

For Immediate Release



CEDILLE RECORDS RELEASES WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING OF SHAWN E OKPEBHOLO'S *SONGS IN FLIGHT*, FEBRUARY 14

Performed by Rhiannon Giddens, Will Liverman, Reginald Mobley, Karen Slack, and pianist Paul Sánchez, Okpebholo's song cycle is inspired by the Freedom on the Move database, a collection of historical runaway slave advertisements from early U.S. newspapers

Also on the album are individual songs from four other Okpebholo cycles, two of which feature saxophonist Julian Velasco



CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (December 12, 2024) — On **February 14, 2025**, Cedille Records will release the World Premiere recording of **Shawn E Okpebholo's** *Songs in Flight*, a song cycle for soprano, countertenor, baritone, and piano that originally premiered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2023. Featuring texts by poets **Tsitsi Jaji**, **Crystal Simone Smith**, and **Tyehimba Jess**, reflecting on and quoting from the *Freedom on the Move* database, *Songs in Flight* comprises 12 songs performed by Grammy-winning and -nominated artists known for their dedication to cultural and historical music projects: vocalist and multi-instrumentalist **Rhiannon Giddens**, baritone **Will Liverman**, countertenor **Reginald Mobley**, soprano **Karen Slack**, and pianist **Paul Sánchez**. In addition to *Songs in Flight*, the album also includes one song from each

of Okpebholo's four other song cycles — *Unknown*, *Three Psalmic Meditations*, *Words Like Freedom*, and *Four Songs on Love* — two of which feature saxophonist **Julian Velasco**, the winner of Cedille's inaugural Emerging Artist Competition in 2021.

Songs in Flight was conceived as an artistic response to Cornell University's *Freedom on the Move* database, an archive containing over 30,000 newspaper advertisements placed by North American enslavers to aid in the capture of runaway enslaved persons. According to Okpebholo, "The dehumanizing ads . . . described the runaways in chilling detail — their physical characteristics, clothing, mannerisms, even fragments of their stories which, ironically, offered a glimpse into these individuals' humanity." Taken collectively, the ads offer a detailed and rare source of information about the experiences of people who had no other way of entering the historical record.

The songs comprising *Songs in Flight* bring to life different figures found in these advertisements, incorporating varied styles including folk, elegiac lullaby, protest song, and spiritual. In her program note for the album, poet and lyricist Tsitsi Jaji writes, "The extraordinary singers on this album bare emotion in performances that display the human voice's capacity to bear the color and grain of interior worlds to contemporary audiences." Okpebholo sets the full brutal text of his chosen advertisements — as narrations, solos, or ensembles — so as not to sentimentalize the stories."

Songs in Flight connects past to present, drawing a line from the individuals who hoped to emancipate themselves for as long as they could, to the racial violence of today. Still, glimpses of hope are woven throughout. In its review of the cycle's premiere performance, *The New York Times* noted that it "zeroes in on... the simultaneous presence of good and evil, perseverance and depravity, combining beauty and harshness."

Complementing *Songs in Flight* are individual songs from Okpebholo's four other song cycles. With texts drawn from diverse sources — poets Langston Hughes and Marcus Amaker, Okpebholo's former teacher Beatrice Holz, and scripture — these songs build on the themes of *Songs in Flight*, ruminating on the moral and biological frailty of humankind.

Shawn E. Okpebholo was named the 2024 Chicagoan of the Year in Classical Music by the *Chicago Tribune*; his work has been described as "devastatingly beautiful" and "fresh and new and fearless" by *The Washington Post*. *Songs in Flight* continues his mission to create impactful, narrative-driven music, bringing new perspectives on historical stories. This is the first Cedille Records album to feature his music exclusively. Previous Okpebholo works were included on Will Liverman's 2021 album, *Dreams of a New Day — Songs by Black Composers*, a 2022 Grammy nominee for Best Classical Solo Vocal Album, and the Lincoln Trio's *Trios from Contemporary Chicago* (2022).

SHAWN E OKPEBHOLO

Songs In Flight

CEDILLE RECORDS — CDR 90000 234

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals

Karen Slack, soprano

Reginald Mobley, countertenor

Will Liverman, baritone

Paul Sánchez, piano

Julian Velasco, saxophone

TRACK LISTING

Songs in Flight (43:11)

1. Prologue: Oh Freedom • *a spiritual* (4:16)
2. In Flight • *a quiet song* (6:29)
3. Asko or Glasgow • *a chaconne* (2:53)
4. Peter • *a work song* (1:28)
5. Mud Song • *a folk song* (4:02)
6. Jack (and Paul) • *a field holler* (2:08)
7. Mariah Francis • *a waltz* (3:33)
8. Matilda's Tom • *an anthem* (1:11)
9. I Go by Robert • *a protest song/reprise* (3:29)
10. Ahmaud • *an elegiac lullaby* (5:04)
11. Four Martins • *a dirge* (4:56)
12. Jubilee: Thomas Rutling (1854? - 1915) • *a lament/quasi reprise* (5:35)

13. An Echo, an Ending (from *Unknown*) (5:33)
14. Time (from *Three Psalmic Meditations*) (5:41)
15. Sing, O Black Mother (from *Words Like Freedom*) (1:31)
16. I'm Sure (from *Four Songs on Love*) (5:20)

Total Duration: 63:43

Produced by Shawn E Okpebholo and engineered by Brian Porick.

Recorded March 9-10 and 12-13, 2024, at the Amerding Center for Music and the Arts at Wheaton College.

ABOUT SHAWN E OKPEBHOLO

Grammy-nominated Nigerian-American composer Shawn E Okpebholo is a celebrated figure in contemporary classical music. His accolades include awards from the Academy of Arts and Letters and The American Prize in Composition, along with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Chamber Music America, the Barlow Endowment for the Arts, and the Mellon

Foundation. He has been commissioned by leading arts organizations, festivals, and ensembles, including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, Oakland Symphony, United States Air Force Strings, American Composers Orchestra, Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Sphinx, and the Tanglewood, Ravinia, and Newport Classical music festivals. Okpebholo's music resonates internationally, having been performed at iconic venues including Carnegie and Wigmore Halls, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and the Lincoln, Kennedy, and Kimmel Centers. Many highly acclaimed artists and ensembles have performed his work, including Rhiannon Giddens, Will Liverman, Eighth Blackbird, the Copland House Ensemble, and the Cincinnati and Houston Symphonies, as well as opera companies in Chicago, Nashville, St. Louis, and Portland. Okpebholo's music has been featured on PBS *NewsHour*, NPR's *Tiny Desk* and *Morning Edition*. In 2021, NPR included his song, "The Rain," among the 100 Best Songs of the Year, a rare nod to classical music on the list. He has contributed to 12 commercially released albums, with three earning Grammy nominations. Okpebholo holds master's and doctoral degrees in composition from the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music. He is currently the Jonathan Blanchard Distinguished Professor of Composition at Wheaton College and recently completed residencies as the Saykaly Garbulinska Composer-in-Residence with the Lexington Philharmonic and with Chicago Opera Theater.

ABOUT CEDILLE RECORDS

Launched in November 1989 by James Ginsburg, Grammy Award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing and promoting the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area. A nonprofit record label, Cedille's mission is to produce and disseminate audiophile recordings presenting the finest classical music performers and composers in and from Chicago. The recordings further the careers and legacies of these Chicago artists as Cedille invests in not only the recordings but in the artists represented on them. The label's catalog of more than 200 front-line albums brims with attractive, off-the-beaten-path repertoire from the Baroque era to the present day, including world premieres of more than 400 classical compositions. Works from the classical canon, when they do appear, are usually heard in particularly imaginative pairings. Cedille never removes albums from its catalog and each recording is a permanent documentation of the artist's work. With more than 180 Chicago artists and ensembles, over 80 making their professional recording debuts on the label, Cedille brings the area's most significant classical music artists to a worldwide listening public. Cedille recordings are available on CD, as MP3 and hi-resolution FLAC downloads, and on all major streaming platforms. Learn more Cedille Records and explore the label's catalog at cedillerecords.org.

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