

# Nkeiru Okoye, Composer

www.nkeiruokoye.com



## Program Notes

### Black Bottom

*For Soli Soprano, Mezzo, Tenor and Bass-Baritone, and Orchestra*

Music and Lyrics by Nkeiru Okoye

- I. Tribute: Shout
- II. Shops on Hastings
- III. Tribute: Moan
- IV. Bethel AME
- V. Children's Games
- VI. Sweet Story
- VII. Tribute 3: Breathe
- VIII. 5461 Brush Street
- IX. Tribute 4: Dance

Approximate duration is 23-25 minutes

Commissioned by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra with a grant from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation in celebration of Classical Roots and the Orchestra Hall Centennial Season

## INSTRUMENTATION

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2 Flutes

Piccolo

Oboe

English Horn

2 Clarinets in Bb

Bass Clarinet in Bb

2 Bassoons

4 Horns in F

3 Trumpets in C

1 Tenor Trombone

1 Bass Trombone

Tuba

Timpani

3 Percussion\*

Electric bass

Strings

\* Orchestral Bells, Tubular bells, Marimba, Xylophone Cymbals, Snare Drum, Hi-Hat, Drum Set  
Anvil, Congas or African drums, Bass Drum

## Nkeiru Okoye, Composer

Program notes for *Black Bottom*

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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This work is intended for singers who are well versed in contemporary concert music as well as improvisatory performance practices of traditional African American churches and jazz.

### PROGRAM NOTES

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Grappling with the complex fabric of Detroit's urban renewal history, composer Nkeiru Okoye's *Black Bottom* crafts a bold portrayal of the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods' musical social life in the 1920s-1960s. Black Bottom was said to have been named after the fertile top soil on which it was established, until the neighborhood was razed to construct the Chrysler Freeway (I-375) in 1964. The picture of black upward mobility, Black Bottom was a destination for entrepreneurs, public figures, and musicians, including Sidney Barthwell, Mayor Coleman Young, Charlie Premas, Laverne Baker, and Della Reese. This composition is meant to raise questions about the destruction of a vibrant neighborhood and the reasoning behind why Black Bottom was selected for demolition.

Pictorially inspired, *Black Bottom* transports listeners to this storied place and time through nine movements, setting us right at its most popular vein: Hastings Street. The piece features a full orchestra and four versatile singers who deploy "extended techniques" exploring the African-American voice as an instrument and the instrumentation as voices. Okoye challenges us by incorporating song forms like the "sung story," which is the combination of African storytelling (a parable with a point), African-American musical styles (e.g. choral singing), and the narrative pageantry of opera. Audiences are invited to listen for spoken and unspoken messages in the form of short musical motives derived from interviews and other research.

**Tribute 1: Shout** – Shout is a tribute to the elders, drawing from African-derived traditions such as Kwanzaa commemoration. To depict a sonic mapping of the Black Bottom neighborhood, African-American voices, African drumming, and jazz textures are used.

**Two Shops on Hastings** – Centering on Hastings Street, audiences are placed in Joe's Record Shop, in the midst of a busy thoroughfare. Consistent with the African "talking instrument" tradition, musicians "speak" and establish the artistic motives. Then we are introduced to the owner of Barthwell's Drugs, Sidney Barthwell, and his relationship with wife Gladys Whitfield-Barthwell. Barthwell is heard in a baritone voice duplicated by trombone with perpetual movement, illustrating him working to build a thriving business empire. The three-note chromatic opening is evocative of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

**Tribute 2: Moan** – This slow, almost excruciating prelude conjures African women keening as they mourn separation from loved ones. As Moan progresses, one hears a resemblance to the despair of observing bulldozers desecrating a cherished community. The movement ends with

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Program notes for *Black Bottom*

church bells ringing, cuing congregants to worship with a familiar refrain of the Doxology that one might hear from the four prominent black churches in the neighborhood.

**Bethel A.M.E.** – A tribute to black churches focusing on the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) denomination, this movement imitates the Decalogue and iconic hymns, including the distinct “Soon I Will Be Done.” The A.M.E. Decalogue comprises a responsorial reading of the Ten Commandments and a struck anvil, which signifies the founding of the A.M.E. denomination in a blacksmith shop.

**Children’s Games** – Prompted by a photo of little girls jumping rope with the caption “Gangs,” this fugue is an original tune inspired by the children’s game lyric “one potato, two potato, three potato, four;” then the melody is trans- formed into something new.

**Sweet Story** – A “sung story” about the Civil Rights figure Dr. Ossian Sweet, who pursued an American dream that cost him his life. A tenor solo with soprano, mezzo-soprano, and baritone call and response is featured in a black church choral style. Multivocal narratives are conveyed through layering simple rhyme schemes with contrasting somber text.

**Tribute 3: Breathe** – Interweaving previous tribute motives, this jazz waltz has sparse instrumentation and no vocalists, mirroring the intimacy of the Paradise Theatre – the jazz and blues venue that Orchestra Hall became in the 1940’s.

**5461 Brush Street** – A “sung story” of an unsung Civil Rights leader, Dr. Rosa Slade Gragg. A dark-skinned, privileged, and cultured woman, Dr. Gragg founded a women’s club that did charitable work, an essential resource during the Great Depression. Music from jazz clubs can be heard. The A.M.E. and historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) choral tradition is alluded to, as is the symphonic and chamber music that would have floated through the air at Dr. Gragg’s club teas. Because Dr. Gragg’s name is not famous, it is a signature sounded several times as a motif by vocalists and orchestra.

**Tribute 4: Dance** – The closing tribute is given to the elders and ancestors, those who have preceded us; it also looks to the future in an illustration of *Sankofa* – a word from the Akan people of Ghana that expresses the concept of knowing the past in order to make the future better.

—Dr. Alisha L. Jones ©2020.