

# Nkeiru Okoye, Composer

www.nkeiruokoye.com



## Program Notes and information

### Songs of Harriet Tubman

For Soprano and Orchestra

Music and Lyrics by Nkeiru Okoye

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|------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. My Name is Araminta             | 5 min |
| 2. My Name is Harriet, Now         | 6 min |
| 3. I am Harriet Tubman, Free Woman | 7 min |
| 4. I am Moses, The Liberator       | 7 min |

## INSTRUMENTATION

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Flute 1	Timpani
Flute 2 (Piccolo)	3 Percussion**
1 Oboe (English Horn)	Piano
Clarinet 1 in B	Strings
Clarinet 2 in B $\flat$ (Bass Clarinet)	
1 Bassoon	*Glockenspiel, Marimba, Xylophone,
4 Horns in F	Triangle, Cymbals, Cymbal, Woodblock,
2 Trumpets in B $\flat$	Bass Drum
1 Tenor trombone	
1 Bass trombone	
1 Tuba	

\*\*Note: **Songs of Harriet Tubman** has a chamber version for Piano and String quintet or String Section, which is the same instrumentation as the chamber version of **HARRIET TUBMAN: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom**.

## PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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A soprano who sings big Puccini or Wagnerian arias would be at home with these songs. 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 particularly in the cadenza-like sections of arias 2, 3, and 4. In deference to the character's young age, little improvisation is used in the first aria. Not intended to be sung in traditional Bel Canto technique, most successful performers use a blend of voice and chest voice.

## PROGRAM NOTES

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**Songs of Harriet Tubman** are the four "name" arias sung by the title character in the opera, **HARRIET TUBMAN: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom**. Each song's focus is a name tied to a stage in Tubman's transformation from slave to freedom-fighter.

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### Program notes for *Songs of Harriet Tubman*

First, as a child, she introduces herself as “Araminta,” who is often called, “Minty.” Her naïve prattlings establish a dramatic contrast between childhood's contentment and the harsh realities of slave existence.

“My name is Harriet, now. Don't call me Minty anymore,” declares the teenaged heroine. Having survived a series of abusive masters and a debilitating injury, she asserts her rites of womanhood through the shedding of her childhood moniker.

The adult Harriet Tubman reintroduces herself as a free woman, recounting the harrowing tale of escape from slavery. Confronted by bittersweet poignancy at having crossed the line to freedom without family to welcome her, she is inspired towards a new goal: returning home to rescue loved ones.

In the final aria, Tubman, a seasoned conductor on the Underground Railroad, embraces the folkloric title given to her by escapees and aspiring runaways. “I am 'Moses, the Liberator,’” she proclaims. Her transformation is complete.

Texts for **Songs of Harriet Tubman** were written by the composer. She states,

“In writing the libretto, I consulted several books on Tubman and made a list of quotations ascribed to her. While Tubman never read or wrote, she was a famed public speaker and dictated letters that surfaced recently through the work of biographers. To make it sound true to form so that Tubman's resilient message comes through, I did in-depth research on the time period. There were many questions to answer: What was it like to live on a plantation? How different was plantation life in antebellum Maryland from the same in the Deep South? What were family dynamics like and how were relations maintained? What joys could have been found in the austere life? Most of all, I wanted to know what motivation kept Tubman crossing the Mason Dixon Line over and over again.”

“Before writing the libretto for HARRIET TUBMAN and the SONGS OF HARRIET TUBMAN, I got a copy of Sarah Bradford's biography aptly titled, THE MOSES OF HER PEOPLE. The thin book was purportedly based on the author's interview with Tubman, then in her advanced years. I highlighted every passage ascribed to Tubman, intending to set as many of her original words as possible. Since she never read or wrote, this was the closest I would get to her voice. Once the “dialect affects” are removed, what remains is an eloquent mixture of Victorian prose and plain-speech.”

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### TEXT:

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1. My name is Araminta But everybody calls me Minty. I lived with my Mother, my four brothers and four sisters Working for Master Brodess Mama works cleaning the house While Papa works chopping lumber. His master lets him visit us, He doesn't live far away.  and we're all so very happy That our family gets to stay together As long as we keep working for the master	We all can stay together  Master Brodess sold my three sisters He said he needed the money He sold them on a chain-gang headed south We never did hear from them again Master Brodess says he'll hire my time And I'll work for another planter. There will be more money as he rents me out like so, And there won't be need to sell me away.  And I'm oh so very happy That my family gets to stay together
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## **Nkeiru Okoye, Composer**

### Program notes for *Songs of Harriet Tubman*

As long as I keep working for the master  
And I am earning money  
Then we all can stay together  
We all can stay together

They say I'm turning seven  
And they're sending me to work for a new master  
I hope he and his missus are kind people as they  
Hire my time from Master Brodess  
I will cook and clean the house  
I will watch their little baby  
I'll mind my mistress, and I'll do just what I'm told  
So they won't have me sold away

And we're all so very happy  
That our family gets to stay together.  
As long as I keep working for my master  
And he doesn't lose more money  
And he finds no cause to sell me  
Then we all can stay together.

#### 2.

My Name is Harriet now.  
Minty was the name of my youth  
But that child died when they struck me,  
Leaving me unconscious  
Don't call me Minty anymore!  
Don't you call me Minty anymore!

They dragged my Mama's mother  
From Africa, changed her name.  
And then they whipped my mother  
whipped me just the same.  
Well Mama is a woman,  
I am a woman, too!

You are Harriet now, God told me.  
Your toil has not been in vain.  
Each lash had meaning.  
Joy will follow your pain.  
You'll be hero to your people.  
All shall remember your name.  
Don't call me Minty anymore.  
Harriet is my name, now.

Harriet, home ruler, guardian of the home.  
That's who I became  
When I woke from my slumbering.  
God told me

My Name is Harriet now  
My name is Harriet now  
My Name is Harriet Now  
My name is Harriet now!

#### 3.

I am Harriet Tubman  
And I am a free woman,  
I Escaped My slavery from Maryland.  
I traveled here on foot through the winter,  
running from can't to can.  
And I have  
hidden in holes,  
trekked through swamps,  
half starved, half crazed  
With patter-rollers and dogs that chased me  
thought I'd never make it.

My, my, my  
Well, well, well, well,  
My, my, my

but then  
I looked at my hands to  
see if I was the same person.  
There was glory over everything.  
And the sun came like gold through the trees,  
and I felt like I was in heaven.  
I'd crossed the line, I was free!

When I crossed that line,  
into freedom,  
I was finally free.  
When I crossed,  
that line to freedom,  
I was Finally free.  
When I crossed  
that line to freedom-

Your kind William Still  
helped me, fed me, found me a job.  
I worked scrubbing houses clean as can be.  
And though my back ached,  
and my hands liked to bleed,  
it felt like I was in heaven

But-  
Well, well, well, well

But here in Philadelphia  
I was a stranger in a strange land  
with none familiar here to welcome me.  
My home was after all,  
on the plantation with my family.  
What good is a brand new life,  
and how can I have freedom,  
without my family?

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### Program notes for *Songs of Harriet Tubman*

And so, to this solemn resolution I came.  
If I was free then my family should be free, too.  
I would make a home for them here in the North.  
And the Lord helping me,  
I will bring them all here,  
and we'll be together.  
And only then will I be free

When I crossed that Line,  
into freedom,  
I was without,  
my family.  
I'll keep crossing that line to freedom,  
Until we all are free.  
I'll keep crossing that line to freedom,  
Until we all are free.

#### **4.**

I am Moses, the Liberator.  
Moses, the liberator.  
You keep on going or die!

When I took on this role  
of liberator,  
I said to myself  
"There's one of two things I have a right to,  
One of these things:  
My liberty or my death."

If I cannot have one,  
I would have the other.  
For no man shall take me alive!

I am Moses,  
stealer of slaves,  
Moses, stealer of slaves.

I stole my mother,  
father cousins, brothers.

We do not turn back.  
We've come this far  
and now you're scared?  
You're scared-  
Well,  
well, well, well, well.

I'll hold my revolver to the  
space between your eyes,  
Dogs yet baying in the midnight air,  
Patter-rollers footsteps closing in.  
What's it gonna be, now?  
Dead negroes tell no tales  
You keep on going or die!

Keep on going.  
Keep on going.

If you're tired, keep on going;  
and if you're scared, keep on going.  
If you're hungry, keep on going.  
If you want to taste freedom, keep on going.  
Set your mind to freedom and the promised land,  
We shall be free, Just like in the scriptures  
free indeed, We shall be free  
You will be free, free, free.  
I want to be free.

We shall,  
we shall, we shall, we shall, shall be  
We shall be free