

Artist's Note

RUTH NAOMI FLOYD



I am deeply affected by the currents in the world around us, responding both to the threads of pandemic and civil strife, as well as to the seeds of resilience and hope that are emerging from all corners of the country. In trying to understand, create, and respond to this moment, I look towards bold figures from our past, identifying in their brilliance and forward-thinking the ways in which they illuminate the future. Black women's voices are consistently overlooked and underappreciated, and part of my mission as a Black artist is to lift up the vibrant voices who should be recognized and celebrated - like the luminous Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911).

As I imagined and then wrote this suite, I heard Frances calling out, resonating through the centuries as a visionary artist and leader who offers a bracing, insightful commentary for the 21st century. *The Frances Suite*, which brings the work of this remarkable woman into creative light, reflects deeply on the life and justice work of a fellow artist. There are beautiful moments, light moments, and some joy - but there's struggle threaded throughout. In researching Frances' life and words, I was struck by the lament and the joy that lived side by side, informing and containing one another. And yet, from that place of deep personal loss and pain, Frances was clear-eyed about the world around her, unafraid to call out bigotry, inequity, racism, and sexism, and somehow, still resolute that we would all walk out from under the shadows.

I am grateful for the opportunity to be a composer at a time like this, as music is essential to human life and its spirit, speaks to the human condition, and strengthens and revolutionizes thoughts and lives. It is a joy to create this work, to have two stellar featured artists, Yolanda Wisher and Diane Monroe, create with me, and to be surrounded by this ensemble composed of all women of color. There is immense power in telling your own story, and an equally immense responsibility in telling the story of the ones who have come before you. I am moved by Frances' strength, conviction, and insight, and hope that in honoring her and keeping her voice alive, Frances' life lights new pathways for you as well.

About The Frances Suite



SHADOWS UPLIFTED

An alternate name for the novel *Iola Leroy* (1892), I imagine that this Shadows Uplifted encompasses walking from the shadows into the sunlight. There is no more hesitancy here, just the determination that there can be no other way forward other than a brightness on the other side. The piece is full of motion, with many voices coming together in unison and individual moments, but it is focused, and resolute on moving forward. The theme is comprised of eight notes which express the march from shadows to light. The meditative section is comprised of piano and voice signifying the loneliness of this journey. The main theme returns and is performed in what almost feels like a round, each instrument playing their own separate part but still unified.

A BRIGHTER COMING DAY

Taking inspiration from a line in Frances' novel, *Iola Leroy*, A Brighter Coming Day encompasses hope. In the midst of setbacks and everything that Frances is fighting for, she still finds hope that her goals of equality for women and people of color were going to happen. Drawing from the folksongs of the 19th century and African Spirituals, this piece looks backward and forward, honoring Frances' past and pressing forward in the light of her hope and perseverance. This is an instrumental composition, and the violin solo and piano solo point to the tension of the movement between what has come before and what is to come. In the last section the strings express the hope of freedom and equality by playing the same musical figure with harmonic parts.

WE ARE ALL BOUND UP TOGETHER

Frances' powerful speech, *We Are All Bound Up Together* (1866) is a call to action - a call to wake up. She speaks of the shackles of racism, and how it binds us and pulls us down together, but her words also center her conviction that we need each other - and that our success as a community is rooted in our ability to all rise together. This soulful piece uses a call-and-response format that echoes Frances' call to fight for each others' freedoms.

MOTHER'S BLESSINGS

Frances' story of womanhood and motherhood and the loss that it charts resonates deeply with me - Frances lost her mother in her early life, her stepchildren and husband in her middle years, and in the later years of her life, her daughter. I don't know that a mother ever gets over a child's death, and in Frances, I see the pain, strength, and beauty of continuing on. Being a mother never leaves you, but as your children grow, there is more and more relinquishing as they find their own way in the world. But a girl never stops needing her mom. This simple lullaby with two major themes reflects those moments of mothering, nurturing, and deep loss that are all present within Frances' life.

About The Frances Suite

THERE IS SUNSHINE STILL

In a letter to abolitionist and suffragist Angelina Grimké, Frances wrote that there is sunshine still - and that “still” makes all the difference. There is joy in living your purpose, but you cannot have joy without the lament. I’m honoring that lament within her joy. This piece mingles two voices, soprano and trumpet, in dialogue, in harmony, and in joy, and the trumpet, in particular, reminds us you cannot get to joy without the blues.

LEGACY

This uptempo piece moves through lament and joy, celebrating the legacy of Frances, and how her work and words continue to catapult and push us forward. It is the only piece that is not taken directly from her words, but stems from a place of gratitude to her for her life and her work, and a sense of reverence for all that she accomplished with her time on earth. The composition begins with call and response then goes into a vocal duet which illustrates the lead voice of Frances and a second voice representing the community of those of us who carry on the legacy of the themes of Frances life. The violin solo reminds of the soberness of the cost and sacrifice of Frances work and the last section is the blessing and hope that Frances gifted us.

BURY ME IN A FREE LAND

Frances’ plea, encapsulated in one of her most famous poems, is to be buried in a free land. Frances and her daughter Mary rest at Eden Cemetery, the freest place we could offer at the time, and the words of her poem line her gravestone. And Frances’ charge still stands: none of us are free until all of us are free. The composition begins as a ballad and flows into a vamp where every ensemble member and special guests collectively improvise their thoughts and reflections.



about

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER



Born in Baltimore in 1825, poet and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was an only child of free African American parents. She was raised by her aunt and uncle, Henrietta and William Watkins, after her mother died when Frances was three years old. She attended the Academy for Negro Youth, a highly-regarded school run by her uncle, until the age of 13, and then found domestic work in a bookseller's household, where she had access to a wide range of literature. After teaching domestic sciences for two years in Ohio and Pennsylvania, she embarked on a career as a traveling speaker on the abolitionist circuit. She was supported by and lived for a time with the family of Philadelphia abolitionist William Stills, considered the father of the Underground Railroad. A prolific writer, Harper published many collections of poetry, including *Autumn*

Leaves (also published as *Forest Leaves*) (1845); *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), which was reprinted 20 times; *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), which chronicles Reconstruction; *Poems* (1857); *The Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems* (1892); *The Sparrow's Fall and Other Poems* (1894); and *Atlanta Offering* (1895). Harper also published several novels, including *Iola Leroy* (1892), and essay collections. Her short story "The Two Offers" was the first short story published by an African American woman. Her poetry has been collected in *Complete Poems of Frances E.W. Harper* (1988, ed. Maryemma Graham), and her prose in *A Brighter Coming Day* (1990, ed. Frances Smith Foster). Due to her widespread speaking engagements and publications, Harper became the best known and best loved African American poet prior to Paul Laurence Dunbar.

She married Fenton Harper in 1860 and moved to a farm in Ohio. He brought to the marriage three children of his own, and together they had a daughter, Mary. When her husband died in 1864, the state took the Harper property and Frances Harper continued to support her family through speaking engagements. During Reconstruction she was an activist for civil rights, women's rights, and educational opportunities for all. She was superintendent of the Colored Section of the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Women's Christian Temperance Union, co-founder and vice president of the National Association of Colored Women, and a member of the American Woman Suffrage Association. Harper was also the director of the American Association of Colored Youth.

She purchased a home at 1006 Bainbridge Street in Philadelphia in 1871, and was active in both African Methodist Episcopalian and Unitarian churches. She died in 1911 and was buried in Eden Cemetery near Philadelphia, next to her daughter Mary, who had preceded her in death in 1908.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



RUTH NAOMI FLOYD

A composer and vocalist for over 25 years, **Ruth Naomi Floyd** leads a distinctive, progressive jazz ensemble and has released multiple recordings of original compositions, bringing "...an unmistakable emotional integrity that conveys her music's power." (The Times London).

In 2022, Ruth was named to a Lincoln City Fellowship and a Mutual Mentorship for Musicians Fellow, and last year, as a featured artist with The Orrin Evans Trio, was named one of NPR Music's Best Live Sessions of 2021 for their powerful anthem of liberation, the African American Spiritual, "Oh Freedom." In 2020, Ruth and poet Charles Lattimore Howard, were Kimmel Center Jazz Residency artists for their project which centers on homelessness in Philadelphia. Additional recent compositions include the commissioned work "Freedom," focused on human rights activist Mende Nazer's story of survival as a slave in the United Kingdom, and the Frederick Douglass Jazz Works. In the centennial year of Leonard Bernstein's birth, the Mann Music Center, in partnership with NEWorks Productions commissioned Ruth as one of four composers to create a community mass inspired by Bernstein's MASS. Ruth is an Adjunct and Artist in Residence at Temple University.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

DIANE MONROE

is a violinist whose versatility and artistry consistently brings audiences to their feet, and is lead violinist for The Suite. Her visibility as a jazz artist began with her membership in the Uptown String Quartet and the Max Roach Double Quartet, but Monroe is more than simply a fine performer. Her original compositions and arrangements were highlighted on TV and in performances at major concert halls and festivals throughout the world. Monroe has also led her own ensembles for more than 15 years, appearing at the Kennedy Center's Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival and across the country.



YOLANDA WISHER

Poet, singer, educator, and curator Yolanda Wisner is author of *Monk Eats an Afro* and co-editor of the anthology *Peace is a Haiku Song* with mentor Sonia Sanchez. Wisner was named inaugural Poet Laureate of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania in 1999 and third Poet Laureate of Philadelphia for 2016 and 2017. Wisner earned an M.A. in English/Poetry from Temple University and B.A. in English/Black Studies from Lafayette College, where she received an honorary doctorate of letters in 2021. Wisner is Curator of Spoken Word and Co-Director of Curatorial Programs at Philadelphia Contemporary. She performs a blend of poetry and song with her band Yolanda Wisner & The Afroeaters. *Doublehanded Suite*, their debut album, will be out in 2022.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

LAUREN BLACKWELL

is a cellist in the Philadelphia area. She received her Bachelor of Music from West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She is a freelance artist who enjoys performing and recording with diverse ensembles and genres. Her artistic aim is to create an open and safe space for audiences with her music and collaborations.



KENDRAH BUTLER-WATERS

is a Philadelphia based pianist, violinist, vocalist, composer and educator. A musician and scholar, she holds a dual Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Sociology from Temple University and Masters degree in Elementary Education from Drexel University. Butler-Waters has performed at countless jazz venues regionally and abroad including the Kimmel Center for Performing Arts, The Philadelphia Clef Club, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and more. Most recently, she performed and composed new work for LeVar Burton and his "LeVar Burton Reads" Tour episode titled, "Driftglass"; a work by famed author/sci-fi innovator Samuel L. Delany. Butler-Waters' most recent album, "Faith Walk" has been featured on WRTI Radio, NPR, WHY Y PBS At Home Concert Series, Jazz Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Jazz Project.



EUNICE C. CHINA

Having studied violin since the age of 4, Eunice China holds a Bachelor of Music degree in Violin Performance from Temple University's Boyer College of Music and Dance. Eunice has participated in many orchestras including the Philadelphia Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, Southeastern Pennsylvania Symphony Orchestra, Pennsylvania Philharmonic, Main Line Symphony Orchestra, Independence Sinfonia, Amici Strings, and countless other ensembles, performing in venues from the Kimmel Center for Performing Arts to Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. Eunice has a fond love for performing for the community—she has performed for countless weddings, services and cultural events, and has taught violin privately for over eight years. Eunice is pursuing a Master of Music degree in Violin Performance at Temple University.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

VALERIE V. GAY

is a recording/performing artist, composer and thought leader. A classically trained soprano, Val is an active performer across several genres, having performed in small and large concert halls, including solo performances from churches across the country to Carnegie Hall. In 2021, Val began releasing singles from her first solo recording project "Re-Purposed + Re-Positioned," comprised of original music across a few musical genres. Val is a 2022 recipient of the Black Music City grant to support her compositions of meditative music for physical and emotional healing. In 2019, Val received an Honorary Doctorate from St. Joseph's University and has earned a Professional Studies Certificate and a Master of Music in Vocal Performance at Temple University's Boyer College of Music and Dance, a Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance from the University of the Arts and completed degree course work at Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University.



ERICA MCELVEEN

A native of Prince George's County, Maryland, Erica McElveen is an all-around musician affectionately known as E Mack. Erica graduated from Temple University in 2012 with a Bachelor's Degree in Music Education and has since proudly called Philly her home. She serves as the Arts Department Lead Teacher at The Philadelphia Charter School For The Arts and Sciences. Although E Mack plays multiple instruments, her first love is the drums. Her father had faith in her ability to play the drums at just 6 years old, and she began playing for her church when she was barely able to reach the foot pedals. She recently opened a private event venue, Events at The Loft, where she hopes to provide musicians with a creative space to rehearse and perform.



MARISA WEBSTER

is a trumpeter, composer, and educator from Jacksonville, FL. She is a graduate of the prestigious Douglas Anderson School of the Arts, received her bachelor's degree in music with a minor in entrepreneurship from The Florida State University, and a masters degree in Jazz Studies from Temple University. Marisa has had the opportunity to perform at many music venues and festivals around the country from Carnegie Hall to the Detroit Jazz Festival. Marisa is an alumnus of the 2019 Betty Carter Jazz Ahead program, an international jazz residency that features performances and compositions by the next generation of jazz greats, and of the 2021 Jazz Aspen Snowmass Jazz Academy Big band.



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With Thanks

We extend our deepest thanks to the IJ volunteers, audio engineer Jon Picciano, Andrew Desiderio, Abigail Dickson, Jay Fluellen, Gerard Silva and the staff of Fleisher Art Memorial, The City School, and the Intercultural Journeys Board of Directors.

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Support for The Frances Suite

Funding for The Frances Suite has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support comes from The Presser Foundation. The Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, and Fleisher Art Memorial.