

Hannibal Lokumbe (b. 1948)

Dear Mrs Parks

Commissioned by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), *Dear Mrs Parks* had its World Premiere by the DSO at Detroit's Orchestra Hall at the Max M. Fisher Music Center in February 2005 under the direction of Resident Conductor Thomas Wilkins.

According to Hannibal Lokumbe, "*Dear Mrs Parks* is a prayer of music and words in honor of Mrs Rosa Parks and every soul of her spiritual and social realm. She is the true nature of what is perceived and spoken of as being heaven. Her unselfish love, as unselfish love always does, transforms the entire world."

*Dear Mrs Parks* is a 57-minute oratorio for which Lokumbe wrote both the music and libretto. The work features a massive ensemble comprised of full orchestra plus a large choir and four vocal soloists. Featuring influences from the blues, jazz, African music and Gospel music, it pays homage to Rosa Parks in the form of imaginary letters to the civil rights heroine from three individuals: an African-American woman who worked with Mrs Parks and Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, representing the viewpoint of all African-American civil rights activists of her generation; Viola Liuzzo, a white Civil Rights martyr from Detroit slain by the Ku Klux Klan in 1965; and a young African-American man whose generation has benefited from the Civil Rights Movement. The fourth soloist is a young girl, representing innocence and hope, who leads the "Prayer for the World" that concludes the composition.

The composition is in 10 movements that are essentially continuous. The orchestration is compact yet meaty, and even when rhythms are quick, they are still tightly orchestrated. The composer creates a sense of music in unity among the sections of the orchestra, the soloists and chorus. The result is an enthralling atmosphere that also lends clarity to the text. In other places, the composer creates wide-open spaces in both the harmony and instrumentation. Again, this illuminates the spiritually charged text.

A brief introductory first movement features the tenor voices against chordal accompaniment in the rest of the chorus. In the second movement, the composer gives us a haunting double ostinato. This becomes, melodically, a significant part of this entire piece. A simple repeating melody, of only five notes, is set against a repeating slow-moving chordal accompaniment, but this time it is echoed by the orchestra. Lokumbe returns to this material as a closing theme in the last movement, when it is cast not only in the voices of the adult chorus, but in the innocence of the little girl's solo voice as well.

Reviewing *Dear Mrs Parks* in 2005, the *Detroit Free Press* music critic Mark Stryker wrote that there were several remarkable aspects to the work: "One was the intuition and skill with which the composer incorporated African and African-American idioms into the oratorio...Another was Lokumbe's inspired text [which] elevated what might have been a trivial civics lesson into an organic sound world of poetic mysticism, pulsating percussion, work song laments, optimistic spirituals, rhapsodic instrumental obbligatos and dynamic squalls of expression."

Like all of Lokumbe's music, *Dear Mrs Parks* also reflects the composer's roots as a jazz artist. A celebrated trumpeter, he played jazz in New York for 23 years, including many with Gil Evans, as well as dozens of other jazz giants.

In 1979, however, his life took a drastic turn. He contracted double pneumonia that was resistant to antibiotics and was convinced that the end was near. As the great-grandson of an American slave, he wanted to die in his ancestors' homeland. Though gravely ill, he traveled to an African village in Kenya and credits his physical recovery to a traditional tribal leader. He feels that he was also healed spiritually "for all he suffered as a black man in America."

Through this experience, he began to develop a new way of expressing himself through music. "In Africa, I saw violins, double-reed trumpets and harps all being used in different ways; it helped me realize I could apply my musical concepts to the orchestra, that there was nothing strange about expressing my musical feelings in traditional instruments."

By the time he returned to New York, Lokumbe was determined to tell "the truth of what he had learned" and composed his first major work for orchestra, *African Portraits*, which received its world premiere at Carnegie Hall in 1990. It tells the experience of black Americans, from Africa to slavery to the present day. The celebrated work has now been performed by more than 55 orchestras across the country, and the recording by the Chicago Symphony and Daniel Barenboim (which was released in 1996) was nominated for a Grammy Award.

Lokumbe has since become a leader in expressing the African-American experience through orchestral and choral music, with a particular focus on civil rights leaders. In 1998, the New Jersey Symphony commissioned and premiered an oratorio titled *God, Mississippi and a Man Called Evers* about the slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers. Other works include *Soul Brother*, inspired by the life of Malcolm X, and *A Great and Shining Light*, about former Atlanta mayor and United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young.

In the orchestral world, Lokumbe's scores weave connections between advanced blues, jazz technique, and orchestral settings. "The subject matter he works with tends to be controversial," says Dr Leslie Dunner, a former Resident Conductor of the DSO, who has conducted *African Portraits* and led the *Evers* premiere. "I think it's good for contemporary music to challenge our social ethics through musical commentary."

The *Dear Mrs Parks* performance was part of the DSO's annual "Classical Roots" concerts, which celebrate African-American composers and musicians. These concerts have been performed by the DSO since 1978 and became a part of the DSO's classical subscription series during the 1989–90 season. Beginning in 2001, the DSO also began holding an annual "Classical Roots Celebration," a gala event to raise funds for the DSO's African-American Fellowship, African-American Composer Residency and the Emerging Composer Program.

Hannibal Lokumbe was deeply gratified to have *Dear Mrs Parks* recorded. "At such a trying financial and spiritual time for our country and for the city of Detroit, imagine that this recording has come into being, thanks to the good work of many people coming together to make it happen," he said. "It is a great compliment to my efforts and to Mrs Parks, and as clear a validation of the entire project as I can ever imagine."