

For immediate release: April 7, 2015
Contact exec@cantate.org for more information

Sun. April 19 world premiere! Creating *Rise*: Composer Judah Adashi and poet Tameka Cage Conley on their musical journey from Selma to Ferguson and beyond



Rise artwork by Rafaela Dreisin; Judah Adashi (photo by Britt Olsen-Ecker); Tameka Cage Conley (photo by Mario Epanya)

WASHINGTON, D.C.: **Rise** is a new work commissioned by **Cantate Chamber Singers** (Gisèle Becker, director) from composer **Judah Adashi**, based on texts by the Pittsburgh-based poet **Tameka Cage Conley**. Written for two choirs—one specializing in chamber choral music, the other in a cappella jazz—**Rise** bears the influence of some of Adashi's musical heroes such as Stevie Wonder and Nina Simone. It also represents the effort of two young artists to grapple with recent tragedies in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York, and through their partnership to create dialogue and art. In the composer's words, **Rise** is "a reflection on the journey from Selma to Ferguson and beyond—a celebration of and a reckoning with the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century refracted through the triumphs and horrors of the 21st."

Rise will be premiered by Cantate with special guest artists Afro Blue (Connaitre Miller, founder and director), the acclaimed a cappella jazz group from Howard University, on Sunday, April 19, 2015 at 5:00 p.m. at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, 1518 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Tickets (\$35-45, \$15 students with ID, ages 18 and under FREE) are available at www.cantate.org or 301-986-1799.

Q: How did *Rise* begin?

JA: In 2012, Cantate approached me about a commission for their 30th anniversary. I had already enjoyed wonderful experiences with Cantate: They'd given multiple performances of a work of mine that won their Young Composers' Contest, and I served as a judge for subsequent competitions. When Cantate told me they wanted to collaborate with an a cappella ensemble on this project, I immediately suggested Afro Blue. A

cappella singing is a big part of my musical background. I sang in and directed a cappella groups in high school and college—in fact, I believe the Yale Whiffenpoofs shared a season of NBC's *The Sing-Off* with Afro Blue! Afro Blue's versatility and affiliation with a historically black college struck me as exactly the kind of cross-cultural, multigenerational collaboration that Gisèle was seeking.

In recent years, my music has been converging with my activities in community engagement. I've had a longstanding interest in the Civil Rights Movement, sparked by an inspiring Black History course I took in high school with Dr. Jerry Thornbery. I suggested that the Cantate piece focus on civil rights in America. And as much as I love working with existing poetry, it became clear early on that this project would call for new text by a young poet who had lived through the highs and low of our recent history.

Q: You and Tameka Cage Conley met at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. What kind of affinities did you sense that made collaboration seem like a fruitful next step?

JA: Tameka and I had overlapping residencies in 2013. I was actually the first person she encountered: she pulled onto the grounds before dinner, during a torrential downpour. I showed her where to unload and offered her an umbrella. It seems auspicious in hindsight! I don't recall a discussion of working together per se. I do remember late-night discussions we had about race and politics in America. Our fellow residents drifted in and out of these conversations, but I felt the two of us shared some sensibilities. Among other things, we were sensitive to the ways in which President Obama had been treated and viewed differently from his predecessors. Tameka also noted the painful irony of African-American artists being asked to address discrimination and disenfranchisement. Why are the oppressed asked to speak to or "solve" a condition imposed by others? This question resonated with me as a white artist invested in civil rights.

TCC: I'll add that the night before Judah's departure from VCCA, another artist and I stayed up late into the night to spend one last bit of time with him. I remember thinking, "This is not the last I will see of Judah." I trusted and believed we would work together.

Q: In creating *Rise*, did either of you have touchstone works in mind or did you feel you were in uncharted territory?

JA: *Rise* takes its title from Tameka's words, as well as resonances in the writings of Michele Norris (*The Grace of Silence*, a memoir) and Maya Angelou (the poem "I'll Rise"). I will let Tameka speak to her literary influences. I can only say that I experience Tameka's poems as channeling a number of African-American poets we both admire (for example, Natasha Trethewey) but in a voice that is her own and of our moment.

TCC: As a matter of fact, the poems that I wrote for this collaboration are almost entirely different from my other poems. Those usually center on aspects of personal history, especially struggles unique to women and the woman's body (though even here I attempt to incorporate matters of social justice). With the poems for *Rise*, I had to do the work of acknowledging where we had been as a nation. There was the powerful historical moment when the Voting Rights Act became law. But I also had to be realistic about the ways African-American people, especially young men, are still treated as non-citizens, their lives rendered as nothing.

I felt a historical weight and urgency. I thought about other poets who had been called upon to write meaningful work that was bigger than them. I thought of Elizabeth Alexander, who wrote the inaugural poem for President Obama in 2008. I love that work because Alexander taps into the hope in the atmosphere at that time even as she writes frankly about the repair still needed for the nation to become as fair as it can and should be. There's also a specificity to the poem I admire: an attentiveness to the detail of everyday American life, and the idea that somehow we are bound together.

Q: How specific were the directives that one poem needed to work well for Cantate's performance style, another for Afro Blue's?

JA: These were issues we touched base about while Tameka was writing. But it became clear that it was neither necessary nor practical to try to determine the roles each group would have in singing the text. The poetry lends itself to many possibilities, from solos to combined choirs and everything in between.

TCC: We wanted the poems to tell a progressive story of struggle and social change. We had a chronological series of figures: Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Congressman John Lewis and the march to Selma itself. Because Congressman Lewis famously said, "Barack Obama is what comes at the end of that bridge in Selma," there was a link between that "Bloody Sunday" and the 44th president of the United States—if those protesters had not risked their lives, the first African American president would not be in the White House.

Judah and I spoke throughout the process, and that made the project more meaningful. At the same time Judah focused on allowing the poems to guide the piece, and I am forever grateful because it gave me the freedom I needed.

JA: A few of my musical influences are part of the fabric of this piece. I didn't consciously approach *Rise* with their work in mind. But I hear echoes of Stevie Wonder's brooding, majestic "They Won't Go When I Go" in the opening movement about Selma, and Nina Simone's epic "Sinnerman" in the hard-driving John Lewis number, "O Light (from Troy to All the Cities)." Marvin Gaye's singular rendition of our national anthem is part the fabric of "Merican Anthem," which may also have touches of Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come"; these latter two artists are geniuses of vocal phrasing. It probably goes without saying that African-American spirituals, which I consider the greatest music we have, also inform the language of the piece. I've become very attached over the past 15 years to Alvin Ailey's signature dance piece, *Revelations*, which is comprised of dances set to a series of spirituals.

I was aware throughout the compositional process that I was writing for groups with different (and, I think, complementary) qualities. This isn't the Bach and Britten that Cantate is used to singing, nor is it the harmonically intricate jazz idiom that comprises much of Afro Blue's repertoire. Cantate has very few African-American singers, while the members of Afro Blue are almost all black. Cantate has about 30 singers, while Afro Blue has nine. Cantate performs without amplification; Afro Blue typically sings with individual handheld microphones. My hope is that this music will offer a powerful meeting point for the two groups and that the audience can vicariously share in this artistic communion.

Q: The last two years have been an eventful, fraught period for civil rights in America. Tameka, you had past experience in creating art that tries to break through negative American stereotypes about young black men. During the writing of the *Rise* poems you also gave birth to a son. How did these experiences affect what you hoped to convey?

TCC: In 2011, I wrote a full-length play centered on the lives of African American men, which was performed at the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh. My novel-in-progress has a young Black male focus as well. I am compelled to write about African American men because I don't think the nation loves or values their lives enough. And I do. If any of my poems, plays, or fiction can do even a small thing to affect how Black men are perceived, then I feel I have done my job as an artist.

Our son was sixteen days old when I wrote the first poem for this project. Soon after we brought him home, my husband and I discussed how and when we would have to teach him what to do if ever he is pulled over by a cop. It was horrible. I wanted these poems to be my mantra, as a mother, artist, educator, and U.S. citizen. My

life matters and so does my son's. I finished the final poem of the project when my son was six months old. In so many ways, these poems are dedicated to him.

Q: Were the two of you in touch frequently to discuss how to deal with the unfolding events in Ferguson and elsewhere?

JA: Each fresh tragedy of the past few years has been a painful affirmation of the value of this project. I've felt oddly fortunate to have this work as a place to process thoughts and feelings, and to have Tameka as a partner in trying to make sense of it all.

TCC: We began these discussions after the murder of Trayvon Martin. And then it was almost as if the murders of Mike Brown and Eric Garner gave even more "rise" to our idea to collaborate. My poetry is at once an art form and a tool to raise awareness. I think Judah sees his work in the same way. We both felt we needed to respond.

While the creation of each poem was mine, conversations with Judah were key and helped to unlock the direction. Each poem has a greater depth than the previous one. I feel safe in writing that the final poem, "Merican Anthem," was exactly what I wanted it to be and the right one to close the piece.

Q: What kind of impact do you hope a live performance of the finished work might have on the audience?

TCC: I'd like to have more open conversations about race, for people to dare to be honest and not idealistic. It's not enough that we have an African American president. Even if our lives are privileged and removed from the socio-cultural realities of Ferguson, our lives cannot mean much if we allow children to be murdered without consequence. We believe the live performance is just the beginning. We hope to share the piece more in D.C. and around the nation—I'd even like to have an international conversation focused on change with this collaboration as a centerpiece.

JA: I always want a live performance to create a world, an experience. In this case, one that invites the audience to engage with where we are 50 years after Selma. It doesn't offer easy solace or resolution. There is no better story, and no worse story, than the Civil Rights Movement in America. I hope we are creating a meaningful space for everyone to grapple with these realities, as we bear witness to where we have been and where we are going.

TCC: This collaboration represents a pivotal moment in my career. I have put my soul into these poems and hope that I have captured hope and struggle with the same level of grace and dignity that those courageous men, women, and children in the Civil Rights Movement exhibited each day they arose and decided to fight for justice. I am grateful to be an artist with a tool that can elevate and show us that as long as we have breath, we have hope.

JA: I know there are many stories that Tameka and I have just started to tell that we'll want to explore further. I cannot thank Cantate Chamber Singers and Afro Blue enough for going on this journey with us.

* The composer and Cantate Chamber Singers thank Dr. & Mrs. Eli and Toni Adashi for commissioning the poetry of Dr. Tameka Cage Conley.

###