

Nkeiru Okoye, Composer

www.nkeiruokoye.com



Program Notes and Information

Charlotte Mecklenburg

For Orchestra

Year: ©2018

Duration: 12 Minutes

INSTRUMENTATION – FULL ORCHESTRA:

Flute 1 (Piccolo)	3 Trumpets in Bb
Flute 2	2 Trombones
Oboe 1	Tuba
Oboe 2 (English Horn)	Timpani
2 Clarinets in Bb	3 Percussion*
Bass Clarinet in Bb	Harp
Bassoon	Strings
4 Horns in F	

*Glockenspiel, Marimba, Triangle, Cymbals, Whistle, Snare Drum, Hi-hat, Drum Set, Anvil, Shaker, Claves, Congas, Bass Drum

INSTRUMENTATION – CHAMBER ORCHESTRA:

Flute 1	Bassoon 2
Flute 2 (Piccolo)	2 Horns in F
Oboe 1	2 Trumpets in Bb
Oboe 2 (English Horn)	Timpani (opt. Shaker)
Clarinet 1 in Bb	Percussion*
Clarinet 2 in Bb (Bass Clarinet)	Strings
Bassoon 1	

*Glockenspiel, Marimba, Triangle, Cymbals, Whistle, Snare Drum, Hi-hat, Drum Set, Anvil, Shaker, Claves, Congas, Bass Drum

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Program notes for "Charlotte Mecklenburg"

COMPOSER STATEMENT

Charlotte Mecklenburg is a result of a Charlotte Symphony commission. In celebration of the city's 250th anniversary, I was asked to write a work that would reflect Charlotte's history, future, culture, and its developing reputation as an immigrant gateway. It would also mark my return to writing orchestral works after a hiatus, during which I wrote primarily opera.

The project's music was to be inspired by a visit to Charlotte, where I would meet with several community leaders, asking the same five questions:

- What is your favorite piece of classical music?
- Do you have a piece of music that has a cultural tie to your heritage or Charlotte?
- Is there a short story or saying that speaks to your Charlotte experience, or cultural heritage, or a childhood memory?
- What in Charlotte makes you feel at home?
- Have you ever been to a symphony concert? If not, what would get you to go?

I crafted together my reflections and additional research using various melodic elements from original and folk sources, well-known and obscure. With a gentle nod to Aaron Copland, and the early 20th century call for more "American" music, the composition weaves a tapestry of the city and its history.

The work begins with my original wordless hymn, "The Queen City," reflecting Charlotte's location in the Bible Belt, and her native son, Billy Graham. Its base arrangement is a 4-part chorale, typical of the days of the city's founding. I've modernized the hymn by fashioning it into more of a 'folk style.'

The city's colonial settlers were of English, Scottish, and Irish ancestry. I used the 18th century Scottish fiddle tune, "Tulloch Gorum," to represent them. The tune is tied to contemporary music by its "Mixolydian" scale, re-popularized through jazz and blues, and then seeped into contemporary concert music. Like a vibrant flash of color in a patchwork quilt, the horns interrupt the melody with a coded message: They blare the rhythm of the phrase, "This is what democracy looks like."

Next, the piece captures the perpetual motion of mills in a section focused on Charlotte's post-Civil War industrial era. It excerpts melodies of three lesser-known work songs with area ties, and preserved in anthologies of old American songs. "Cotton Mill Colic" is the protest of economically depressed mill workers. My arrangement of the song "I don't feel weary" reflects an irony, through its bright and expansive "American" sound, marked "Mechanically, like a clock" in the score. The father-and-son Lomax team recorded and transcribed the section's last selection, "Didn't old John cross the water on his knees?" as sung by prisoners on a NC chain gang. It is a spiritual, set as a work song, a reflection of the prejudice at that time, against singing secular "reels" and "sinful songs." I transformed the melody with a nod to the trombone shout traditions made popular in United House of Prayer for all People, which has historical ties to Charlotte.

The spiritual "Sometimes" is interwoven into the part that reflects Charlotte today. The city's multiethnic threads are several cultures, predominantly White and African American, with a growing Latinx community. Racial tensions came to a head two years ago as people reacted to the death of an unarmed Black man. Musically, the man's name and the words "Not my Charlotte" become a call-and-response that repeats cyclically over a perpetually moving baseline. The intermingling is complex, sometimes at odds with itself but also harmonious. I use the marimba, originally an African instrument, to symbolize

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the Angolan people, ancestors of much of Charlotte’s original African American population. “Alma Llanera,” the last excerpted melody, considered by some to be a second Venezuelan national anthem, is celebratory and danceable.

During the residency, an interviewee said Charlotte’s future hope resides in its children. Their youthful innocence inspired the finale.

Charlotte Mecklenburg is named after Princess Charlotte, who according to *Smithsonian* magazine, was a mixed-race Portuguese woman, with an “unmistakable African appearance.” Queen Charlotte supported composers, including one of Bach’s sons and Mozart. Titling the composition after her ties into my own body of musical works, which has pieces about two other Black women, Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Tubman.

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