

Nkeiru
OKOYE

When the Caged Bird Sings

Coburn • Brown • Dashiell • Savage • Sykes • Chestnut

EXIGENCE • University of Michigan Choirs

University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra • Kenneth Kiesler



Nkeiru
OKOYE
(b. 1972)

When the Caged Bird Sings (2023–24)

A Musical Celebration

Celebrant Rita Coburn
Mother Angela Brown, Soprano
Cerise Christie Dashiell, Mezzo-soprano
Guidance Counselor Issachah Savage, Tenor
Father Jubilant Sykes, Baritone
Minister of Music Cyrus Chestnut, Piano
Congregants EXIGENCE

Cyrus Chestnut, Piano [1] [3] [4] [7] [9] [10] [12] [14] [16] [17]

EXIGENCE [1]–[5] [7]–[10] [13]–[15] [17]

A Sphinx Vocal Ensemble

Eugene Rogers, Founding Director • Julian Goods, Rehearsal Accompanist

Soloists:

Lenora Green-Turner [3], **Nicole Joseph** [4], Soprano

Tyrese Byrd, LaVonté Heard, Tenor [3]

University of Michigan Choirs [1]–[5] [7]–[9] [11]–[13] [15] [17]

Chamber Choir

Eugene Rogers, Director of University Choirs • Scott VanOrnum, Rehearsal Accompanist

Orpheus Singers

Eugene Rogers, Artistic Director • Scott VanOrnum, Rehearsal Pianist

University Choir

Mark Stover, Director • Mariah Boucher, Rehearsal Accompanist

University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra

Kenneth Kiesler

Part I: Gather Together in My Name

19:32

- 1 Who am I supposed to be? (*solì, celebrant, congregants, choir, piano*) 5:13
- 2 Devotions (*solì, choir*) 0:38
- 3 Shine your light upon us (*celebrant, congregants, choir, piano*) 7:29
- 4 The Beatitudes (*celebrant, congregants with soprano improvisations, choir*) 6:11

Part II: Now Sheba Sings the Song

20:46

- 5 Cerise's Story, Part 1 – You gave me a baby girl
(*soprano [as Mother], celebrant, congregants, choir*) 6:13
- 6 He Saw Her Beauty (*tenor*) 2:43
- 7 I am Thine, O Lord (*celebrant, soprano, congregants, choir*) 2:50
- 8 Sometimes life gets ugly (*celebrant, mezzo-soprano, congregants, choir*) 8:55

Part III: And Still I Rise

11:49

- 9 Cerise's Story, Part 2 – I thought this life would protect us
(*baritone [as Father], congregants, choir*) 9:30
- 10 Pass me not, O Gentle Savior (*congregants*) 2:15

Part IV: I Shall Not Be Moved

12:07

- 11 Cerise's Story, Part 3 – It takes a village
(*tenor [as Guidance Counselor], congregants, choir*) 7:30
- 12 Interlude — She shall not be moved (*congregants, choir*) 4:33

Part V: A Song Flung up to Heaven

14:22

- 13 Butterflies — Be Transformed (*solì, celebrant, congregants, choir*) 2:34
- 14 Be Transformed (*celebrant, congregants, piano*) 0:56
- 15 I'm so glad I found me (*solì, celebrant, choir*) 1:50
- 16 Cerise's Story, Part 4 – You sheltered me
(*mezzo-soprano [as Cerise], celebrant, piano*) 4:23
- 17 When a Caged Bird Sings – Night turns to day (*solì, celebrant, congregants, choir*) 4:37

Recorded: 11–13 February 2024 at Hill Auditorium, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

Executive producer: Kenneth Kiesler

Co-producers: Bernd Gottinger, Nkeiru Okoye, Eugene Rogers, Cyrus Chestnut

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The premiere live performance and this premiere recording were a collaboration of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance (SMTD), David Gier, Dean, and UMS, Matthew Van Besien, President.

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Cocktails, Cookies and the Composer

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Nkeiru Okoye (b. 1972)

When the Caged Bird Sings

Nkeiru Okoye, composer and lyricist, has been hailed as “gripping” and “evocative” by *The New York Times*. She is a 2023 winner of The American Prize in vocal chamber music, a 2021 Guggenheim Fellow, and a 2021–23 Hermitage Artist Retreat Fellow. Okoye was appointed composer in residence for the Detroit Symphony’s Classical Roots festival in 2020. Her works have been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, OPERA America, and ASCAP, among others.

Okoye’s music has been commissioned and performed by major organizations such as The Philadelphia Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Sinfonietta, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, Houston Grand Opera, The Royal Opera and Opera North (UK) and The Juilliard School, as well as artists such as cellist Matt Haimovitz and pianist Lara Downes. Her compositions blend diverse musical styles, creating “a sound that’s uniquely hers,” as noted by Minnesota Public Radio. She has written libretti for works such as *Love and Longing* (The Juilliard School), *Inside is What Remains* (Tulsa Opera), and *We Met at the Symphony* (The Harlem Chamber Players).

As an educator, Okoye has taught at institutions such as the University of Michigan, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, The New School, University of Louisville, and Spelman College. She has also served as a featured composer on panels for San Francisco Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, OPERA America, and Gateways Music Festival, among others. In 2021, she was an inaugural William Grant Still Fellow at the Conductors Retreat at Medomak.

Okoye is the artistic chair for the American Opera Project’s Composers and the Voice program, a mentor for the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and serves on the board of Composers Now. Her music has been recorded on labels such as Albany Records, MSR Classics, and Rising Sun Music, and her works are published by Theodore Presser Company and Carl Fischer Music.

www.nkeiruokoye.com



Photo: HV Digital Arts

When the Caged Bird Sings (2023–24)

A Musical Celebration

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opens,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals –
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats her wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For she must fly back to her perch and cling
When she fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting –
I know why she beats her wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When her wing is bruised and her bosom sore, –
When she beats her bars and she would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that she sends from her heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven she flings –
I know why the caged bird sings!

*Adapted by Mark Clague from the poem Sympathy (1899)
by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)*

The Caged Bird Flies Free: Nkeiru Okoye's music as a ritual of communal healing

When the Caged Bird Sings is something new and old at the same time. Like an oratorio, it fuses orchestra and chorus into a sacred service, here bringing the sounds of the Black American church into the concert hall. Like an opera, it tells a very human story with words, music, drama, costumes, and characters. Four powerful voices command the stage: a soprano, the mother; a mezzo-soprano, the daughter; a tenor, the guidance counselor; and a baritone, the father. The entire chorus speaks as the community, while a subset – led by the pianist in the role of minister of music – represents Black congregants in worship. The narrator (celebrant) is both sage and celebrant, timeless, all-knowing. She is an ethereal pastor – unseen by the

other characters – but always at the center of the drama. The composer originally called the composition “a gathering,” signaling that it was a communal ritual, bringing people together as an act of healing, hope, and celebration. *When the Caged Bird Sings* is all of these.

Text and music have been created and woven together by composer Dr. Nkeiru Okoye, a woman of American and Nigerian heritage, to explore themes of perseverance and triumph. It is the story of the transformative power of Black womanhood. It speaks of hope and possibility, while it is also a warning that past traumas will be repeated, until such a time when the community listens, learns, and is itself transformed.

Dr. Okoye's work draws from a powerful well of Black history. Inspired by the life and work of Dr. Maya Angelou, *When the Caged Bird Sings* pulses with the strength of countless Black women whose courage and creativity have changed history: the poet Phillis Wheatley, abolitionists Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, journalist Ida B. Wells, entrepreneur C.J. Walker, vocalists Sissieretta Jones and Marian Anderson, author Zora Neale Hurston, dancer Katherine Dunham, singer Billie Holiday, politician Shirley Chisholm, athletes Althea Gibson and Serena Williams, activists Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King and Dr. Angela Davis, actress and media mogul Oprah Winfrey, and former First Lady Michelle Obama. These and so many others exemplify the exceptional and everyday activism that has shaped our world. Their stories echo in Okoye's music, in the words spoken and sung through the musical idioms of the Black church, as acts of faith, hope, courage, and community.

Told throughout *When the Caged Bird Sings* is the story of Cerise (Cherish), a young Black woman that the world seeks to doubt and diminish merely because of the color of her skin and braids in her hair. Cerise, whose name itself signals her parents' love and protection, nevertheless encounters racial prejudice – sometimes overt, often surreptitious, always relentless – in her neighborhood, which is predominantly White. Her family offers support and solace, with the message: “Let her know that she is loved; Let her know that she is cherished.”

At one point, Cerise falls victim to peer pressure in the attempt to fit in. Her high school counselor intervenes, she recovers, escapes the cage of discrimination, triumphs, and gives back, contributing to the legacy of Black womanhood, and adding her voice to a historical chorus of those who transformed adversity into opportunity. “She sets herself free,” as the lyrics state.

Her story also parallels the composer's own. It is the all too personal story of lived experience, but one less autobiographical than simply human and universal. As the composer has remarked, “Cerise is not a stereotype. She's just a girl.”

When the Caged Bird Sings is organized in five parts, each titled after a Maya Angelou book or poem:

Part I: Gather Together in My Name introduces us to the cast and invokes the drama's central question "Who am I supposed to be?" It is a question that vexes each of the tale's protagonists.

Part II: Now Sheba Sings the Song focuses on the first part of Cerise's story: her mother's joy at her birth. The tenor offers praises and what the composer calls a "valentine to all Black women." The narrated choral number *Sometimes Life Gets Ugly* presents the emotional crux of the composition. It gives voice to a pernicious social dialogue, which rises from the whispers of the choir. It is a voice that too often tells Black women that they are "too dark, too poor, too ugly, too broken,... unworthy, subhuman."

Part III: And Still I Rise tells the second part of Cerise's story, of her relentless determination despite the forces holding her back. Her father laments that his new job as a junior vice president was "still not enough" to protect her.

Part IV: I Shall Not Be Moved recounts a crisis for Cerise. The tenor, representing her high school guidance counselor, recounts a story of personal collapse and social collision. Cerise has fallen victim to drug addiction. Given warning that police will raid the school, the counselor removes evidence from Cerise's locker to protect her. The music here is punctuated by the first four notes of the *Dies irae* ('Day of Wrath'), a chant melody associated with the Requiem Mass of the Catholic Church, that here represents turmoil and confusion.

Part V: A Song Flung up to Heaven depicts the triumph and transformation of Cerise, now a grown woman. Here a lyrical flute melody that morphs into the mezzo-soprano's vocals represents the butterfly – a living symbol of transformation that echoes in the poetry of Maya Angelou. This musical theme serves as an example of true beauty, but a beauty that often masks the change that has made its realization possible, and that masks an underlying trauma overcome.

Musically, *When the Caged Bird Sings* is rooted deep within the sounds of the Black church, and cast in concert music tradition. Okoye's compositional voice travels seamlessly between styles: the romantic, minimalist, gospel-inflected, and improvisatory. Often the melodic passion of a solo vocalist foreshadows the lyrical contours of specific hymns and spirituals, shifting from minor to major and blossoming into full arrangements of traditional sacred melodies, such as *I Am Thine, O Lord, I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned*, or *Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior*.

The goal of *When the Caged Bird Sings*, according to the composer, is not only to celebrate the transformative power of Black women, but to use the power of art to transform the world. The drama closes with an original hymn of the same title. Okoye's lyric encapsulates the journey, both traveled and envisioned:

When a caged bird sings
Despite captivity
I think it means that in her dreams
She can see
Herself
beyond the bars
And beyond her tears
beyond her scars
And beyond her fears
She is transformed
And she set herself free.

Maybe not coincidentally, the composer's own name – "Nkeiru" – means "the future is greater than the past" in her father's native language of Igbo. In this sense, *When the Caged Bird Sings* envisions a world in which parental prophecy is doubly fulfilled.

When the Caged Bird Sings is both prayer and promise. Through this work Okoye gives voice to the hope that we as the audience will be changed. It shares the hope that we will all understand our nation and world as more capacious and come to "see Black women in a different way."

Yet *When the Caged Bird Sings* is also Dr. Okoye's own personal proclamation, as artist and person. With pride it shouts to the heavens on behalf of all Black women – "we are triumphant; we are doctors, lawyers, educators, entrepreneurs; and we are FABULOUS."

Mark Clague

WHEN THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Part I: Gather Together in My Name

1 Who am I supposed to be?

(Starts singing from off stage. Other soloists follow her, in turn. Their solos vary, following same harmony. Setting is amorphous, as if coming from beyond. It's a theater setting.)

MEZZO-SOPRANO [AS CERISe]

Who am I supposed to be?
Who am I supposed to be?
In a world that cannot see
Anything good
For little girls that
Look like me.

Who am I supposed to be?
Who am I supposed to be?
In a world that cannot see
Anything good,
From little Black girl
That look like me.

(Cerise continues her melody as the other soloists join her. Each, as if unseen by the others.)

SOPRANO [AS MOTHER]

What will my daughter's future look like?

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

How will I protect my family?

TENOR [AS GUIDANCE COUNSELOR]

It takes a village to raise a child.

CONGREGANTS

(Congregants hum intermittently throughout Celebrant's opening.)
Hmmm

CELEBRANT

(Stands or walks onstage. She is unnoticed by the soloists. She approaches Cerise, who continues singing.)

"Poor child,
Poor little Black girl,"
So they say.
How they underestimate you.

CERISe

Anything from girls that look like me

CELEBRANT

They have no idea.

(Setting is now church-service like. Congregants are seated. Celebrant moves to center stage. She speaks grandly. She is a mix between clergy, griot, and Michelle Obama-like storyteller. Congregants interject intermittently.)

Call and Response

(Throughout the section, congregants interject, clap, etc. in call and response style. Text is provided as placeholders and should not be interpreted literally.)

CELEBRANT

"I know why the caged bird sings," wrote Dr. Maya Angelou.

CONGREGANTS

(Interject, as if in church, followed by piano interjections)

CELEBRANT

She was quoting from a poem called *Sympathy*.

CONGREGANTS

Mmh, mmh, well, etc.

CELEBRANT

Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote it back in 1899.

CONGREGANTS

Tell it, tell it.

CELEBRANT

Yet those in Dr. Angelou's generation felt the same frustration.

CONGREGANTS

You better tell it.

CELEBRANT

And generation after generation,

CONGREGANTS

Preach!

CELEBRANT

It continues.

Let us say, "Enough!"

CONGREGANTS

(Singing. Choir Director has them rise, as a chorus. He gestures boldly, showcasing his choir's agility, in the manner of an HBCU choir director.)
Enough!

CELEBRANT

Enough!

CONGREGANTS

Enough!

CELEBRANT

Enough!

CONGREGANTS

Enough!

CELEBRANT

Enough!

CONGREGANTS

Enough!

CELEBRANT

It's time to change the narrative.

CONGREGANTS

Yes, it is.

CELEBRANT

Glory

CONGREGANTS

Glory

2 Devotions**SOPRANO**

Glory, Glory, Glory, Glory

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Feeling the Spirit.

SOPRANO/TENOR

Welcome, welcome, welcome Lord.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Feeling the Spirit.

CELEBRANT

Grace and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Shine your light upon us**CELEBRANT**

The word of God says,

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sins and I will heal their land."

Let us pray.

CONGREGANTS

Yes. Thank you, God.

SOLISTS AND/OR CONGREGANTS

Shine your light upon us.
Let your mercy rain upon us.
Let Your Spirit descend upon us.
And hear us as we
Gather
Together.
We ask that you heal our land.

Tend the sick.
Feed the poor.
Guide us through the hard times;
Bring justice and restore.

As we
Gather
Together,
We ask that you heal our land.

Grant us peace,
End all war.
Comfort your people.
Open heaven's door.

Shine your light upon us.
Let your mercy rain upon us.
Let Your Spirit, descend upon us.
And hear us as we
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Grant us peace.
End all war.
Comfort your people.
Open heaven's door.

4 The Beatitudes

CELEBRANT

Mother Maya said,
"I love the melodies in the Old Testament, how preachers highlight them when they read from Scripture. But I was influenced forever by the New Testament. I love the Beatitudes, informing us that the meek shall inherit the earth."

(Introductory music starts.)

CHOIR

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they will see God, they will see God!

Part II: Now Sheba Sings the Song

5 Cerise's Story, Part 1 – You gave me a baby girl

(Music starts with "Who am I supposed to be" and becomes the "Let her know that she is loved" theme)

CONGREGANTS

Let her know that she is loved.

Let her know that she is cherished, cherished.

SOPRANO [AS MOTHER]

Dear Lord,

Thank you for this child growing inside me.

After years of praying,

You gave me a baby girl,

A baby girl

To treasure.

Let Paul and I be good parents to her.

Let her never be in need.

Let her live to her potential.

Let her know You.

Most of all,

Let her know that she is loved.

Let her know that she is cherished.

My baby will face obstacles, just as I have.

People judging her because of her skin,

Trying to tether her with their expectations.

Dear Lord,

Give me the wisdom to guide her through them.

Give her the strength to overcome.

And most of all,

Let her know that she is loved.

Let her know that she is cherished.

I think I'll call her Cherish, no.... Cerise.

CELEBRANT

Of what is the value of a woman?

She is above fine rubies.

"Dark am I, yet lovely," said the Queen of Sheba, to Solomon.
She said, "Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun."
Yet, he loved her.

CONGREGANTS

Yes, he did.

6 He Saw Her Beauty

TENOR

He saw her beauty

In bronzed splendor,

And said, "How beautiful you are!"

He prized her, valued her, adored her.

Against convention he loved her.

Against tradition he loved her.

He loved her.

Against convention he loved her.

Against tradition he loved her.

He loved her.

He loved her!

7 I am Thine, O Lord

CELEBRANT

I am Thine, oh Lord.

I have heard Thy Voice,

And it told Thy love to me.

But I long to rise

In the arms of faith,

And be closer drawn to Thee.

CONGREGANTS WITH SOPRANO

I am Thine, oh Lord, I have heard Thy voice,

And it told my love to Thee.

But I long to rise in the arms of faith,

And be closer drawn to Thee.

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,

To the cross where Thou hast died;

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,

To Thy precious, bleeding side.

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To the cross where Thou hast died;
Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To Thy precious, bleeding side.

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To the cross where Thou hast died;
Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To Thy precious, bleeding side.

8 Sometimes life gets ugly

CELEBRANT

Sometimes life gets ugly,
And it's all she can do to hold on.

CONGREGANTS

I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned,
I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned,
I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned,
I've been talked about, sure's you're born.

CHOIR

Too Dark
Too Poor
Too Ugly
Too Broken

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down!

CELEBRANT

Unworthy. How they can make you feel so unworthy.
Subhuman, I see it in their eyes.
Unwelcome, despite what they say.
I can feel it in their speech.
Contempt!
Fear of what I represent,
Fear of who I am,
Fear that I might overcome!

CHOIR

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down

I've been 'buked.

CONGREGANTS

There is trouble all over this world.
There is trouble all over this world.
There is trouble all over this world.
It won't stop this Black Girl.

CHOIR

Too Dark
Too Poor
Too Ugly
Too Broken

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down

CELEBRANT

It's no longer enough to be tolerated;
I will go where I am celebrated!
And if there is nowhere,
No place to affirm me
To go,
Then I will stay,
Stand my ground,
And celebrate myself!

CHOIR

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down!

CONGREGANTS

I've been 'buked.

CELEBRANT

Black mothers crying out for their children.
(Lord have mercy!)
Don't know if they won't ever come home.
Made to stand in the back of the bus.

Loud
Angry
Mammy figure
Welfare queen

Criticized for my hair,
Criticized for my skin,
Criticized for my strength,
Criticized for my weakness!

Just 'cause you think I'm economically depressed,
You presume I'm incompetent.

CHOIR

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down

CELEBRANT

But this caged bird is gonna sing!
She's gonna sing and press on.
And I'm going to rise!

CONGREGANTS

Been to the river and I've been baptized...
Been to the river and I've been baptized...
Been to the river and I've been baptized...
You can oppress me, I'll still rise.
World might oppress me, I'll still rise.

CELEBRANT

I'm going to rise!
I'm going to rise!

CONGREGANTS

She's rising!

Part III: And Still I Rise

9 Cerise's Story, Part 2 – I thought this life would protect us

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

BARITONE [WITH CHOIR]

Savior, my Savior,
Do not pass me by.

While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.
Please don't pass me by.

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

Dear Lord, my, my Lord,
I thank you for the loves in my life.
My wife is lovely, and a true delight
To anyone who meets her.
And our beautiful daughter Cerise takes after her,
She's so sweet and bright.

My, my Lord.

You blessed me with this job
As a junior Vice President.
It let me move my family
Into a nicer house than I could ever imagine.

And ev'ry day, with these Ladies You put in my life,
I let them know that they are loved,
Let them know that they are cherished.

I thought this life would protect us, Father!

Go to church, Say my prayers!
Get good grades, Go to college!
Wear a nice suit, Be a good Black Man!
Love my wife, Raise our daughter.

And it's still not enough!

In the Sea of Milk that is our neighborhood,
I've been stopped and frisked for being Black
And driving!
Just for driving!

And I can bear it...
You help me bear it.
But there are sometimes,
sometimes...

My little girl was sent home from school today.
Not because she talked back, she never misbehaved.
They didn't like the braids in my baby's hair.

Tell, me, how am I supposed to live with that?
How am I supposed to live with that!?
How am I supposed to live with that!?

CHOIR

Live with that, live with that, live with that, live with that!

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

How am I supposed to live with that!?

(Breaks down into sobs, as music continues.)

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

Spoken

Cerise wants to do well. Oh Lord, for high school,
Help me find her a better place.

Sung

Father, help me,
Help me –

10 Pass me not, O gentle Savior

(Congregants with pianist sing traditional version of “Pass Me Not”. Time signature is 12/8, as in Baptist/Pentecostal tradition)

CONGREGANTS

Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry,
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.
Do not pass me by.

Part IV: I Shall Not Be Moved

11 Cerise’s Story, Part 3 – It takes a village

TENOR [AS GUIDANCE COUNSELOR]

Well, well,
My,
Bless me Father,
for I have sinned.
It’s been two months and six days since my last confession.

I broke the laws of man, Father.
I broke the laws of man, Father.
Our new student at the high school,
Poor Cerise,
She was the first of us
They’d have to see as equal.

Janitors, cafeteria workers.
Even me, the Guidance Counselor,
To them, we
are all invisible people.

But then there was Cerise.

They picked on her,
Called her everything but a Child of God.
But she made friends, made them by and by.
She never caused her Mama a moment of sorrow.
Then she joined the Future Business Leaders of Tomorrow.
For better grades,
They took drugs,
And Cerise did too.

I advised,
She wouldn’t heed,
Was nothing I could do,
Or so I thought.

Drugs rumored throughout the school:
Cocaine, Adderall, Whatever.
To fit in she broke all the rules.
And for Cerise, I did, too.

Early one morning
I raced to her locker to retrieve a vial
Right before the police made their arrival.
I knew those White kids would never face jail.

But a Black child...

Was I wrong Father?

Too many of our girls get locked away, caged for a single bad moment.

I told her parents, to put her in rehab.

I pray she'll know that she is loved.

I pray she'll know that she is cherished.

It takes a village to raise a child.

God put her in mine.

12 Interlude — She shall not be moved

CONGREGANTS AND MASS CHOIR

Even in the darkest hour,

She shall not be moved.

His hands will hold her 'til the morning comes;

She will not be moved,

And she dresses herself in strength

And she works harder than any.

And she reaches herself to the needy

And her work was not in vain.

And her work was not in vain.

She is clothed in Solomon's splendor;

She shall not be moved.

Strength and dignity are upon her;

She will not be moved.

And she opens her mouth with wisdom

And she teaches kindness.

And there's nothing to compare to her

And her hope is not in vain.

And her hope is not in vain.

God is watching over her,

God is watching over her,

God will answer her prayers.

God will, for He cares for her.

He will see her through.

He will see her through.

He will see her through.

He will see her through.

Even in the darkest hour

She shall not be moved.

His hands will hold her 'til the morning comes;

She will not be moved.

And she dresses herself in strength

And she works harder than any.

And she reaches herself to the needy

And her work was not in vain.

And her work was not in vain.

Part V: A Song Flung up to Heaven

13 Butterflies — Be Transformed

CELEBRANT

Maya Angelou said, "We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty." It is the ugliness in life, that is the impetus to transform.

14 My friends,

Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

CONGREGANTS

Yes.

CELEBRANT

I said, be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

Together: "Be transformed..."

CONGREGANTS

Be transformed...

CELEBRANT

...by the renewing of your minds.

CONGREGANTS

...by the renewing of your minds.

CELEBRANT

Be transformed! Can I get an "Amen?"

CONGREGANTS

Amen.

(In the theater, congregants as community members encourage Mezzo-soprano [as Cerise].)

15 I'm so glad I found me

MEZZO-SOPRANO [AS CERISE]

(humming)

I'm so glad that I found me

CELEBRANT

(To Cerise)

Little Black girl is all grown up.

Look at you,

Married, and a baby on the way.

(Mezzo-soprano [as Cerise] continues her melody as the other soloists, join her. Each, as if unseen by the others.)

SOPRANO [AS MOTHER]

You gave my daughter back her future.

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

You showed how faith protects my family

TENOR [AS GUIDANCE COUNSELOR]

I'm in the village who raised that child.

(Mezzo-soprano continues humming)

CELEBRANT

Opening today,

The Paul and Nina Walker Center in memory of your parents,

With programs for at risk teens.

You've been told that you're too dark, too ugly.

People assume you're too poor to be something

And that you're just not enough.

But honey, this is your moment.

(Celebrant, returns to her lectern, and closes her book. The Butterfly theme starts.)

16 Cerise's Story, Part 4 – You sheltered me

(Cerise stands. She sees the imaginary butterfly and sings a duet with it, using scat syllables. Her music begins.)

MEZZO-SOPRANO [AS CERISE]

Dear Lord,

Verse 1

I thank you for this moment.

I thought it would never come.

I thought I'd blown my chances;

I'd fallen so low.

And the way to redemption

Is a long, long road.

And I came this far

Just because.

Chorus

You sheltered me from all my foolishness,

You sheltered me when I had made my own mess.

You loved me so,

And you never gave up.

Like the woman at the well,

You gave me a cup.

Verse 2

Looking in the mirror,

It all comes clear.

I'd made so many poor choices

I nearly disappeared.

And the way to redemption

Is a winding road,

And I kept pressing on

Because you were there.

Chorus

You sheltered me

When my faith had lapsed.

You shut the door

When I would have gone back.

You loved me Lord,

And You never gave up.

I am the woman at the well,
And You're giving me a cup.

Bridge

You said be strong and courageous,
You said believe in all goodness.
When it seemed everyone left,
You showed I could trust You.
You said, "hold on," and the dream You gave me
Would come true.

Chorus

You sheltered me
When my faith had lapsed.
You shut the door
When I would have gone back.
You loved me Lord,
And you never gave up.

I am the woman at the well,
And You're giving me a cup.

CELEBRANT

(whispering to Alto [as Cerise])
It's going to be a girl.

17 When a Caged Bird Sings – Night turns to day
(Congregants hum)

SOLOISTS/CONGREGATION

When a caged bird sings...
Captivity
I think that she can see
And find
That beyond the bars
And beyond her tears,
And beyond her scars,
And beyond her fears,
She is transformed
And set herself free.

(Music reprises Beatitudes.)

CELEBRANT

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May He shine His face upon you.
May He grant you peace,
May He bring you joy,
And may He instill in you the spirit of transformation.

CONGREGATION

Amen.

CHOIR

Night turns to day
As the sun bids goodbye.
After the rain,
A band of color fills the sky.

Reminding of a promise from the Most High:
Be transformed, be transformed,
by the renewing of your mind.

Diamonds from the earth beam like
Stars up in the sky.
Shedding its cocoon,
Bursts a stunning butterfly,
Reminding of a promise from the Most High:
Be transformed, be transformed,
By the renewing of your mind.

If you will endure your tears,
A smile appears.
God will hear.
Just Persevere.

Set yourself free like a butterfly.
Set yourself free and float to the sky.

Winter turns to spring and the
Summer becomes harvest.
Seeds become flowers
After soil has a rest.
Reminding of a promise from the Most High:
Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Nkeiru Okoye

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Rita Coburn



Photo: Faye Sadou

Rita Coburn is an award-winning director, writer, and producer with nearly four decades of experience in radio, television, and film. Known for her work in Black and underrepresented cultures, Coburn produced Maya Angelou's Oprah Radio program and co-directed the acclaimed *Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise* (2016), which won a Peabody Award. She also directed *Marian Anderson: The Whole World in Her Hands* (2022), earning a 2023 Christopher Award. Coburn's public engagements include Carnegie Hall, Yale Divinity School, University of Cambridge, and Columbia University.

www.ritacoburn.com

Angela Brown



Photo: Polina Oshero

Soprano Angela Brown has performed on major opera and symphonic stages across six continents. Her debut at The Metropolitan Opera in *Aida* earned international acclaim. A featured artist on the two-time GRAMMY-winning *Ask Your Mama*, she has premiered operas by Richard Danielpour and Daniel Schnyder. Brown founded Morning Brown, Inc., a nonprofit for artists, and co-hosts the award-winning podcast *Melanated Moments in Classical Music*. She has appeared in PBS documentaries on Marian Anderson, and was named the 2023 Delta Visiting Chair for Global Understanding at the University of Georgia.

www.angelambrown.com

Christie Dashiell



Photo courtesy of the artist

Christie Dashiell is known for her improvisational prowess and effortlessly rich tone. She lives at the musical crossroads of jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel, and soul. Her debut solo album, *Time All Mine* (2016), charted in Billboard's Jazz and Contemporary Jazz Albums, as well as *JazzTimes*' Top 50 Writer's Ballots, Critics' Poll. Dashiell has graced prominent national and international stages and contributed to a variety of albums. She has enjoyed collaborations with Sweet Honey in the Rock and Wynton Marsalis, among others. She serves on the faculties of Temple University, Howard University, and the University of the District of Columbia. Dashiell was nominated for a GRAMMY in 2024 for Best Jazz Album.

www.christiedashiell.com

Issachah Savage



Photo: Jiyang Chen

Dramatic tenor Issachah Savage has performed with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, The Cleveland Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, working with renowned conductors such as Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Gustavo Dudamel. Operatic highlights include roles in *Tannhäuser*, *Otello*, *Aida* and *Rienzi* with top opera companies, including The Metropolitan Opera. Savage is a winner of the Seattle International Wagner Competition, and has received prestigious awards and recognition from institutions such as The Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation, The Olga Forrai Foundation, The Gerda Lissner Foundation, Jensen Foundation Vocal Competition, Opera Index, and the Giulio Gari Foundation.

www.issachahsavage.com

Jubilant Sykes

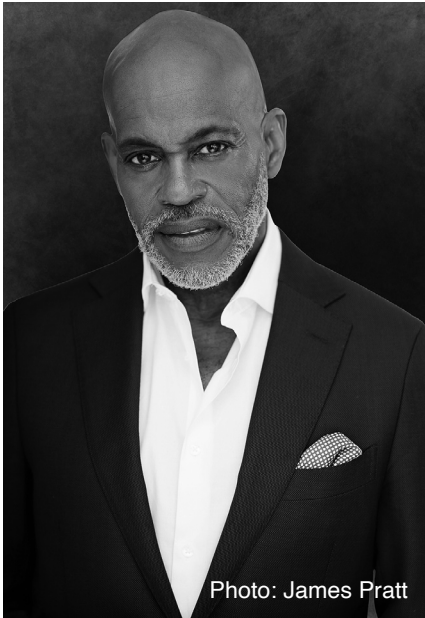


Photo: James Pratt

Baritone Jubilant Sykes is known for his exquisitely versatile voice, blending gospel, jazz, and folk influences with classical training. He has performed leading roles at The Metropolitan Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin, and Detroit Opera, and sung at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Kennedy Center. As a soloist, he has appeared with top orchestras, and his performances span iconic venues including the Hollywood Bowl, Apollo Theatre, and New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. Sykes has performed with the London Symphony Orchestra and BBC Symphony Orchestra, and appeared as an actor in Broadway productions and films.

www.jubilantsykes.com

Cyrus Chestnut



Jazz pianist Cyrus Chestnut pairs his lithe technical skill with a robust, soulful style that speaks to his deep gospel roots and love of swinging hard bop. Chestnut has collaborated with legends such as Wynton Marsalis, Chick Corea, Betty Carter, and Freddie Hubbard. His critically acclaimed albums, including *Revelation* (1994) and *Soul Food* (2001), have earned top accolades, with *Soul Food* making *DownBeat's* best-of list. He also paid tribute to Vince Guaraldi with *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (2000). A prominent educator, Chestnut teaches at Middlebury College and continues to perform globally, cementing his status as one of jazz's foremost pianists.

www.cyruschestnut.net

EXIGENCE

Eugene Rogers, Founding Director



Inspired by the mission of the Sphinx organisation, which aims to increase representation in classical music and celebrate excellence, the EXIGENCE vocal ensemble seeks to promote brilliance and diversity through choral music within Black and Latinx communities by creating a platform for soloists and composers of color while inspiring and challenging audiences. Led by founding conductor Eugene Rogers and comprised of vocal artists including solo performers, educators, conductors and composers, EXIGENCE is a professional vocal ensemble highlighting artistry within Black and Latinx communities and celebrating the power of community and expression through choral music.

www.sphinxmusic.org/exigence-vocal-ensemble

Soprano

Rabihah Dunn • Lenora Green-Turner • Nicole Joseph

Alto

Melissa Connor • Lori Hicks • Monique Spells • Lianna Williams

Tenor

Tyrese Byrd • LaVonté Heard • Matthew Valverde

Bass

Branden Hood • Andrew Smith • Joel Thompson

Eugene Rogers

Lauded choral conductor Eugene Rogers is recognized as a musical leader across North America and beyond. He champions new works and historically overlooked music, and supports emerging talents. Rogers is a two-time Michigan Emmy winner, Sphinx Medal of Excellence recipient, and GRAMMY Award nominee. He serves as director of choirs at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, and artistic director of The Washington Chorus, leading innovative performances and community engagement. Rogers also founded EXIGENCE, a professional ensemble celebrating Black and Latinx artistry, and created a choral series for emerging composers.

www.eugenerogers.com

University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance Choirs



The award-winning University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance Choirs perform the breadth and depth of choral repertoire, from traditional to contemporary a cappella and choral-orchestral works. Led by director Eugene Rogers, the School of Music, Theatre & Dance Choirs have been featured on GRAMMY Award-winning and GRAMMY Award-nominated albums, in addition to performing at national and regional conventions of the American Choral Directors Association and National Collegiate Choral Organization. Most recently, the choir premiered Damien Geter's powerful *The Justice Symphony*, and the Chamber Choir was featured in a Detroit PBS performance of Craig Hella Johnson's acclaimed passion oratorio, *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

University Chamber Choir

Eugene Rogers, Director

Soprano

Hallie Ackerman
Allison Gaines
Cecilia Kowara
Ava Hawkins
Jamiyah Hudson
Goitseman Lehigh
Marisa Redding
Amber Rogers
Juliet Schlefer
Lucia Skrobola
Amber Sosa

Alto

Abby Baker
Emily Barrett
Mira Grayton
Ava Hawkins
Simone Li
Ella Peters
Katie Rohwer
Genevieve Welch

Tenor

Tyrese Byrd
Jacob Carroll
Bryan Ijames
Sydney Mukasa
Stephen Riesen

Eric Reyes
Dawson Trotman
Spencer Vandellen
Keen Williams

Bass

Luca Antonucci
Cody Carlson
Ben Gaughran
Nate Gorman
Micah Huisman
Justin Ingui
Tyler Middleton
Jack Morin
Charlie Morrison
Gabe Paredes
Andrew Smith
Gavin Tomasco

Orpheus Singers

Eugene Rogers, Director

Soprano

Emily Barrett
Eliana Gross
Cecilia Kowara
Allison Lange
Lucy McDowell
Madeleine Rogers
Joelle Vuylsteke
Katie Maraldo

Alto

Nora Farley
Lucy Koukoudian
Veronica Koz
Katie Rohwer
Genevieve Welch

Tenor

Carson Arcuri
Jacob Carroll
Varun Ganapathy
Bryan Ijames
Sydney Mukasa
Ian Pathak
Eric Reyes

Bass

John Brink
Jaden Douglas
Ben Gaughran
Micah Huisman
Duncan McConaughy
Charles McDermott

University Choir

Dr. Mark Stover, Director

Soprano

Emily Becker
Natalie Bridgnell
Kyleigh Burtley
Payton Carter
Rebecca Clark
Aimee Doneth
Lillian Grusz
Lillian Hunwick
Ally Johnson
Nadia Johnson
Yuting Liu
Lucy McDowell
Victoria Pinto
Brooke Studebaker
Yijing Xu
Zhixin Zhang

Alto

Amelie Besch
Amour Bethea
Sohyun Cho
Megan Gottfried
ira Grayton
McKenna Jones
Kora Kennedy
Olivia Kirk
Molly Levin
Qirong Liang

Fiona Liu
Macey Owen
Hannah Park
Caroline Ziegler

Tenor

Ryan Hughes
Benjamin Isyk
Nolan Khandrika
Mark Pettaway III
Hunter Reid
Justin Schutz
Maxwell Vernon

Bass

Jake Bullard
Isaiah Liggins
Brendan Lockhart
Abel Munoz
Xavier Perry
Latimer Rogland
Ellis Schickman
Max Zelle

University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra

Kenneth Kiesler, Music Director



The University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra (UMSO) has been conducted by its music director Kenneth Kiesler since 1995. Its achievements have been recognized through a 2005 GRAMMY Award for Best Classical Album for William Bolcom's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (8.559216-18); The American Prize in Orchestral Performance, 2011; two Adventurous Programming Awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); a GRAMMY Award nomination for its 2014 premiere recording of Milhaud's *L'Orestie d'Eschyle* (8.660349-51); critical acclaim for its recording of music by Vítězlava Kaprálová (8.574144); and a coveted place among *The New York Times* Best Classical Albums of 2023 for Johnson's operas *De Organizer* and *The Dreamy Kid* (8.669041). The UMSO has also been at the core of the university's distinguished program in orchestral conducting, has performed at the festivals of Salzburg and Evian, and made a return appearance at Carnegie Hall. The orchestra has premiered dozens of new works by contemporary composers, and has several recordings currently available on the Naxos, Equilibrium, Pierian and Centaur labels.

www.smtld.umich.edu

Violin

Andrew Choi**
Anda Jiang**
Cameron Jeppson*
Lauren Kim*
Matthew Adams
Ian Aegerter
Sara Aldana
Jordan Bartel
Fiona Cunningham-Murray
Zoe Fong
Liana Fonseca
Linnea Geenen
Ellen Hayashi
Bright Johnston
Yuki Kanazawa
Bethlehem Kelley
Aidan Krieger
Angela Lee
Kirsten Lee
Enoria Li
Anna Linder
Joshua Millet
Alden Rohwer
Evan Schuman
Ian Stripling Jensen
May Tang
Javier F. Torres Delgado

Cara Wunder
Matt Xu

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Margot Cunningham*
Benjamin Martz*
Martha Mulcahy†
Mateo Calderon
Alondra Damian-Noyola
Kim LaFranzo
Zoey Long
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Diego Mieres
Jane Mockus
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Cello

Maxwell Remmer*
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Ting-Yu Yeh

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Judson Whitney

Trombone

Elijah Emmons*
Andreas Naagaard

Bass Trombone

Ryan Meygaard

Tuba

Brandon Mooney*

Percussion

Xin Yi Chong
James Koo
Ansel Neeley
Karl Rueterbusch
David Wang*

Harp

Beth Henson*
Madeline Chen

Keyboard

Samuel Goldfarb*

Assistant Conductors

Yeo Reyong Ahn
Luca Antonucci

** Concertmaster

* Principal

† Associate Principal

Kenneth Kiesler



Photo: Bailey Eiland

Kenneth Kiesler, GRAMMY Award nominee and winner of the 2024 American Prize National Arts Award, has led over 100 orchestras across six continents. He was acclaimed for Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia* at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, and Bright Sheng's *The Silver River* in Singapore. As music director of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra (1980–2000), he appeared at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, and was named Conductor Laureate for life. Kiesler has given dozens of premieres, and founded MORE (Michigan Orchestra Repertoire for Equity). His discography includes Milhaud's *L'Orestie d'Eschyle* (8.660349-51), which was nominated for a GRAMMY Award, and Johnson's *De Organizer* and *The Dreamy Kid* (8.669041), which was included in *The New York Times* Best Classical Music Albums of 2023. Kiesler's teachers included Carlo Maria Giulini, Pierre Boulez, Erich Leinsdorf, John Nelson, Fiora Contino, Julius Herford, and James Wimer. He was director of the conducting programs of Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra and the Orchestre de chambre de Paris, and leads the renowned orchestral conducting programs at the University of Michigan and the Conductors Retreat at Medomak.

www.kennethkiesler.com

Nkeiru
OKOYE
(b. 1972)



When the Caged Bird Sings (2023–24)

1–4	Part I: Gather Together in My Name	19:32
5–8	Part II: Now Sheba Sings the Song	20:46
9–10	Part III: And Still I Rise	11:49
11–12	Part IV: I Shall Not Be Moved	12:07
13–17	Part V: A Song Flung up to Heaven	14:22

Celebrant Rita Coburn
Mother Angela Brown, Soprano
Cerise Christie Dashiell, Mezzo-soprano
Guidance Counselor Issachah Savage, Tenor
Father Jubilant Sykes, Baritone
Minister of Music Cyrus Chestnut, Piano

EXIGENCE

A Sphinx Vocal Ensemble

University of Michigan Choirs

Chamber Choir • Orpheus Singers • University Choir
(Eugene Rogers, Chorus Master)

University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra

Kenneth Kiesler

A full track list and recording details can be found inside the booklet • The libretto is included in the booklet, and may also be accessed at www.naxos.com/libretti/559953.htm

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

Nkeiru Okoye's *When the Caged Bird Sings* is a 'musical celebration' whose compositional voice, though rooted in the African American church, also embraces minimalism and improvisational elements. Delivering a message of adversity turned to triumph, it celebrates the transformative ability of African American women, partly evoking the experiences of the author and activist Maya Angelou. The work functions as a communal ritual that, like oratorio, opera and theatre, brings together vocal soloists, chorus and orchestra, in an experience that both commemorates and celebrates hope and possibility.

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