

NKEIRU OKOYE

Nkeiru Okoye was born in New York in 1972 and grew up traveling between the US and Nigeria.



Charlotte Mecklenburg (2018)

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, who were all asked 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 and/or to Charlotte?

Is there a short story or saying that speaks to your Charlotte experience, or cultural heritage, or a childhood memory?

What is something in Charlotte that makes you feel particularly 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

AT A GLANCE...

PREMIERE: Sept. 21, 2018 on this stage.

The piece is titled after the city's namesake Queen who, according to Smithsonian magazine, likely had mixed-race heritage. Queen Charlotte supported composers, including one of Bach's sons and even Mozart. The composition's title ties into Okoye's own body of work, which has pieces about two other Black women, Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Tubman.

Duration: approx. 12 minutes

blues, and 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 police shooting of a 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 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.

- Nkeiru Okoye, *September 2018*



Celebrating Charlotte at 250



CHARLOTTE
SYMPHONY
CHRISTOPHER WARREN-GREEN
music director