



Bongani Ndodana-Breen

Born: August 1975, Queenstown, South Africa; now living in Cape Town, South Africa

Harmonia Ubuntu

Premiering: July 21, 2018

In geographic terms, Minnesota and South Africa are separated by some 9,000 miles. Musically speaking, though, they've rarely been closer than this summer, as the Minnesota Orchestra presents a Sommerfest celebration of South Africa's most famous statesman, the late Nelson Mandela, on the centenary of his birth; collaborates with South African soloists, ensembles and composers; and tours Mandela's home country in the first-ever visit there by a professional U.S. orchestra. Central to this "Music for Mandela" project is the world premiere of *Harmonia Ubuntu* by Bongani Ndodana-Breen, one of today's leading South African composers. The new work honors Mandela and the ideals he stood for, such as peace, freedom, reconciliation and ubuntu—a Nguni Bantu term which Ndodana-Breen explains is "the knowledge that one's humanity is tied to the humanity of others or humanity towards others."

New orchestral works are often funded by ensembles or individuals, but Ndodana-Breen's *Harmonia Ubuntu* was commissioned for the Minnesota Orchestra's South Africa tour by a different sort of musical organization, the international touring company Classical Movements, through its Eric Daniel Helms New Music Program. After proposing the commission last year, Classical Movements—which is managing the South Africa tour—gave the Orchestra a list of recommended South African composers. Ndodana-Breen's music stood out to Music Director Osmo Vänskä, and collaborative discussions ensued over how the new piece could best connect with the Mandela celebration. The incorporation of Mandela's own words appealed to all parties, but rather than following the model of a work such as Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* that employs spoken narration, Ndodana-Breen elected to have Mandela's words sung by a soprano—an artistic choice which allows the listener to hear those words in a wholly new way.

Tonight's premiere of *Harmonia Ubuntu* marks only the start of the work's international journey. Next month the Orchestra will perform it during all five stops on the South Africa tour: Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, Soweto and Johannesburg.

about the composer

Dr. Bongani Ndodana-Breen has written a number of works which relate to or are inspired by his country's struggle against apartheid and for liberation. One of his most acclaimed is *Winnie, The Opera*, based on the life of Winnie Mandela, who was married to Nelson Mandela for more than three decades and was a fellow leading figure of the anti-apartheid movement. (Winnie Mandela herself attended the opera's premiere in April 2011.) His other recent major operatic and orchestral works include *Three Orchestral Songs on poems by Ingrid Jonker*, the oratorio *Credo*, which is based on South Africa's historic Freedom Charter and libretto by Brent Meersman; *Mzilikazi: Emhlabeni*, a sinfonia concertante for piano and orchestra; and the short opera *Hani*.

Ndodana-Breen's orchestral works have been performed around the world by ensembles including the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, Vancouver Opera Orchestra, Symphony Nova Scotia, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, Belgian National Orchestra, Kwa Zulu-Natal Philharmonic, Johannesburg Festival Orchestra, Johannesburg Philharmonic and Cape Town Philharmonic. In addition to his symphonic and opera writing, he has composed a wide range of choral, small ensemble, chamber and solo music. Commissions have come from institutions such as London's Wigmore Hall, the Vancouver Recital Society, Madame Walker Theatre in Indianapolis, the Hong Kong Arts Festival, Luminato Festival Toronto and the Haydn Festival in Eisenstadt. Among the many honors conferred on him are the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 1998 and recognition as one of *Mail & Guardian's* 200 Young South Africans in 2011. From 1999 to 2007 he directed the Canadian new music organization Ensemble Noir, which he led on tours to Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa.

"our common humanity"

The English text sung by soprano in *Harmonia Ubuntu* is a composite of phrases from writings and speeches of Nelson Mandela, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning leader, philanthropist and human rights advocate whose centenary (officially July 18, 2018) is being celebrated worldwide this year. Mandela's extraordinary life experience—including 27 years as a political prisoner for his opposition to the apartheid regime, followed by his election to the presidency of a government that pursued a "truth and reconciliation" model of honest accountability and healing—lends great moral authority to his words. The particular lines Ndodana-Breen has chosen, the composer explains, "reinforce our common humanity and inspire courage over adversity....[Mandela's] message is one of reconciliation, forgiveness, freedom and justice and love for our fellow man. More importantly, we are reminded that it takes courage to pursue these ideals." Selections from Ndodana-Breen's notes on *Harmonia Ubuntu* follow; his comments appear in full at minnesotaorchestra.org/showcase.

Ndodana-Breen offers this description of *Harmonia Ubuntu*: “The music begins with an introductory figure in the lower strings. In the culture of the Xhosa of the Eastern Cape of South Africa, this figure is often termed ‘ukuhlabela’—a short musical introduction by a lead singer before everyone else joins in. This is a common trait in music from various traditions in Africa where the leader starts with a teasing ‘short start’—the leader sings or plays his opening introduction upon which everyone responds with their answer. The answer in *Harmonia Ubuntu* is a fanfare figure that makes three appearances in the piece, heralding the beginning and roughly the middle and end sections. Given that this work focuses on Nelson Mandela (and his Centennial), it can also be said that the fanfare alludes to the ‘statesman’ side of Mandela, South Africa’s first black president, coupled with the fact that he is regarded as a traditional prince of the Thembu people (who are Xhosa speakers). His father was Chief Mphakanyiswa Gadla Mandela, principal counsellor to then Acting King of the Thembu, Jongintaba Dalindyebo.”

The composer continues: “The musical ideas that frame this work are largely derived from the musical universe of Southern Africa. For example, the musical language is influenced by modes which are often associated with the Xhosa hexatonic scale. This is a six note scale that comes from the overtones created by musical bows (mrhube, uhadi) used over centuries by the Xhosa people. Aspects of the interlocking patterns in *Harmonia Ubuntu* looked beyond South Africa’s political borders, to the traditional mbira (African thumb piano), an instrument prevalent among the Shona people of what is now Zimbabwe. An aspect of mbira music alluded to here is not only in the constructing of a musical theme but the dynamic between a ‘kushaura’ (lead part) and ‘kutsinhira’ (following part)—a curious musical architecture where themes interact a note apart. This rhythmic counterpoint lends the music a trance-like and also a dance-like quality. The Shona mapira ceremonies are where the people ask ancestral spirits for guidance and intercession, in a trance-like state. There is a section in the music when the soprano alludes to this by singing words that do not have a lexicographical meaning but are certainly part of a deeply rooted (and felt) ancient Xhosa vocabulary. Music in African society is not an abstraction, it is informed by sophisticated aesthetic principles.”

Concluding his remarks, Ndodana-Breen states: “It is not uncommon in certain types of African music that the pulse of one performer (or group of performers) falls exactly in the middle of the pulse of another’s. Also, repetition forms a crucial aspect in the architecture of this piece. Repetition unveils dimensions of the music for the performer and listener that Gerhard Kubik observed in his study of Kiganda and Kisoga xylophone music: “To make all the inner dimensions of these musical picture puzzles gradually visible to oneself the total pattern must be repeated

again and again. Only then is it possible to follow the conflicting inherent lines. If there were no repetitions, if the Baganda musicians had tried the kind of horizontal development of their art found in European classical music, there would be no chance for listeners and performers to appreciate this music in its highly developed vertical dimension.’”

Harmonia Ubuntu is scored primarily for standard orchestral instruments, but Ndodana-Breen adds two percussion instruments of African origin: the Wasembe rattle, which is played with quick downward motions, causing the gourd slices to move up and down the connector stick—and the djembe, a rope-tuned, skin-covered drum shaped like a goblet and played with the bare hands.

Program note by *Carl Schroeder*.

Harmonia Ubuntu: in the words of Nelson Mandela

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

For to be free is not to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that enhances the freedom of others.

If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with them. Then he becomes your partner.

In the end, reconciliation is a spiritual process. It requires more than just words. It has to happen in the hearts and minds of people.

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.

We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom. We know it well, that none of us acting alone can achieve success. We must therefore act together as a united people for reconciliation, the birth of a new world.

Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways you yourself have changed.

After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.

The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.

From the writings and speeches of Nelson Mandela.