

Nkeiru Okoye, Ph.D.

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Program Notes

Tales from the Briar Patch

A triptych of sung stories

Music and story by Nkeiru Okoye

Libretto by Carman Moore

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| 1. Briar Patch | 30 min |
| 2. The Pot of Sense* | 30 min |
| 3. Madame Partridge and her Eggs* | 30 min |

Cast (SSATB): Sister Sparrow, Sister Robin, Madame Partridge, Bre’r Rabbit, Bre’r Fox

Chamber orchestra: Flute, Clarinet, Trombone, Percussion (Washboard and Triangle) and strings.

* Denotes in progress

ABOUT

This rebooted triptych of short operas is family friendly and full of fun, while paying tribute to the African tradition of storytelling for all ages. Sister Sparrow, Sister Robin and Madame Partridge retell the antics of Bre’r Rabbit and his nemesis Bre’r Fox in “Briar Patch,” “The Pot of Sense,” and “Madame Partridge and her Eggs.” A concert version of “Briar Patch” will be available for full orchestra with five soloists. Libretto by Carman Moore. The music blends African American musical styles of jazz, blues, and gospel with contemporary concert music sounds. A concert version of “Briar Patch” will be available for full orchestra with five soloists. Libretto by Carman Moore. *Intended for all audiences.*

NOTE: Each story from the **Tales from the Briar Patch** is derived from African folk tales. The character “Bre’r Rabbit” is actually the trickster, “Anansi the Spider,” of ancient Ghanaian folklore. While many people associate him and his friends with Joel Chandler Harris’ Uncle Remus stories, the stories predate Harris and his stories. The creators updated the language, using all animals to portray the story, with the trio of spirited birds narrating. Producers find that the works rate well with all audiences and are especially useful for community discussions and outreach.

CAST*

Sister’ Sparrow, ditzy, likes to show off, high speaking voiceSoprano 1
Sister’ Robin, the practical oneSoprano 2
Sister’ Partridge, the bossy one, Mezzo
Bre’r Rabbit, the famed trickster – has a Kevin Hart type short man’s complex.....Tenor
Bre’r Fox, The famed trickster’s arch enemy Baritone

*Note – Colorblind casting is not permitted. All singers must be African Americans proficient in classical traditions, as well as performance practices of improvisatory African American music styles, such as gospel and jazz.

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Program notes for "Tales from the Briar Patch"

LINKS TO WORKSHOP PERFORMANCES

The University of Michigan School of Music and Dance presented a concert performance workshop with chamber orchestra on February 27, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQZlrbDgjeo>

The American Opera Project presented a partial piano workshop in conjunction with Dance Theatre of Harlem's Sunday Matinée program. <https://youtu.be/5sGwplBQIzs>

Virginia Festival for the Arts performance of Briar Patch, scheduled for 2020 was postponed due to COVID

NOTES

African and African-American cultures are full of tales of tricksters and vulnerable little guys finding ways to prevail over big guys. Obviously a hero to enslaved and post- Slavery downtrodden African Americans, such a trickster persona as Bre'r Rabbit allowed American blacks a chance to imagine tricking and somehow overcoming the oppression of the white world.

No matter how clever or powerful or even hungry Bre'r Fox or Bre'r Bear or Bre'r Wolf might be, the rabbit would always find a way to survive and even have some fun.

Most often known as a character created by white author Joel Chandler Harris (1848- 1908) for his Uncle Remus stories for children, Bre'r Rabbit may also be seen as the embodiment of the famous West African trickster Anancy the Spider. Originally verbally handed down by Slaves of the American South, the Bre'r Rabbit -style story was even adopted by Native Americans and adapted by Cherokees as the story of "Tar Wolf." French-speaking Caribbean children heard stories of "Compair Lapin."

The opera version of the Bre'r Rabbit story with libretto by composer Carman Moore and music by Nkeiru Okoye is part of a trio of operas they call **Tales From the Briar Patch**. The opera "Bre'r Rabbit" (which dramatizes "Bre'r Rabbit and the Tar Baby") is followed by "Bre'r Rabbit and the Pot of Sense" and "Madame Partridge's Eggs." All are full of mirth but also full of home-spun wisdom with a dear life lesson to each. Ms. Okoye and Mr. Moore look forward to the three operas being performed on the same bill someday soon.

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