

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



An Interview with Rosephanye Powell

by Shekela Wanyama



Rosephanye (roh-SEH-fuh-nee) Powell is an accomplished singer, music educator, and choral conductor. Dr. Powell is a Charles W. Barkley Endowed Professor and Professor of Voice at Auburn University, where she teaches voice, art song repertoire, vocal pedagogy, conducts Women's Choir, and co-conducts the Auburn University Gospel Choir. She is perhaps best recognized as one of the United States' leading contemporary choral composers. In this Choral Conversation, she discusses her music, the compositional process, and reflects on being a prominent African American female composer.

As one who studied vocal performance, how did you find your way to choral composition?

Choral music has always been

an integral part of my life. In high school, one of my hobbies was re-arranging songs that we sang in choir. As an undergraduate at Alabama State University, an HBCU (Historically Black College or University), we were required to sing in the choir every semester. And every semester we learned and performed arrangements of African American spirituals. Those experiences developed my love and appreciation for these marvelous works of art.

While working on my master's degree in Vocal Performance and Vocal Pedagogy at Westminster Choir College, graduate students were required to sing each semester in the Symphonic Choir. Singing under the direction of Joseph Flummerfelt and Frauke Haasemann impacted my understanding of European classical music, the beauty of the choral sound, and the shaping of vowels to achieve the ideal tone. When I pursued my doctoral degree at Florida State, I spent a great deal of time with the graduate choral conductors and observed Rodney

Eichenberger and André Thomas work with their choirs. Once again, I was impacted by these conductors and their commitment to the craft of choral conducting and the development of the choral tone.

I became a published composer after composing *The Word Was God* for the Philander Smith Collegiate Choir in Little Rock, Arkansas. This choir, conducted by my husband, William Powell, and for which I served as associate conductor, needed original songs to be composed for a CD to be sold at our concerts to raise funds for the choir. Once we recorded *The Word Was God*, I was encouraged by conductor friends to submit the work to a publisher. After submitting a previous work to a publisher and never receiving a reply, I decided to send *The Word Was God* to ten publishers with the hope that one would reply. Unfortunately, all ten replied with acceptance of the work, after which I received several letters of reprimand when I had to inform publishers that I had contracted with another publisher. I learned a valu-

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS

able lesson from that experience, which I share with young composers: "Submit your work to only one publisher at a time!"

How would you describe your style of composition? Has it changed over time?

I would characterize my style of composition as African American neo-Romantic. Generally, it comprises lyrical vocal lines; strong rhythmic emphasis, including much use of syncopation; harmonies often derived from African American popular music styles that serve to express the text or the mood of the text; and varied vocal textures including layering, interweaving melodies, and light counterpoint. I am grateful to have grown up with musical experiences that included African American spirituals, gospel music, hymns, rhythm and blues, jazz, Caribbean

music, and African folk songs.

Although they may not be identifiable in my works, each of these genres or styles are a part of my musical vocabulary for composition. I endeavor to compose melodies that are healthy for the voice, avoiding overuse of the extremes of the range. As a singer, I prefer to employ singable melodies that use the practical parts of the range, saving the extreme highs and lows for climaxes, color, emphasis, or text painting. I would not say that my style of composition has changed over time. My hope is that it has evolved with my life experiences.

What is more important to you: the text or the music? (This question was supplied by the previous Choral Conversations Column interviewee.)

In one sense, I consider the text to

be of primary importance since the text is the message to be communicated. In another sense, the music is of equal importance with the text. In addition to providing harmonic support, the music plays an equal role with the text in communicating the message and meaning of the text. I begin composition by immersing myself in the text, repeating and memorizing the text in addition to reading about the poet. Through this immersion, the music begins to develop as I seek to express the sentiment and heart of the message awakened in me. The rhythm of the poetry influences the rhythm of the melody and the shape of the vocal line. The mood and energy experienced as I recite the poetry determine the text setting, tempo, form, rhythms, and harmonies. In contrast to the spoken word alone, music can serve to enhance the meaning of the text, painting mental pictures of it for the performer and listener. At the same time, music can detract from and betray the meaning of the text if its marriage to the poetry is not given serious consideration in composition.

Who are your biggest influences as a composer?

During my undergraduate studies at Alabama State, I experienced a steady diet of solo and choral arrangements of spirituals by Harry T. Burleigh, Hall Johnson, and J. Rosamund Johnson, among others. Also during this time, I was introduced to African American female composers, including Undine Smith Moore, Florence Price, and Lena

As Mary proclaims in the Magnificat, God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.


The 2020 conference "Scatter the Imagination of Our Hearts" invites you to explore how the power of imagination can challenge, change, and inspire. Together we'll reimagine what it means to be the people God has called in the church, scattered in service throughout the world.

Featuring theologians and preachers
WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS and **EUNJOO MARY KIM**

With a variety of musical artists, including
TESFA WONDEMAGEGNEHU, Choral
JILL MAHR, Handbells,
and **ROBYN SAND ANDERSON**, Visual Artist

Registration dates
EARLY BIRD begins January 15 • **REGULAR** begins March 1

STOLAF.EDU/CWTA

 ST. OLAF | CONFERENCE ON WORSHIP, THEOLOGY, AND THE ARTS

McLin. I was strongly impressed by the fact that they were black women who composed and arranged classical music. In graduate school at Westminster Choir College, I was deeply influenced by African American composers of art songs such as Adolphus Hailstork, Julia Perry, David Nathaniel Baker, George Walker, and William Grant Still, among others. I think William Grant Still, the Dean of African American composers, was my greatest influence as a classical composer. My research in graduate school focused on his compositional style for the solo voice and piano. I found myself very much connected to Still's harmonic vocabulary, which included jazz harmonies, and his lyrical vocal lines, especially in the song cycle *Songs of Separation*. European classical music influences included Handel and Bach for their counterpoint; Mozart and Haydn for their form and lyricism; and Verdi, Puccini, and Ravel for their Romantic harmonies and long vocal phrases.

What inspires you?

I guess I would say "life." Yes. Life and life experiences—people and places, sunny days, rainy days, smiling faces, tears, pain, aloneness, joy, peace, laughter, acts of love, kindness and service to others, stories of triumph over struggles, passionate and tender poetry, the beauty of nature, the quietness of an early morning, beautiful music...and all that is good that can be experienced in this brief life.

Share a piece with us from your catalogue that is particularly meaningful to you. What is the story behind that piece?

Still I Rise is a song that was com-

missioned by VOX Femina Los Angeles and Iris S. Levine, music director. When Dr. Levine approached me with her idea for the project, she shared that the choir wanted a work that spoke to the experiences

"The go-to company for ensembles planning concert tours."
Baltimore Sun

CLASSICAL MOVEMENTS

Concerts and Travel to 145 Countries



28 Years as the Leaders in Cultural Diplomacy and Concert Touring.

**From Vienna to Vietnam
 Canberra to Cape Town
 Brussels to Buenos Aires**

Custom Tours for Top Choirs

Two International Choral Festivals

SERENADE!
 Washington, D.C.
 Annually in June-July



IHLOMBE!
 South Africa
 Annually in July



www.ClassicalMovements.com | +1 703 683 6040

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS

of women from a perspective of strength. Immediately, I knew that I wanted to set Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*. Because of my love for the poem, I composed feverishly and very quickly, completing the first draft within a matter of hours. Unfortunately, I was denied permission to set the poem by Dr. Angelou's representative. So I took the inspiration received from the poem and wrote my own lyrics. *Still I Rise* is an anthem in salute to the strength of women who persevere through life's many and diverse dif-

iculties, including sickness, physical and emotional abuse, rape, incest, prejudice, abandonment, and many more. It is a charge to view life's disappointments, setbacks, and inequalities as opportunities to become stronger.

This song is especially meaningful to me because of the women's choruses that have made it their choir anthem that is sung yearly. I have been overwhelmed by the number of women from around the world who have sent me photos or informed me of their *Still I Rise*

tattoos, while sharing stories of how the song encouraged or sustained them at low points in their lives. These stories include a three-time cancer survivor who, upon hearing the song, had a *Still I Rise* t-shirt made to remind herself that she is a survivor; and a young lady who was on the verge of suicide but chose to live (and is doing so victoriously) after her women's chorus was introduced to *Still I Rise*. I get emotional just thinking about it. To compose a song that empowers sisters in this way gives great meaning and fulfill-



Lehigh University • ACDA Summer Choral Composers Forum



June 22 - 29, 2020

Steven Sametz, director The Princeton Singers, choir-in-residence
Lehigh University • Zoellner Arts Center • Bethlehem, PA 18015



Composers are encouraged to apply to this week-long practicum, workshopping new pieces with mentor-composers Steven Sametz and Ēriks Ešēvalds in a supportive atmosphere. All works developed at the Composers Forum will be considered for publication by Notenova.

For more information and registration, go to www.lehighchoralarts.com/composersforum
Discount applies for early registration.

Steven Sametz
ACDA Brock Commission
Composer

Ēriks Ešēvalds
ACDA Brock Commission
Composer

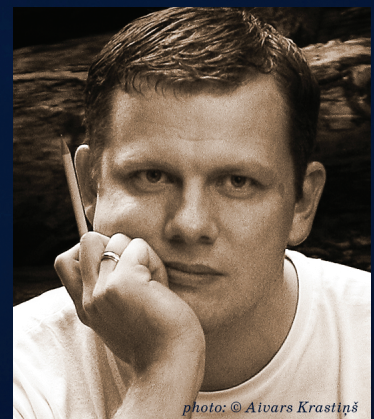


photo: © Aivars Krastiņš

Lehigh University offers undergraduate singers, conductors and composers Choral Arts Scholarships. Study with Steven Sametz and Sun Min Lee. For information, email sul212@lehigh.edu.

ment to my life!

Share one experience that was special for you as a composer.

The one that comes to mind immediately is the dress rehearsal and premiere of *Sing for the Cure: A Proclamation of Hope* in Dallas, Texas. Along with several other choral composers, I was asked to compose one of the choral movements for this multi-movement work that honors the journeys of those who lost their battle with cancer; fought the battle and were victorious; as well as those loved ones who traveled the journey with them. My song “The Promise Lives On” sets tender and touching lyrics by Pamela Martin and represents the partner’s voice.

In it, the partner-caregiver assures the one cared for that their promise of love and life-long commitment will remain and grow stronger through the struggle and pain of cancer. To be a part of the special evening of the performance with poet-laureate Maya Angelou as narrator, the Turtle Creek Chorale, The Women’s Chorus of Dallas, and the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra was nothing short of exhilarating.

On the day of the premiere, I was invited to the dress rehearsal for the performance but missed it due to a delayed flight out of Atlanta. Upon my arrival in Dallas, Timothy Seelig, then-director of the Turtle Creek Chorale, informed me that at the dress rehearsal, Maya Angelou, upon hearing “The Promise Lives On,” was so overcome with emotion that she required time to gather

herself before speaking the next narration. Having read and admired Dr. Angelou through her series of autobiographies and poetry collections, I received much gratification hearing that I had touched her heart perhaps as deeply as she had touched mine.

What advice do you give composers who are entering the field today?

The advice I offer is to strive to develop one’s craft and distinct voice compositionally. The development of a career in composition is one that requires patience and persistence. I caution composers not to compose for the sake of composing. Rather, compose because one has a message to share or a story to tell through music. Then, people “get it” and connect to it. From lessons learned while a young composer, I inform composers to submit to one publisher at a time and wait several months before submitting to another. They should be sure to get a poet’s permission *before* setting their

poem to music.

Also, when arranging someone else’s music, composers should be sure to obtain permission from the composer to do so. Finally, if one is having difficulty being accepted by an established publisher, consider self-publishing through one’s own website. Or, consider working with a non-traditional publisher who will allow the composer to keep ownership while providing online exposure and distribution for a fee or a small percentage of the sales.

What do you do when you experience composer’s block?

I pray and put it away! I have found that when I try to compose through a block and force the work, I don’t like the results of what I composed when I return to it later. This means that I wasted the time and energy and must begin again. I find that when I take a break from the work, engaging in stimulating or relaxing activities, I experience a fresh creative flow upon my return to it.

Performing Bach’s St. John Passion with Joshua Rifkin

A workshop for conductors, historical instrumentalists, and singers.

May 22-23, 2020 - Boston, Massachusetts

Study the challenges of performing Bach’s St. John Passion with the leading expert in Bach performance practice. Fellows will work directly with Joshua Rifkin on issues concerning performance forces, versions of the St. John Passion, and interpretation. Auditors are also invited to apply.

Applications are due March 23, 2020. Visit www.bu.edu/earlymusic for details or email cems@bu.edu.

Hosted by the Center for Early Music Studies at Boston University.

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS

The challenge is being wise enough to take the break, especially when pressed to meet a commission deadline.

What is it like to be an internationally recognized African American female composer?

I am grateful for the opportunity to be a voice that represents the diversity of the African American and American choral music cultures. I consider it a privilege to share a perspective on our nation's diversity with singers around the world. It is especially fulfilling to hear my works

performed by singers for whom English is not their first language. To work with choirs from other nations reminds me of just how much we all have in common regardless of our culture, nationality, and language.

As a child growing up in a small southern town on the border of Alabama and Georgia, I could not have imagined being afforded the opportunity to share my love of music and singing to this extent. As an African American woman, I hope that my contributions to choral music literature will serve to encourage African American female composers to develop their compositional craft and

leave their distinct imprint upon the world of choral music.

Please provide a question for the next interviewee to answer.

What do you find most challenging when guest conducting?

Shekela Wanyama is a doctoral student in conducting at the University of Arizona. She is grateful to Catherine Roma, whose important research was the genesis of this conversation.



Artist TRAVEL CONSULTANTS

THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

“THANK YOU FOR OUR WONDERFUL TRIP TO NEW YORK CITY AND THE BEAUTIFUL ACCOMMODATIONS YOU PLANNED FOR US!”

-CAROLE (PA)

CONTACT US FOR YOUR PERSONALIZED GROUP TRAVEL BOOKING.

- Call us for all of your travel needs, we have expertise with groups of 1-1,000+
- We are experts in travel and understand your unique needs as musicians

CALL OR EMAIL TODAY!

DCINY DISTINGUISHED CONCERTS INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK Preferred Travel Partner

NYC & Company nycgo.com

SYTA The Voice of Student & Youth Travel®

Disney BROADWAY PREFERRED TRAVEL PLANNER

Inc. 5000

www.ArtistTravels.com
(212) 707-8170
Info@ArtistTravels.com