

# Nkeiru Okoye, Composer

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## Program Notes and information

### Invitation to a Die-In

For Baritone and Orchestra

*Music and Concept by Nkeiru Okoye*

*Text by David Cote*

### DESCRIPTION

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**Invitation To A Die-In** is a “sung story” written in direct musical response to recent murders of unarmed Black men at the hands of police officers or vigilantes. It is part work for baritone and orchestra, that is simultaneously both monodrama, and performance art. An African-American baritone tells the story from the perspective of the deceased, their families, police officers, and citizens on all sides of the issue. Musically, it is a dramatic, stark portrait of African American men being hunted and haunted by the past. The work was commissioned by Ng Tian Hui and the Mount Holyoke Symphony Orchestra In memory of Trayvon Martin.

### INSTRUMENTATION

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Baritone*	1 Bass Trombone
2 Flutes (2 doubles piccolo)	Tuba
Piccolo	Timpani
Oboe	3 Percussion*
English Horn	Electric bass
2 Clarinets in Bb	Strings
Bass Clarinet in Bb	
2 Bassoons	* Orchestral Bells, Tubular bells, Marimba,
4 Horns in F	Xylophone Cymbals, Snare Drum, Hi-Hat,
3 Trumpets in C	Drum Set , Anvil, Congas or African drums,
1 Tenor Trombone	Bass Drum

### PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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An understanding of traditional African American styles such as blues, gospel, jazz and spirituals is essential in order to execute with intended performance practice. It is presumed that the vocalist will use stylistic improvisations and 'blue' notes, as appropriate.

## **Nkeiru Okoye, Composer**

Program notes for *Invitation to a Die-In*

### **COMPOSER'S PROGRAM NOTE**

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The preliminary concept for **Invitation to a Die-In** came to me on New Year's Day 2015 in response to the rash of police slayings of Black men. I spoke to David Cote, my librettist, about it. After a few exchanges, he penned his poignant text, which I immediately loved. Yet, setting these words to music proved to be more difficult than anticipated. I'd never composed something so angry, painful, and disjointed.

Once the writing started, I instinctively decided to infuse the spiritual, "Witness," throughout the work, charging all to watch and be accountable for the events that would unfold. My initial arrangement combined a funeral march-like quality with rhythmic shifts that disorient the listener. The melody's tunefulness would clash with the dissonant, ascending, six-note figure that starts **Invitation** and resurfaces throughout the work's segments.

What I had not anticipated was my growing horror at writing a character who was deceased, looks reflectively over the events that cause his murder, and then capturing that murder through music as he pleads for his life. As I was completing **Invitation**, irony struck me: I had grown attached to this imagined young man after only months of working on him sporadically. How much more do family members mourn their actual sons, fathers, brothers, and uncles who die, having known them for a lifetime?

### **TEXT**

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Text by David Cote

#### **BARITONE**

*Who will be a witness for my Lord?  
Oh, I will be a witness for my Lord.*

I'm walking late at night.  
I'm walking home at noon.  
I'm walking home when it is dim.  
I'm walking home when it's too soon.  
I'm just standing on this corner,  
And I'm not gonna move.

And he is always watching, stalking, talking,  
yelling, telling, choking  
My life, my rights!

Hood up, head down, gotta get home.

Just another Black man in the middle of the  
road.  
A man trying to make his way in the world.  
Down in the gutter you can see the blood  
swirl.

What was my crime?  
They say give me some time.  
When was my trial?  
They say might take a while.

Don't confuse my face with your fears.  
The Law puts a gun in your hand,  
But you are still a man.  
Are you blue, or are you, you?  
I don't see Black People or White People.  
I just see Blue People and You People.  
But you are a symbol of Justice,

**Nkeiru Okoye, Composer**

Program notes for *Invitation to a Die-In*

And your bullets are real.

**ORCHESTRA**

Don't shoot, please!

**BARITONE**

The badge the gun the choke the Black the  
Blue the shot the fall the scream the blood  
the badge the crowd the cry the blood the  
chalk the form the tape the news the crowd  
the case the blood the gun the sun the moon  
the stars  
the end  
my end!

My Black boy is dead.  
They shot him for stealing a box.  
My Black boy is dead!  
They put him in a chokehold.  
My Black boy is dead.

Because he wore a hoodie!  
Who will be the next dead Black boy?

People say: Fix the system.  
Don't you want peace?  
Don't you want justice?  
This is the way the system works!  
This is the way it's working.

No!

**ORCHESTRA**

Don't shoot, please!

**BARITONE**

Please don't shoot me.  
Sir, I am unarmed!  
My life matters.  
My life-