

Nkeiru Okoye, Ph.D.

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Invitation to a Die-In

Music Nkeiru Okoye

Text by David Cote, with N. Okoye

Program Notes: Project description, Composer's program note, Instrumentation, and Text

DESCRIPTION

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.

COMPOSER'S PROGRAM NOTE:

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?

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TEXT

*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,
And your bullets are real.

Don't shoot, please!

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

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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!

Don't shoot, please!

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

INSTRUMENTATION

Baritone
2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo)
Oboe
English Horn
Clarinet in Bb
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon

Marimba, glockenspiel, tambourine,
Gankokwe (African cow bell), Congas or
bongos

Strings

TOTAL needs: (baritone, 20 players plus
strings (10 minimum))

4 Horns
2 Trumpets in Bb
Trombone
Tuba (or bass trombone)
Timpani
3 percussion: Snare, bass drum, taiko (or
other mid range) drums, Drum set,