

Nkeiru Okoye, Ph.D.

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Program Notes

The Journey of Phillis Wheatley

Narrated Orchestral Showcase

Music by Nkeiru Okoye

Text by Carolivia Herron and Nkeiru Okoye

Commissioned by the Boston Landmarks Orchestra, Charles Ansbacher, conductor and founder

Approximate duration is 25 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION – ORCHESTRAL SCORE

Flute	1 Tenor Trombone
Oboe	Timpani
1 Clarinet in Bb	3 Percussion*
1 Bassoon	African Percussion**
2 Horns in F	Narrator
1 Trumpet in Bb	Strings

*Snare Drum, Bass Drum, Anvil, Washboard, Woodblock, Triangle

** Djembe, mid-sized African drums or congas, Shakeree, Rain stick, Agogo, etc.

ABOUT THE JOURNEY OF PHILLIS WHEATELY

Sitting down to write *The Journey of Phillis Wheatley*, I began by asking myself what music shaped her world. My answer to this question unfolded into an unusual juxtaposition of sounds that portray her story.

Phillis would have heard drums from her childhood in Senegal. These would contrast sharply with the drum cadences of soldiers in colonial era Boston. Walking through town, Phillis would have observed her fellow Africans, toiling along Boston's docks. Music they created to make the day go faster would be the precursors to blues, jazz, and gospel. Additionally, having been adopted into the affluent home of John and Susannah Wheatley, Phillis undoubtedly had exposure to classical era music. Her writings mention dancing in ballrooms, while wearing a stylish gown. She must have been familiar with the waltz and other period compositions.

Listeners encounter the characters and events shaping Phillis' life as unique themes, each associated with a different orchestral instrument or ensemble. Since Phillis remains a child of Africa, the drums of her homeland are never far behind.

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Program notes for “The Journey of Phillis Wheatley”

TEXT:

Hello there! I am Phillis Wheatley, the African poet of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Today I am remembered as the first Black poet to publish a book in America. In my day, I was famous. I traveled to London where I went to parties, dancing through the evenings in a fancy ball gown. Benjamin Franklin came to visit me and I even spent a half hour with General George Washington, discussing our new country.

Now, how all this happened to an African slave girl living in America is quite a tale; and if you will journey with me in these moments, I will tell you all about it with help from Maestro Charles Ansbacher and the Boston Landmarks Orchestra. Our instrumentalist friends will play different characters in the story.

Life in Boston is played by the brass.

Slavery and the African Americans, by the trumpet.

Susannah Wheatley by the flute.

The twins, Mary and Nathaniel Wheatley, by the oboe and clarinet.

Mr. John Wheatley, by the trombone.

My trial and those who did not believe in me, by the snare and bass drums.

My home in Senegal by the Djembe and congas.

... And my theme, the Phillis Theme, is played by all of the stringed instruments in the orchestra.

My story begins with my first memory. It takes place in Africa, in what is now Senegal. I was standing with my back against my mother near a stream while my father chanted. My mother held a pot of water above her head and lowered it into my hands. I poured the water into the stream and the sun reflected into my eyes. My life in Africa was happy.

And then it was over. One moment I was playing with the water and the next minute I was alone. I had been kidnapped and sold as a slave. 130 of us were put on a ship that sailed across the Atlantic. Many people died, but I survived. I never saw Africa again.

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Our ship arrived in Boston where we were all sold at auction. Boston was very different from my African home. It was cold and the people had white skin. The only people who had dark skin like me were in chains. We were slaves.

The Wheatleys saw me at the slave market. I was seven years old, weak and small, dressed in a piece of old carpet. They took pity on me and bought me. The Wheatleys looked like nice people. They named me Phillis after the slave ship and took me to live in their house on King Street.

The Wheatleys were nice people after all. When I first got to their house, the mistress, Miss Susannah bathed me, untangled my hair, and gave me soft clothes. She was so good to me that I called her my Dearest Susannah. The Wheatleys had twins named Nathaniel and Mary and they taught me English. Mary Wheatley taught me to read the Bible, poetry, and the mythologies of ancient Rome and Greece. Nathaniel Wheatley taught me what he learned in his classes at Harvard. The two of them gave me a splendid education. Mary taught me how to spell my own name and Nathaniel taught me Greek and Latin. Soon I was writing my own poetry. The Wheatleys treated me like I was part of the family. They were proud of my achievements. Other Africans in America were not treated nearly as well.

Susannah Wheatley thought my poetry was so good that she showed it to neighbors and had some of my poems published in the newspaper. She published them under her own name because she didn't think people would believe that a Black African slave girl could read or write so well.

My Dearest Susannah was right. The free people of Massachusetts thought we were lying.

The Wheatleys and I wanted to publish the poems as a book, but it seemed everyone else believed that Mary or Nathaniel must have written my work. There was a big controversy; and

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eventually Mr. John stepped in to become my great defender.

Mr. John wanted everyone to know we were not lying, and so he insisted that I be tested. Mr. John took me to be examined by the powerful people of Boston: Governor Hutchinson, Mr. John Hancock, and fifteen other distinguished, White gentlemen.

The trial lasted a whole hour. They asked hard questions, but my teachers had taught me well and I got them all right. Mr. John was there, smiling at my answers. My examiners were amazed: How could an African slave girl be so well educated?

We waited as they talked. And they talked some more. And then they proclaimed, "You are approved. I consider that you are indeed the true author of these poems."

It was true: I, Phillis Wheatley, wrote my own poems, and finally now the world believed!

News of the trial spread throughout Boston and then the world.

You see, it was a victory for every person with Black skin. After my trial, the world knew that we had brains and we had souls.

Mrs. Wheatley had my book published through friends of hers in London. Nathaniel sailed with me there after the trial. We had fun. He and Mary had been great teachers. Mr. John was so proud, he gave me my freedom and helped me get established.

Some people continue to question my skills, even today; but my victory remains the same: I founded African poetry in America; and my story brings hope to people from generation to generation.

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NARRATION TEXT WITH CORRESPONDING MEASURE NUMBERS

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Now, how all this happened to an African slave girl living in America is quite a tale; and if you will journey with me in these moments, I will tell you all about it with help from Maestra/o (Conductor Name) _____ and the _____ Orchestra. Our instrumentalist friends will play different characters in the story.

1. Life in Boston is played by the brass. ***
11. Slavery and the African Americans, by the trumpet. ***
21. Susannah Wheatley by the flute. ***
29. The twins, Mary and Nathaniel Wheatley, by the oboe and clarinet.***
40. Mr. John Wheatley, by the trombone. ***
51. My trial and those who did not believe in me, by the snare and bass drums. ***
60. My home in Senegal by the Djembe and congas. ***
69. ... And my theme, the Phillis Theme, is played by all of the stringed instruments in the orchestra. ***
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123. And then it was over. One moment I was playing with the water and the next minute I was alone.***
125. I had been kidnapped and sold as a slave. 130 of us were put on a ship that sailed across the Atlantic. Many people died, but I survived. I never saw Africa again. ***
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