



PHOTO BY TIM TRUMBUE

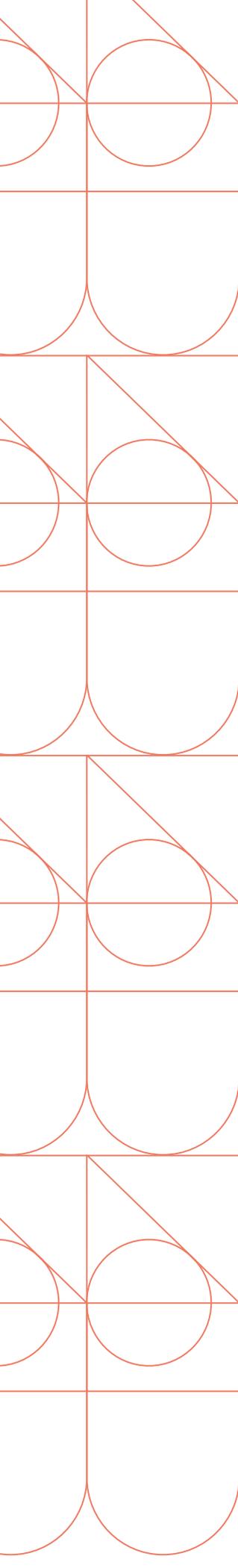
WHO DO WE CALL 'SISTER'?

BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS IS HELPING US FIND OUT

BY JULIA BAKER

FOR DIANNE BERKUN MENAKER, founder and artistic director of Brooklyn Youth Chorus, the idea for the female-forward piece *she is called* has been slowly taking shape for many years. The chorus's Concert Ensemble—the top-level treble ensemble—is largely composed of young women. As the upper level boys' voices begin to change, they are redirected to the Men's Ensemble. The Concert Ensemble, then, offers a unique space for young women to freely explore their individuality.

"From the beginning of the chorus, the idea that developing a skill—especially something as personal as one's voice—is really important in establishing a positive self concept and identity," Berkun Menaker



said. This is particularly important for women, whose self-worth is often externally affirmed, she added. Instead, Berkun Menaker wants the young singers to define their self-worth on internal, meaningful, and lasting values.

As her idea for the piece unfolded, Berkun Menaker acknowledged the importance of examining the intersectionality of gender, race, sexuality, and age, as well as the ongoing oppression of those who are marginalized because of their identities. At the forefront of this effort, she said, are young people.

“Young people are changing how we think of gender, in terms of gender expression, how someone identifies, and recognizing and valuing people who don’t fit into the binary categories,” Berkun Menaker asserted. Young people challenge the categorization of “woman,” considering the ways in which the term is used positively and, alternatively, how it has become both limiting and confining.

The title *she is called* comes from a piece composed by Pulitzer Prize- and Grammy Award-winning David Lang for the chorus’ previous production, *Silent Voices*. To create this composition, he pulled every line from the King James Bible that started with “she.” This piece offers a glimpse into early definitions of womanhood, and became a fitting place for *she is called* to begin.

“It was this cataloguing of ‘she bears a child,’ ‘she’s a man’s wife,’ ‘she’s defiled,’ all of these kinds of images that were created about women,” Berkun Menaker said. “[This piece] seemed like a meaningful starting point.”

As the story of *she is called* comes to life, Carolina Performing Arts fellows Helga Davis and Toshi Reagon have helped Berkun Menaker and chorus members hone in on their message.

“Everything that [Davis] does or brings to a project is to help it find its truest form,” Berkun Menaker said. “She’s led individual conversations and interviews with students and participated in group discussions. A lot of [her work] has had an effect on helping students find their own truth.”

Similarly, Reagon encourages Berkun Menaker and the young vocalists to search for the overlooked people and the unseen problems in the stories they are telling.

“I always feel like I’m going to emerge [into a better person] after working with Toshi, a more enlightened person, and an artist with more care and sensitivity,” Berkun Menaker said. “I know to look below the surface and open my mind to the experiences that are maybe outside of my [own].”

To present all facets of womanhood, Berkun Menaker commissioned eight new pieces for *she is called* by female composers (the performance at CPA will be the premieres of all eight works) who represent a broad cross-section of identities. She also brought in Charlotte Brathwaite to direct, who has assembled a creative team with a broad perspective on gender and race. One of the composers, Nathalie Joachim, shares a special connection with the program. Working for the chorus nearly a decade ago, the Brooklyn native came to admire the work of Berkun Menaker and the energy of the young choristers. When she was asked

IN *SHE IS CALLED*, BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS ILLUSTRATES THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE SPANNING FROM BIBLICAL TIMES TO TODAY, EXPLORING THE WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN'S VOICES HAVE BEEN HISTORICALLY SILENCED AND THEN REDISCOVERED THROUGH THE ART OF CHORAL MUSIC.

to write a piece for the project centered around stories of female identity, the request serendipitously aligned with the current focus of her own work. Around the same time, Nathalie was in Chapel Hill as part of her artist residency with Carolina Performing Arts (working with partner Allison Loggins-Hull on *Discourse*, which premieres at CPA on April 2 and 3) and met North Carolina's poet laureate, Jaki Shelton Green. Soon after, she became immersed in the anthology of Green's poetry.

"I was taken aback by her language and her own celebration of the female form and also a deep connection to her own history... and this celebration specifically of the black female body and spirit," Joachim said.

The third piece of inspiration for her composition was drawn from a moment of loss in Joachim's life, where she was called to contemplate the idea of sisterhood. When she came across Green's poem "Revelations," Joachim was captivated by Green's portrayal of sisterhood, lineage, and connection,

particularly that which is shared by black women.

"Historically, black women have not been allowed to celebrate ourselves and all of our glory," Joachim said. "[We] are largely overlooked, especially in American history and American society. Historically, we've been left out of the feminist movement. We've been deprioritized in most conversations around race or equality for black people and all the while, [we have been] really caring for our communities and keeping them moving forward."

In her composition, Joachim hopes to vocalize quiet triumphs of black women and honor those who are called "sister."

"It's particularly strong that [the program] is coming from a group of predominantly young female voices," Joachim said. "That it's about the youth carrying on this voice into the next generation, but also paying homage to all of the women that came before them and allowed them to be standing on this stage." •