

Alumni

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Featuring: Shawn Okpebholo '03

On a Friday in December 2018, Dr. Shawn Okpebholo '03 found himself seated in New York's Carnegie Hall, a wave of emotion hitting him as the curtains rose and the show began. But it wasn't just any show. That night the composer's piece, "Oh, Glory," was debuted during a performance by mezzo-soprano J'Nai Bridges and pianist Mark Markham in the country's most respected performance hall.

"It was really a surreal moment because I'm a kid that grew up in the projects, the poorest part of town, and then because The Salvation Army and other people took a chance on me, years later I'm sitting at the most famous concert hall in the U.S. hearing my music being performed," Okpebholo said. "That just shows what God can do."

Okpebholo's gift for music was evident from a young age. He began going to church at The Salvation Army in Lexington, Ky., where he received training that allowed him to hone his musical craft, but even more importantly, that is where Okpebholo met Jesus.

Perhaps this is why, for Okpebholo, faith and music are intrinsically linked. As his training continued, Okpebholo realized that the composition and creation of music appealed to him even more than the performance aspect of it. So, his passion for composing ignited.

It was also through The Salvation Army Student Fellowship Band that Okpebholo was introduced to Asbury University's Composer Emeritus James Curnow '66. When it came time to choose a college, Asbury was a no-brainer as it would allow him the opportunity to continue studying under Curnow.

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Shawn Okpebholo '03
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“Those were very formative years of my life,” Okpebholo said. “Because it was a small department, the faculty really saw my passion for music and saw my potential. Many of them really invested time to make sure I could get to the next level.”

Reflecting on the time he spent tucked away in Wilmore composing some of his early works as a music major, brings back fond memories for Okpebholo, who still keeps in contact with his close friends from Asbury.

“Asbury was one of the most enjoyable times in my life because I was living in community with my best friends,” Okpebholo said. “I was getting a good education, but I was also living with people that I love and in a Christian community, which is something very unique.”

Music runs deep in the Okpebholo family. Shawn’s wife, Dorothy, is a professional violist playing for several orchestras in Chicago, while their two daughters’ musical talents are already mirroring those of their impressive parents.

When he’s not working on his latest masterpiece, Okpebholo serves as a professor of theory and composition at Wheaton College where he’s been teaching for eight years. Previously, he taught at Northern Kentucky University and Union University.

“A lot of my theory and skill pedagogy comes straight from [Dr. Vicki Bell](https://www.asbury.edu/about/directory/vicki-bell/) (<https://www.asbury.edu/about/directory/vicki-bell/>), who is still teaching at Asbury,” Okpebholo said. “I have a very relational approach to teaching. I really try to provide a human element to music theory and composition, which all comes from how I was taught at Asbury.”

Musicality and spirituality go hand-in-hand for Okpebholo, who says he doesn’t see the two as separate, but as wedded aspects of his life. Even in his non-sacred pieces, he easily notices the ways in which his faith played a part in the composition process.

“My creative process is a very spiritual process,” Okpebholo said. “I’ll finish a piece of music and reflect back on how I got from point A to point B. Take a big orchestra piece, for example. I’m like, ‘How did that happen?’ Yes, I have skills. I have the training to write music, but I’m convinced that the Holy Spirit is with me the whole time because to create something out of nothing, just like God did with us, requires some sort of higher power. As a Christian, I know what that is.”

His creative process is often born out of ruminations, as Okpebholo often thinks in music. When it comes time to compose a new work, the notes and scales just seem to pour out seamlessly.

His most recent work was born out of not just the musical ruminations that occupy Okpebholo’s mind, but also the societal ruminations that have been in the collective American consciousness for the past several years.

His new album of spirituals reimagined, which will debut before the end of the year, represents many things. It draws heavily upon the experiences of slaves but also on Okpebholo's own modern black experience amidst divisive political and social times. "I'm half Nigerian and so even that aspect is influencing my music as I continue to try to reconnect with the music of my father," he said.

"Oh, Glory" is among those works and is written from the perspective of a mother speaking to her child who is sold into slavery. The mother assures her child he/she will be truly free in Christ and reunited in the heavenly kingdom.

"My new album is totally in response to what's going on in our country," Okpebholo said. "The messages are much clearer in what I'm trying to do in terms of justice, respect and the idea of what freedom means... Freedom is truly being free in Jesus Christ. That's all throughout those negro spirituals. So, my experience is informing my music a lot these days."

BY THE NUMBERS

80

Countries with Asbury Alumni

Asbury grads are living and working in more than 80 countries around the world.

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With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Asbury has established campus guidelines to help ensure our campus remains healthy and safe.