

Nkeiru Okoye, Ph.D.

Program Notes

Songs of Harriet Tubman

Music and Lyrics by Nkeiru Okoye

1. My Name is Araminta
2. My Name is Harriet, Now
3. I am Harriet Tubman, Free Woman
4. I am Moses, The Liberator

ABOUT SONGS OF HARRIET TUBMAN

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.

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.

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Program notes for "Songs of Harriet Tubman"

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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PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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 for execution 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.

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Program notes for "Songs of Harriet Tubman"

TEXT:

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
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.

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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?

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

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COMPOSER STATEMENT – ABOUT THE OPERA HARRIET TUBMAN

"I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person," sings the protagonist in **HARRIET TUBMAN: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom**. In real life Tubman made the statement when describing her first taste of freedom to journalist, Sarah Bradford. But in the same utterance, she admits to mixed feelings about being free while her family remained in bondage. These conflicting emotions from a noteworthy heroine were so compelling, that they became the root of my opera.

Many people know about Harriet Tubman as the legendary American hero; and when originally embarking on this journey of my first opera, I was prepared to write a fictionalized Underground Railroad encounter with Tubman. However, since that had been done already, I decided to find Tubman as a human being beyond her enslavement and liberation of others. This was accomplished through three years of reading recent biographies, fieldwork on Maryland's Eastern shore, collaborating with biographers, researching abolitionists, and reading slave narratives and accounts of life specific to where she lived.

My telling of Araminta "Harriet" Ross Tubman's story involves a community touched by her activities: the close-knit family into which she was born, her real-life love interest – a free man named John Tubman, and the abolitionists William Still, stationmaster of the Philadelphia Underground Railroad Station, and Reverend Samuel Green who secreted slaves out of Tubman's community. Tying the story together is the bond between Tubman and her sister Rachel who promise that "nothing but the grave" will tear them apart.

The opera's grounding in folk music gives it yet another dimension – one that is educational, while entertaining. Between spirituals, juba, ragtime, field hollers, work songs, gospel, jazz, and shouts, the opera remains surprisingly contemporary, interweaving these idioms, seamlessly, with Western traditions.