

by Bill Glovin 

Music of the Spheres

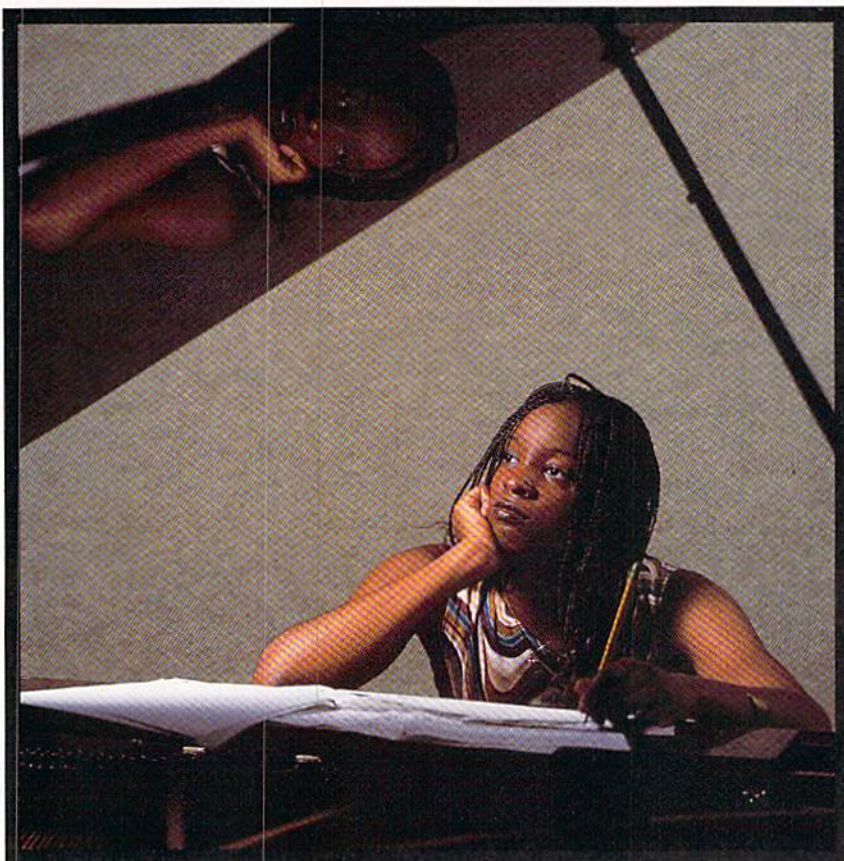
The sound of music, to student-composer Nkeiruka Okoye, mixes jazz, pop, gospel, African, and classical motifs.

No one will ever mistake the Marryott Music Building on the Douglass campus for Carnegie Hall, but Nkeiruka Okoye, seated at the piano in a large, dimly lit room of the old building, knows that great composers must start somewhere. She plays a melodic phrase from her chamber work for tenor and string orchestra, "Spanish Songs," but her Rutgers mentor, composer Noel Da Costa, stops her after a few notes. They talk about counterpoint and direction and she begins again; the painstaking process continues for over an hour. "When I first showed Noel the draft of the score, he said, 'It's nice, but it needs work.'" says Okoye. "I didn't get angry; I got determined."

A tall, personable woman with a contagious laugh, Okoye, 25, learned at an early age that determination pays off. As a teenager, she was told that she would never be a pianist, but she went on to perform as a pianist and conductor and, as a doctoral candidate in Rutgers' graduate program in composition and musicology, has made great strides as a composer. One of her works, "Ruth," was performed last spring by the renowned Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The performance was part of the 1996-97 Unisys African-American Composers Residency and National Symposium at the symphony's Orchestra Hall in Michigan. One of five pieces chosen in this national search for emerging African-American composers, "Ruth" was the only winning composition written by a student.

Okoye began her training in the ninth grade at the Manhattan School of Music, where most students start formal study at age five or six. "Although I took piano lessons in grade school, I hadn't begun studying music seriously. As far as they were concerned, I was completely untrained," she remembers. "When they told me I was never going to be a pianist, I felt washed up at 13."

Despite the naysayers, Okoye attended Saturday classes at the school while continuing regular



studies at a public school in Amityville, New York. Her activities included playing oboe, alto sax, and glockenspiel in the school orchestra and band. A turning point came in junior high, when her band director taught her how to notate the music that was in her head.

A year later Okoye left Manhattan for the Boces Cultural Arts Center in Syosset, New York. Much to her surprise, her first composition for piano and flute won first prize in a competition sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. And she continued racking up awards, including three more firsts in the annual NAACP competitions.

She opted to continue studying music at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, where she would eventually earn her undergraduate degree in music. But

OKOYE'S FIRST FULLY ORCHESTRATED PIECE, "THE GENESIS," WHICH STARTED OUT AS A MOVEMENT FOR BALLET, WAS PERFORMED BY THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY ORCHESTRA AND WON HER AN AMERICAN SOCIETY OF COMPOSERS, AUTHORS, AND PUBLISHERS GRANT FOR YOUNG COMPOSERS.

early on in her college career, she found herself lacking direction. With her self-esteem at an all-time low, she complained about her confusion to a family friend. "With great reluctance on my part," says Okoye, the friend took her to meet a composer who lived nearby. The composer turned out to be Da Costa, a professor of music at Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts. "He asked me if I had ever heard the music of African-American composers. I hadn't," says Okoye. "So he started pulling out scores by black composers. I found it absolutely fascinating."

Inspired by the encounter, Okoye returned to Oberlin and won two Ford Mellon Foundation grants based on a paper she wrote about African-American women composers. She also began working informally with Da Costa during semester breaks and in the summer months. "He is not at all intimidating, although his expectations are high," she says. "I knew from the moment we met that I wanted to work with him someday in graduate school."

Her wish came true in 1993, when she came to Rutgers to pursue advanced studies. So far she's earned her master's degree in composition, although Da Costa teases that, "I'd like to see Nkeiruka receive her Ph.D. before I retire." His student's first fully orchestrated piece, "The Genesis," won the 1995 Rutgers Graduate Composers Competition.

After spending this past summer studying music composition and language in Germany, she is back at Rutgers completing "Spanish Songs," and working on "African Sketches," a suite of piano songs. Both works incorporate her untraditional style, which she describes as "a musical collage incorporating jazz, pop, gospel, and West African sounds. At times it can make an orchestra sound like a gigantic talking drum," she says.

Okoye isn't certain what the future holds. She has thought about film scoring since some of her music is rhythmic and geared for dance. She has also thought long and hard about how to be a role model to children, particularly African-American children. But wherever music takes her, says Okoye, with a nod toward Da Costa, "besides getting out of here someday, I know I want to help others the way I have been helped." □



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