SUNY teacher's opera hails historical figure

GETS $15K GRANT FOR TUBMAN WORK

BY JEREMIAH HORRIGAN

Times Herald-Record NEW PALTZ — Ask Nkeiru Okoye how she came to write an opera and you’ll receive a megawatt smile and an admission: “I didn’t know any better.”

It’s a theme repeated throughout a life that last summer delivered her to SUNY New Paltz, where she is an assistant professor of music.

Okoye recently was awarded a $15,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts which will allow her to put the finishing — and evolving — touches on her opera, “Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom.”

Okoye grew up in Long Island, with occasional visits to her father’s native Nigeria. Her musical career looks, in retrospect, like a series of happy accidents, unencumbered by formal training and its resultant expectations. “I was just one of those girls who was drawn to the piano,” she said. “I’d put music to words I’d read in books, like Beatrix Potter’s. At the time, I didn’t know any better. I didn’t know I was composing.”

Confirmation of her calling came when she was 12 years old. Okoye, hearing music in her head, asked her school’s band director to help her write it down. She entered a national songwriting contest and took first prize.

Her talent got her accepted at the prestigious Oberlin Conservatory of Music. What followed since has been a long list of musical commissions, awards and compositions; her works have been performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Detroit Symphony and regional orchestras.

“Harriet Tubman” is the result of years of research that Okoye said opened her eyes to a wealth of historical and cultural misinformation — the poisoned result of racism and ignorance.

For instance: She said she’s found that slaves did not speak in the minstrel-show vernacular that survives in some literature and movies. “People learn the language they grow up hearing,” she said.

For that matter, her opera includes what Okoye calls “an antiminstrel minstrel-show song.”

Okoye also means to set the record straight in her depiction of Tubman and the people in her life. The play will acknowledge the bravery not only of Tubman but of forgotten anti-slavery African-American heroes like underground railroad stationmaster William Still and freedman Samuel Green — both of whose lives entwined importantly with Tubman’s.

Just as she’s hoping to resuscitate the memory of these forgotten heroes, Okoye also hopes to change people’s view of opera itself. She smiles at the thought of one woman who confessed to loving “Harriet Tubman.” Until then, the woman said, opera had been something to fall asleep to.

“It was so fantastic to hear how she’d been touched by the opera. That’s what I’m aiming for — to make opera regular people can enjoy and appreciate.”

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Nkeiru Okoye, a SUNY New Paltz music professor, is writing an opera about famous abolitionist and humanitarian Harriet Tubman.