

"It's both the most exhilarating and the most exhausting project I've ever done. Some mornings I wake up and the songs are right in my head. I just write them down, as if I'm transcribing them. Then I wonder, 'Is this how it was with Mozart, like in *Arioso*?' So when it's there, it's just like I'm transcribing the notes. Then, there are other moments where everything's slow and I'm not sure where it's going or where it should be going. At those times you've got to struggle. It's not uplifting like the Mozart moments. But you have to take it in stride. It's like any other kind of writing. Some days are exhilarating and others are slow, but you know that if you persist eventually it will be completed.

**What sources do you draw on for inspiration?**

A lot of it is about music from Tubman's own time, which I researched for this project. In that sense, it's a piece about American musical history as well as about her. I thought, "What music did she hear?" because I wanted the music to be reflective of her and her time. And there was this whole world of music in her day: work songs, protest songs, spirituals, children's songs, ballads; there's something called a ring shout, where the singers form a circle to sing hymns; there's blues, gospel, quartets, call and response; even classical forms, like certain dances, or maybe a sonatina; and then there are the minstrel songs — it's all music of her world.

She was in New England, she visited the Alcotts, the Emersons and other leading Boston families, and she might easily have heard all these things. So I envision her as a fairly cosmopolitan person musically, and I've included a lot of these different

kinds of music in the opera, where it's all written to sound familiar to the audience.

**What drew you to Harriet Tubman as a subject?**

A lot of my works are about African-American women and the African-American experience. I was looking to do something about a heroine, a noted historical figure, and that brought me to Harriet. I had already done a piece about the poet Phillis Wheatley that was commissioned by an orchestra in London. I wanted to know what made Tubman keep going up and down the East Coast risking her own freedom to bring others out of bondage. There's a lot of mystery about Harriet, because there are so many discrepancies in the various accounts of her that come from so many different people having talked about her, hardly any of whom let her speak for herself.

For example, she was said to have personally led thousands of people to freedom, and to have set up the Underground Railroad practically single-handedly. I spent more than a year researching her life, and to me that sounds like an urban legend. She did rescue many people, but they were mostly her own family. And many people were involved in organizing the Underground Railroad and the "grapevine telegraph" that brought news to those still in bondage.

Many incidents in her life remain unclear. Was it a lead weight thrown by a plantation overseer that hit Harriet in the head when she was a child and caused the visions she experienced? Or was it a stone? Did it happen in a store or in a field or on a road? A lot of accounts are not much better than fiction. I really wanted to find out who she was for myself so I could share it with other people.

**What does Tubman's story mean for people today?**

She exists on different levels. If you

look at her story, it makes history come alive, and it's important for people to know what people are willing to do for freedom. You can't take our freedoms today for granted after learning her story.

Each person is going to look at this story differently, but there's also a universal message. I think for someone coming from African-American culture, you can't help relating to her story emotionally. But I think every person is going to be able to empathize with her character.

She's someone who believes in working together. She works with whites and blacks. She believes in education, though she couldn't read or write. And no matter what the situation, she was always proud of who she was; she didn't believe there were any limitations on her.

So this is an opera that talks about Harriet Tubman as a person. Often, when we talk about Tubman, she's a heroine, but it's not personal — we don't really understand what it cost her to be that way.

I wanted you to get that here's a person with a history that led up to her being Harriet Tubman. In particular, I wanted to tell her story from the point of view of her parents and the other people in her family.

**As an African-American woman composer, what are you trying to achieve?**

You know, I'm a composer. I wake up in the morning and I hear music and I write it down. I started writing at 13. I had piano lessons. And I just began to hear music. As I look back, I probably had begun hearing it at a very early age, because I remember singing the lines in my children's books, making my own songs up.

My mother really wanted me and my sister to embrace life as people, she didn't want us to know there was any stigma or limitation or lack

of expectation as result of our skin color. She was very careful. We're half Nigerian. My father is Nigerian, she is African-American. We didn't use the term "black" when we were growing up; we were either Nigerian or American. We had people of all colors in our house. We grew up in a very strict religious household where we had African art, but no images of Christ, because my mother didn't want us to see an Aryanized Christ. We had dolls that looked like us.

My mother worked part time as a missionary. She was an occupational therapist who worked with abandoned, disabled children. And she wanted us to be ourselves as people.

I say all this because when I began writing, I was just writing music. It was other people who put the label there, who decided that it was African-American music.

I love writing music about my history. But that's just it. It's my history. I came to Harriet Tubman because she's a black woman and we share that, and I find her fascinating. I gravitate toward people who I feel interest me.

Today, people are doing so many different things. On my iPod there is hip-hop, gospel, so many things. A lot of people question hip-hop as music, as entertainment. But hip-hop is a culture that's had a profound impact on American society as well as on the world at large. What you take from it is up to you, though.

What's fascinating is that a lot of hip-hop artists are using orchestral sampling now; there's a lot of crossover. I think that's wonderful. It's a kind of hand-shaking. They've taken so much music out of the schools, people think classical music is dead. But I think we should celebrate all American music, because the more we do, eventually the more people will start to come back to the concert hall.