

Composer Notes

VALERIE COLEMAN

In its original form, *Umoja*, the Swahili word for Unity and the first principle of the African Diaspora holiday Kwanzaa, was composed of a simple song for women's choir. It embodied a sense of 'tribal unity', through the feel of a drum circle, the sharing of history through traditional "call and response" form and the repetition of a memorable sing-song melody. It was rearranged into woodwind quintet form during the genesis of Coleman's chamber music ensemble, Imani Winds, with the intent of providing an anthem that celebrated the diverse heritages of the ensemble itself.

Almost two decades later from the original, the orchestral version brings an expansion and sophistication to the short and sweet melody, beginning with sustained ethereal passages that float and shift from a bowed vibraphone, supporting the introduction of the melody by solo violin. Here the melody is a sweetly singing in its simplest form with an earnest 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.

Umoja has seen the creation of many versions, that are like siblings to one another, similar in many ways, but each with a unique voice that is informed by Coleman's ever evolving creativity and perspective.

"This version honors the simple melody that ever was, but is now a full exploration into the meaning of freedom and unity. Now more than ever, Umoja has to ring as a strong and beautiful anthem for the world we live in today."

- Valerie Coleman