

PROGRAM NOTES

Women, Power, and the Journey

Commissioned in celebration of National Women's History Month by the Equinox Chamber Players ensemble *Women, Power, and the Journey* is a musical tribute to four women with significant ties to St. Louis: Madam C.J. Walker, Mary Engelbreit, Katherine Dunham, and Tina Turner.

I. Get Up and Make It Happen – As Madam Walker said, “Don’t sit and wait for opportunities to come, you have to get up and make them happen.” The alternating sections of quiet reflection and driving activity in this movement reflect Madam Walker’s life path of insightful planning and committed working that led to her tremendous accomplishments. The opening atmospheric duet between the flute and clarinet gives way to a slow, lyrical passage for oboe and bassoon. These two gestures open up into several energizing march-like sections for the whole ensemble. The atmospheric music then returns in a happier mode and yields to a final, triumphant return of the march, this time with the clarity of the major mode. The spiritual, march and stomp genres prevalent during her lifetime influenced this movement.

II. Catch the Sail – Mary Engelbreit reminds us that “There are wonderful opportunities sailing by, and you have to be ready to grab them.” This quiet and pleasant pastorage reflects Mary’s style of simple nostalgic beauty through color and form. Beginning with a ruminative clarinet solo the other instruments enter, one at a time, creating a spacious landscape of harmony that includes small melodic gestures. The openness of the harmonies gives way to a reinterpretation of the opening melody with simple accompaniment. These accompanying arpeggiations move from instrument to instrument with the melody reemerging until the whole ensemble plays the together at the end.

III. Open the Door – Katherine Dunham opened many doors to throughout her lifetime from being one of the first African American women to attend the University of Chicago, to doing fieldwork as a pioneering anthropologist in Haiti and to internationally establishing herself as a dancer and choreographer. She continually confronted and overcame racial and gender barriers wherever she found them and spread her “can do” attitude to everyone who came into her life. Her favorite Haitian dance, the Yanvalou, forms the basis for this movement in both melodic and rhythmic constructs. The meditative first section uses a newly created yanvalou-like melody synthesized from several diverse original sources. The accompanying cabasa infers the sacred rattle used by the priest in the Rada tradition of Vodoun that calls the congregation to participate in the ritual. The following cowbell entrance carries the pulse of the ensuing dance and cues this driving, percussive section. Another version of a yanvalou melody later emerges in the flute with the other instruments supporting the continuous rhythmic pattern. The ensemble returns to this second melody, this time flute and oboe in octaves with the clarinet in canon. The third rendition of this melody is in unison, with drone notes supporting the rhythmic pattern. As there is no musically developmental beginning, middle and end to the Rada dances this movement ends with a diminishing reiteration of the main motive, culminating with a final tutti chord.

IV. Anything is Possible – Facing her fears, paying the price, and finding the courage to believe in herself rings true to this mantra that carried Tina Turner through so much. References throughout this movement to Tina’s rhythm and blues heritage clearly speaks of the inner strength and courage she showed both on and off-stage in becoming a woman of tremendous accomplishment and one of the top international rock stars of all time. A rousing full-ensemble introductory section prepares for the repeating rim shots on the snare drum over which the winds build on a repetitive melodic cell. This note repetition overtakes the simple melody that later reappears in a more contoured melodic form of call and response. Note repetition and melodic arpeggiations then come together and separate in short alternating sections. The main melodic motive of a falling third then climbs chromatically into a brief reference on one of Tina’s most famous pieces. Another chromatic climb, this time repeating the last melodic cell from the previous section, returns to the repeating note theme and its sequential falling third call and response pattern. Several alternating sections gradually combine the repeated note, the falling third, and the arpeggiations into a crashing cadence and the return of the snare drum’s rim shot. The return of the first section builds into an exploding percussion cadenza to end the piece.