

Memory, Muse, and Experimentation in Ruth Naomi Floyd's "Are We Yet Somehow Alive?"

~ By Dr. Guthrie Ramsey.

Ruth Naomi Floyd's new work asks a profound question for our age. "Are We Yet Somehow Alive?" had its world premiere at the beautiful Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral on April 25th. A composer, vocalist, flautist, educator, and photographer, Floyd possesses an endowment of effusive gifts, with which she answers, a resounding "yes"! The work is a multi-modal meditation on the inner life our enslaved ancestors, whose words were preserved in slave narratives and other accounts. Floyd's powerful song cycle uses their words not as an endpoint but as a muse to explore their world beyond the typical interpretations of abjection. Indeed, their lives were more. They experienced other dimensions in their humanity like love—love of children, friends, God, and lovers. The work's setting for narrator, classical choral octet (the Cathedral Singers under the direction of Dr. Thomas Lloyd) and a jazz quintet (piano, bass, drums, violin, woodwinds), and two singers (with Floyd doubling on flute), and the dance legend Brenda Dixon Gottchild were deployed for maximum emotional and narrative utility. As a composer, Floyd exploits the various timbre qualities at her disposal to explore, re-contextualize, and in some instances, amplify the truth claim of the recorded sentiments of the enslaved. As the piece moved back and forth between the chorale and the band, their words were given breath, wings, and freedom.

For me, this freedom was represented in the juxtaposition of the rich, advanced harmonic language of Floyd's beautiful acapella choral writing—its lush harmonies highlighting infectious dissonant rubs as design elements against the hollow, sterile acoustic environment created by the cathedral's high ceilings and resonant stone. Against this sound, the jazz ensemble performed songs that were treated somewhat conventionally—a vocal statement with tasteful solos following. Floyd's arresting vocals unfurled in the cathedral like a blanket of velvet—her vibrato and relaxed tone sailing through and over the chord changes seemingly without effort. (But singers know she was working!) The other vocalist, Deion Peyton was a revelation. His control and power took the audience on a sustained carpet ride.

The multi-modal aspect of "Are We Yet Somehow Alive?" was highlighted by Floyd's riveting photographs that lined the walls of the cathedral and which were scrolled on the screen in front. The Black figures in the photographs were overlaid with a mesh-like imaging that frustrated the viewers direct engagement with the photo's subject. The distancing of presumed intimacy with these figures was in full effect here. Were the subjects of these photographs trapped or protected? In short, they deserved contemplation.

The ever-effusive Val Gay's muted yet direct interpretations and the simmering (and never over-powering) jazz ensemble under the direction of Aaron Graves) guided this history lesson with skill and understatement. Indeed, the virtuosos Lee Smith, Anthony Nelson, and Mark Price worked as a well-oiled, acoustic machine. But three moments of

this magnificent ninety-minute work stood out to me. When Gottschild snaked through the audience at one point, she provided a stunning and unexpected visual interpretation of the sonic and prose narrative. When Floyd finally added her vocals to one of the chorale ensemble numbers near the end of the piece, we witnessed something of an alchemy. Her call and response gestures ultimately became consummation when she sang her bluesy improvisations and descending minor scale against the totally composed chorale. It represented a kind of arrival point uniting lament and resolution, indeed, classical writing and jazz singing. But when violin veteran Diane Monroe played an unaccompanied solo that took down the house, time stood still. She began the feature with avant-garde, improvisational gestures, complete with extended techniques. From there, she eased into blues-like gestures reminiscent of the moans, groans, hums, and shouts from which the Negro Spirituals developed. In her hands, the violin became a fiddle, a banjo, a shouting church mother, and a jazz improviser. It captured the spirit of the larger piece: to honor and infuse the memories of the enslaved with vitality, relevance, and love through artistic experimentation.

In this age of TikTok in which audiences have been trained to take in “art’s information” as instant gratification, Floyd’s masterwork *Are We Yet Somehow Alive?* invites us to take the time and sit with history and imagine other worlds and lessons beyond that of pain of oppression. Floyd’s art, as this world premiere demonstrates, is an infectious tool that can resurrect, instruct, and inspire, as the sold-out audience proved with its standing ovation.

Congratulations to Ruth Naomi Floyd on your powerful contribution to American music culture. As a woman cultural worker, you stand in the tradition of Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, Geri Allen, Billy Strayhorn and others who used African American music to tell untold stories with insight and courage.

Dr. Guthrie Ramsey is a musician, scholar, ethnomusicologist, author, lecturer, producer, editor, band leader, radio host and label head.

Special thanks to Penn Live Arts and the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral.