

Portrait of a Queen

for orchestra and female narrator

by Carlos Oliver Simon, Jr.
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Program Notes

This piece traces the evolution of black people in America through the lens of the black female. Using one female character who represents strength, courage and selflessness, this character will transform from her journey as a leader in Africa to a slave on an American plantation, to a disenfranchised citizen subject to Jim Crow laws and finally to the strong matriarch found in many churches presently. Dramatic spoken word, written by Courtney D. Ware, poetically explains the thoughts and feelings of her character, while a musical portrait is revealed of her. Courtney writes: "It was imperative that the story of Queen be told from her perspective, in her voice, with her words. Although Queen represents black womanhood in America and in Africa, she is not one-dimensional. Her story is a mixture of pain and struggle, hope and triumph."

Women have always played vital roles in African-American communities. I have known women to have a strong but warm, caring character. She is elegant and prideful. She carries herself with distinction and class. Her guidance is given with both tender love and firmness. She is the backbone and cornerstone of her community. She gives wise instruction to those of all ages; especially the younger generations. She teaches the young girls how to be women and the boys how to treat a woman. Her character does not change with the ages, but is passed on from generation to generation. With every struggle and change presented, she is there providing support and direction to her community.

As each section encapsulates a different time period, the musical themes reflect that by drawing on melodies, textures and rhythms from that particular era. The "Prologue" develops out of Ghanaian song *Mo mmra ma yengoro (Come and let us play)*, transforming the orchestra into a West African drum ensemble with its floating, polyrhythmic texture. "A Crown Forgotten" makes reference to the Negro-spiritual, *Oh, Freedom*, by using the syllabic stress of the word "freedom" as a musical basis for the section. Slow glissandi in the woodwinds mimic the cries of captured slaves against nauseating swells in the lower strings. The tumultuous and violent character of the third section "Jim Crow" is undergirded by the quotation to the Gospel song, *Don't You Let Nobody Turn You Around*, as it served as a protest song during many Civil Rights marches. There are many references to Gospel music as the style acted as the musical soundtrack for the Civil Rights Movement. Elements such as call and response, extended use of the blues scale and syncopated rhythms make up the aggressive, unsettling tone of the section. The piece finally concludes reflectively with the melody of *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, a favorite hymn of my mother and grandmother, played lyrically by the string section over a recording of a prayer led by a "church mother" out of a black Pentecostal church.

Portrait of a Queen was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra with the generous support of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Underwood. As my mother, Lisa Simon and grandmother, Bertha Simon have wholeheartedly displayed the portrait of a "Queen" by their unselfish and loving character, this piece is solely dedicated to them.

~Carlos Oliver Simon, Jr. (2017)

Narrative

by Courtney D. Ware

PROLOGUE (Africa)

I am Queen.

Strength rests upon my head: a gold-dipped crown adorned with jewels of Patience, Kindness, and Wisdom that shine diamond bright.

Like a baby wrapped on my back in swaddling silk. I first nurtured it in my womb.

And Created a Love so deep.

A CROWN FORGOTTEN (Slavery)

Through blessed pain, I birthed a nation. An agony that followed me across the sea.

The stench of blood... sweat... tears... permeated my skin.

Royalty replaced with rags. Silk exchanged for shameful nakedness. Iron chains heavier than my forgotten crown.

I cannot protect the life I bore, the nation I nurtured.

So I closed my eyes just to block the pain.

JIM CROW

We marched and Our bodies swung. They tried to silence my sons and daughters with fists of hatred and nooses 'round their necks. From whips and chains to hoses and handcuffs.

Jim Crow is a hypocrite and separate ain't equal.

So I'll tell my children to hold their hands up high. I tell them to comply. Say, "Yes ma'am. Say No, suh." But still... They'll be shot in the back, left to bleed out in the streets like animals. But they're my children. And their lives matter, their lives matter. I said THEIR LIVES MATTER!

CHURCH

I am Queen.

Strength rests upon my head: a white wide-brimmed hat glittering with jewels of Wisdom, Kindness and Patience.

Oh the tears I've shed, the prayers I've cried, the songs I've wailed to make it through. How I danced and shouted my way out of despair. I speak the tongues of our ancestors. Their spirits intercede for us yesterday, today and forever.