



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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EPK, photos and a version of this press release in PDF are attached.

Nkeiru Okoye's New Symphonic Experience, *Black Bottom*, Makes Its World Premiere With Detroit Symphony Orchestra



Nkeiru Okoye,
composer ©2019

Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) will present the world premiere of a new work by composer Nkeiru Okoye [pronounced “in KEAR roo oh KOY yeh”]. Entitled *Black Bottom*, this 22 minute composition for full orchestra and four African American solo voices will be the centerpiece of the 42nd annual Classical Roots concerts March 6 - 7, 2020 at Detroit's Orchestra Hall. This DSO-commissioned work, supported with a grant from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation* in celebration of Classical Roots and the Orchestra Hall Centennial Season, will be conducted by Maestro Thomas Wilkins. Dr. Okoye depicts joys, sorrows and interrelated stories about the historic Detroit neighborhoods of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley through a series of responses to archival photographs. French colonial settlers named Black Bottom (“Fond Noir”) for its richly hued soil. During WWI, the area became home to many Eastern European immigrants. Then, with the Great Migration and influx of southern African Americans, it became one of Detroit's most lively Black neighborhoods. It was torn down by highway construction projects in the mid-20th century; displacing thousands of residents.

Black Bottom was developed as the result of a nearly one-year-long research project. A display of the archival photographs that triggered the composer's creative response, and a portion of the [Black Bottom Street View](#) Exhibit, will be on display in the second floor atrium at Orchestra Hall. *Black Bottom* audiences are invited and encouraged to listen for references to these photographs in the composition. Dr. Okoye refers to them as “embedded messages.” These are snatches of words and phrases she collected during her interviews and subsequently transformed into wordless musical motifs. For instance, in Mvt. II: Two Shops on Hastings, which conjures the image of the once vibrant thoroughfare, the listener will hear “Joe's Record Shop” and “It's at Hastings at Mack” repeated in homage to the very popular record store but spoken by musical instruments.

*Among her many awards, this was Nkeiru Okoye's third Toulmin Foundation Grant. Her first was an Opera America Discovery Grant for Female Composers (2016) which was followed by an Opera America Female Composers Commissioning Grant (2017). The Pulitzer Prize nominated composer has received grants from New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).



Dr. Okoye will also serve as the 2020 Classical Roots Festival artist in residence, a role that includes school visits, community events, and other initiatives to aid in the extension of the Classical Roots mission of bringing the DSO beyond the concert hall.

For the DSO press release [CLICK HERE](#).

Nkeiru Okoye's relationship with DSO began when she was an undergraduate and Ford-Mellon research fellow at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music and she attended a DSO sponsored conference on Black composers. An epiphanal experience, it introduced her to other African American composers. A few years later her orchestral choreopoem *Ruth* received a DSO reading under the baton of Maestro Leslie Dunner. Dr. Okoye returned to Detroit in spring 2002 for a reading of her newly premiered orchestral short, *Voices Shouting Out* (2002), which had been commissioned by the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. It brought her to the attention of Maestro Wilkins. *Voices Shouting Out* has had nearly 100 performances, several of them given by DSO. Thomas Wilkins conducted the 25th performance of *Voices* with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Hailed as "sublime" by Cleveland's *The Plain Dealer*, Nkeiru Okoye's genre-bending compositions reflect a dizzying range of influences – Gilbert & Sullivan, the Gershwins, Sondheim, Copland, gospel, jazz, and Schoenberg. Dr. Okoye writes in both the opera/theatre and symphonic mediums; and her works have been performed on five continents. Her cycle *Songs of Harriet Tubman* has become established repertoire for African American sopranos. She is best known for her opera *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom* which will be performed next by Knoxville Opera, May 1 and May 3, 2020.

Dr. Okoye's *Tales from the Briar Patch*, a trio of short operas, based upon the "Bre'r Rabbit" tales, which was commissioned by American Opera Projects in partnership with the John Duffy Composer Institute, will make its world premiere at the Virginia Arts Festival June 13 - 14, 2020.

A native New Yorker, born to an African American mother and a Nigerian father, Nkeiru Okoye was raised on Long Island. She was educated at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music while simultaneously pursuing coursework in Africana Studies and at Rutgers University she earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Music Theory and Composition. Nkeiru Okoye's compositions reflect the diverse worldview of a musical scholar and storyteller.