

opera

Arias of a freedom train

BY STEVE PARKS

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A lot of operas are about women who do crazy things and then die," says Hofstra University music professor Nkeiru Okoye. "I wanted to write an opera about a woman who did great things and survived."

The song cycle from Okoye's first full-length opera, "Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom," will be presented in a narrated concert, "A Ride on the Underground Railroad," Sunday at Hofstra's John Cranford Adams Playhouse.

According to a Temple University study, Okoye, 39, is the most frequently performed African-American woman composer in the world of symphonic music. Her best-known work, "Voices Shouting Out," a five-minute orchestral piece played on Martin Luther King Day by the Philadelphia Orchestra, is inspired by the horrific events of Sept. 11, 2001.

The recent holiday weekend was a breakthrough for Okoye, a musician of Nigerian descent who grew up in Massapequa. Besides the "Voices" performance, Downtown Music Productions performed the world premiere of Act I of her opera.

OPERATIC CHOICES "I wanted to write a longer piece

about a black woman," Okoye says. "I thought of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Since I was working in Baltimore at the time, I researched Tubman," who was born into slavery on Maryland's eastern shore. "I wanted to know her motivation. What makes a woman take such risks?"

It was all about family, Okoye found. Fearing that she would be sold, Harriet escaped and "crossed that line to freedom" — the Mason-

Dixon Line. But, as she says in dictated letters from which Okoye's libretto is drawn — Tubman could not read or write: "How can I have freedom without my family?"

Facing mortal hazard each time, Tubman returned to Maryland to retrieve her family and other slaves by way of the Underground Railroad network that took her as far north as Canada. She and John Tubman, the free man she married, settled in Auburn, N.Y.

MUSICAL RIDE Sunday's concert also features a Julius Williams world premiere, an arrangement of "Wade in the Water" by fellow Hofstra professor Chandler Carter, Wendell Logan's "Runagate, Runagate," a new arrangement of "Go Down Moses," plus a Joplin rag. Among the performers are soprano Diana Solomon-Glover, singing the Tubman song cycle, contralto Nicole Mitchell, tenor Robert Anthony Mack, pianist Roy Eaton, members of Hofstra University Orchestra and the combined Hofstra Chamber Choir and Hempstead High School Select Chorale.

In her narration, Okoye addresses basic questions: "Did Harriet Tubman invent the Underground Railroad? Was it an actual train? There are a lot of myths," she says.