

4 Sisters

Program note by the composer

4 Sisters, concerto for jazz violin and orchestra, is a tribute to four great American singers: Aretha Franklin, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan. The first three movements—“Soul,” “Scat,” and “Satin”—are played without interruption, and the final movement, “Sassy,” then follows after a short pause. The concerto begins with Aretha Franklin because her voice and her music exemplify the spiritual element that is the foundation for music in all times and in all cultures. The second movement takes us out of church and onto the New York subway, headed uptown. Ella Fitzgerald could sing the words of a song with the deepest feeling, but she could also scat-sing, improvising notes and sounds with verve, wit and of course, consummate swing. Often she quoted other melodies in her improvisations and if you listen closely you will hear some other tunes, including “A tisket, a tasket,” the song that made her famous. The third movement moves from the big, brightly-lit stage of “Scat” to a more intimate venue, after midnight, and invites the soloist to explore two side--tragic and resilient--of the great Billie Holiday. Sarah Vaughan is the modernist among our four voices, and the final movement brings us into the worlds of bebop, modern jazz and beyond, and asks the soloist to improvise in a free manner, without the constraints of “changes.” Free improvisation underscores the theme of freedom which rings out in every note that these four great artists sang, and which inspired me to compose this concerto.

I originally wrote *4 Sisters* in 1997, and it had its first performance in Cambridge, England (where I attended university) with violinist Will Street, conducted by Peter Britton. In 2004 I was delighted to hear that the Detroit Symphony Orchestra had decided to program the work for Regina Carter’s first performances with the orchestra, and I composed a new solo at the very beginning of the work just for her. I was already a huge fan of Regina’s playing, but we met for the first time just two days before the first of four performances. With the first notes that she played at the very first rehearsal, Regina demonstrated that she owned the piece even though we had not had the opportunity to talk about it before that. About one half of the solo part is improvised and with each of the four performances in 2004, Regina found delightful new things to say. Naturally, I was thrilled beyond words when I learned that she has chosen to perform *4 Sisters* at the 39th Annual Roots Celebration which will honor her and Terence Blanchard for their lifetime achievements.