

Valerie Coleman (b. 1970) *UMOJA: Anthem of Unity* (2019)

Valerie Coleman is a composer and flutist whose works have been performed by chamber ensembles, choirs, and orchestras throughout the United States and around the world. Her many honors include recognition as Performance Today's 2020 Classical Woman of the Year, and the *Washington Post*'s list of "top 35 Women composers." She has written works on commission for the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra. Currently, she serves on the composition faculty at the Julliard School.

Born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, music was an integral part of Coleman's early life. Her formative music education came through participation in bands and orchestras in her school and community, and her first compositions were pieces to be played for fun that she arranged for school friends, mostly arrangements of pop songs she heard on the radio. She also composed using a cassette recorder, creating layers of sound by recording herself playing and singing, playing back the recording and adding in additional parts to be recorded. She remembers this as her first experiments in counterpoint. In her ensembles in Louisville, she was just one of many young black musicians, but when she went off to college, she faced a stark realization: "I was the only one in the orchestra. So I wondered what in the world happened here? It came to my mind that representation was important." To foster more diverse representation in contemporary classical music, she founded the *Imani Winds*, an award-winning wind quintet championing music by underrepresented and marginalized composers, many inspired by music outside of the Western European tradition.

In her compositions, she strives to attract the widest audience possible:

I'm not somebody who writes based on the intellectual side of composition, but rather on the side of addressing what it is within all of us. The shared qualities of human behavior, what feeds the soul, what identifies the issues or all the complexities within ourselves as human beings. That is mainly my focus. And so breathing goes right into that. Breathing, breath of life, unity, all of those things.

This universality of the human experience is one of the central ideas behind her work *UMOJA*, which means "unity" in Swahili and serves as one of the foundational principles of Kwanzaa, the annual celebration of African American culture. In the context of Kwanzaa, this unity refers to one's family, one's community, and the cultural ties that connect peoples of the African diaspora.

In its original form, *Umoja* was written for Women's choir in celebration for the first day of Kwanzaa, but Coleman later re-envisioned the piece for wind quintet, and it became a signature piece for the *Imani Winds*. The popularity of that version caught the attention of the Philadelphia Orchestra, which commissioned Coleman to create the orchestral work that we hear today.

The orchestral version of *UMOJA* builds upon the simple melody of the original choral version, which we hear first played by a solo violin. In Coleman's description:

Here the melody is a sweetly singing in its simplest form with an earnestness reminiscent of Appalachian style music. From there, the melody dances and weaves throughout the instrument families, interrupted by dissonant viewpoints led by the brass and percussion sections, which represent the clash of injustices, racism and hate that threatens to gain a foothold in the world today. Spiky textures turn into an aggressive exchange between upper woodwinds and percussion, before a return to the melody as a gentle reminder of kindness and humanity. Through the brass led ensemble tutti, the journey ends with a bold call of unity that harkens back to the original anthem.