

250 years in 12 minutes? Composer tries to capture Charlotte history in piece for Symphony

Lawrence Toppman

9-11 minutes

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Let your mind roam across 250 years of Charlotte-Mecklenburg history, and what do you hear?

Maybe "[Tullochgorum](#)," a fiddle tune from our Scots-Irish heritage? Perhaps the ceaseless clacking of a mill, with laborers singing work songs or spirituals to relieve the monotony? How about a hymn suggesting Billy Graham and our nearly forgotten nickname "City of Churches"?

[Nkeiru Okoye](#) tuned into those things, too. She also heard the Angolan music of slaves brought here long ago, songs sung by Latino immigrants who have more recently arrived and cries of protest from people who feel unheard in the least upwardly mobile of America's big cities. She wove them into a dense, 12-minute tapestry titled "Charlotte Mecklenburg," which gets its world premiere Sept. 21 in the [Charlotte Symphony Orchestra's](#) opening concert.

Ordinarily, the focus for this Gala Opening Night at Belk Theater might be on [Joshua Bell](#) and his 305-year-old Stradivarius. They'll team up for Brahms' only violin concerto to close the evening. Yet Okoye's piece, which will come in the middle, after Shostakovich's "Festive Overture," may grip the audience's imagination harder.

The non-hyphenated title reminds us that the CSO commissioned it for the 250th anniversary of the founding of a city named for [Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz](#), who married King George III at 17, bore 15 children and reigned with him over England and Ireland from 1761 to 1818. Seven years after she took the throne, "[Charlotte Town](#)" was incorporated around the roads that became Trade and Tryon streets.

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The orchestra could have asked a local composer to depict it in sound, but president and CEO Mary Deissler wanted an outsider who'd come in without preconceptions. Ideally, in a concert schedule dominated by white men living and dead, this would mean a composer of color – likely a woman – who could make the season reflect a little more of Charlotte's diversity.

Nkeiru Okoye (pronounced en-KEE-roo oh-KOY-yeh) had established herself as a chronicler of history through

“The Journey of Phyllis Wheatley,” “Invitation to a Die-In” (genre-crossing performance art dedicated to Trayvon Martin) and especially the two-act opera [“Harriet Tubman.”](#)

Harriet Tubman AOP Images 2_19_14

A scene from Nkeiru Okoye’s “Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom.” Richard Termine
Richard Termine

Here she’d be working without voices, because Deissler figured a chorus wouldn’t have time to master the complicated music with so few rehearsals, and within the conventional lineup of a 62-piece orchestra. Okoye negotiated for a marimba, which represents the Angolan influence, and will put three percussionists through stiff paces: They’ll play glockenspiel, triangle, cymbals, whistle, snare drum, hi-hat cymbals, a drum set, anvil, shaker, claves, congas and a bass drum.

She gave herself a crash course in history over four days in June, talking to a dozen folks found for her by the symphony and sitting in on a lunch with orchestral musicians. She went from elder statesman Hugh McColl to historian Tom Hanchett to educator Banu Valladares to hip-hop musician-producer [Dae-Lee](#). She savored exhibitions at Levine Museum of the New South and lunch at the United House of Prayer for All People. (Trombonist Tyrone Jefferson of [A Sign of the Times](#) took her there and explained its unique trombone-shout style, which found its abbreviated way into the work.)

banu by okoye

Perhaps the only photo from Okoye’s time in Charlotte is this one, which the composer took herself: It’s Banu Valladares of Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, who told us: “Nkeiru did stay behind the scenes, which I found to be a very respectful approach to working with others – she observed and learned before forming an opinion. She is a remarkable woman and we’re fortunate she was involved in this project.”

“They chose me because I have a unique set of skills,” says the New York-based Okoye. “I’m a scholar, a composer, and I work with different cultures to tie them together. One of my strengths is a universal knowledge of music, (which gives me the) ability to be authentically inclusive and talk about history in a musical framework.”

She never needed that skill more than here, compressing eras and cultures into a work shorter than the “1812 Overture.” Though the CSO bills it as a piece “in celebration of our city’s 250th anniversary,” Okoye notes, “You can have a celebratory piece for only about two minutes. Then you have to have contrast.”

The section that gave her the most trouble was inspired by McColl’s discussion of industry. She could see how to depict cotton mills through perpetual-motion music. But because “I was careful to put in as much as I could get that really was from Charlotte ... the three songs in the industrial section took the most research. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack: I wanted them to be less known but also local.” She settled on “Cotton Mill Colic,” “I Don’t Feel Weary” (used ironically) and “Didn’t Old John Cross the Water on his Knees?” (Folklorist Alan Lomax had recorded an N.C. prison gang singing that one.)

Along the way, Okoye heard about racial and economic disharmony, especially after the fatal shooting of Keith Lamont Scott. The second anniversary of his death comes the day before the concert.

Dae-Lee recalls telling her about “the divisions we have here. Our conversation was, ‘This is the reality, but there’s hope in that.’ And she turned these ideas into rhythms in the piece that (reflect) the phrases ‘Not my Charlotte’ and ‘Keith Lamont Scott.’ The polarizing factor of those two statements is in there, and that’s beautiful to me. It makes you want to ask questions when you hear it, and questions are beautiful things.”

The piece ends with a more upbeat note: a version of “Alma Llanera,” the 104-year-old song that has become Venezuela’s unofficial second national anthem. (Aptly, people play it to end a party or social reunion.) Okoye met three native Venezuelans, including Valladares, who explained the contributions Latinos have made to Charlotte in recent decades.

“Our culture tends to think of ‘the other’ as lacking somehow,” says Valladares, executive director at [Charlotte Bilingual Preschool](#). “In a big city, you don’t have to look at the things you don’t want: You can stay in your neighborhood and not see anyone who doesn’t look like you. But these people have talents. They have strengths. So when someone like Nkeiru includes us in a piece like this, the validation is really strong.”

The all-embracing nature of “Charlotte Mecklenburg” means many residents can recognize themselves in its themes. Yet its debut at a fundraising gala means mostly affluent people will hear it the first time, though Deissler has invited students from [Project Harmony](#) – which helps underserved children become musicians – to the concert. Later, she’ll decide how to program it more widely.

“It’s like (the Marvel Comics movie) ‘Black Panther,’ “ says Dae-Lee. “Her existing in this space as a black female composer is meaningful. Kids can look at her onstage and say, ‘Oh my goodness, I want to aspire to be there!’ That really opens up your perspective.”

Charlotte Symphony Gala Concert

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 21.

WHERE: Belk Theater, 130 N. Tryon St.

TICKETS: \$39-\$399.

DETAILS: 704-972-2000 or charlottesymphony.org.

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