

SoundWordSight

an arts magazine

Mark W. Greenfest for SoundWordSight
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American Opera Projects (AOP) presented Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line To Freedom, music and words by Nkeiru Okoye, world premiere chamber version, with the Irondale Ensemble Project at the Irondale Center in Brooklyn (85 South Oxford Street). Marsha Thompson superbly covered for Janinah Burnett, who is on the Metropolitan Opera's roster, on the final of four nearly sold-out performances on March 1, 2014, at 7:30pm. Briana Hunter sang the role of Rachel Ross, Harriet Tubman's sister, with much aplomb.

Nicole Mitchell, contralto, was wonderful as mother Rittia "Ma" Ross; and, Clinton Ingraham as Ben "Pa" Ross and Damian Norfleet as John Tubman gave memorable performances. Dr. Leslie Dunner conducted and Mila Henry played the piano with a five-piece string ensemble. Lemuel Wade was the stage director, who effectively kept the staging sparse, so as not to upstage the music; and the singers had chairs like a railroad car, on stage, when they were not singing (a la the Underground Railway). The piece follows Harriet Ross Tubman from her life as a seven-year old girl, in slavery, until she is a conductor on the Underground Railway, as an escaped slave, named Moses for her courage in liberating others.

Dr. Nkeiru Okoye, who has a doctorate in composition from Rutgers, spent two years workshopping with AOP, transforming an educational piece based upon Ms. Tubman's interviews, into a major folk opera, with musical licks from about 20 different authentic civil war styles, including Spirituals and opera. I personally believe that this piece will enter the repertoire and be discussed with similar praise as George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess - this is a major composition, very worthy, and was greeted with well-deserved standing ovations!