

Composer's Program Notes
Shawn Okpebholo, *Unknown*
FINAL VERSION, 8.20.21

unknown is a five-movement song cycle for mezzo-soprano, two baritones, and chamber ensemble commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a memorial at Arlington Cemetery for unidentified soldiers who have succumbed to war. Poet Marcus Amaker penned the evocative text.

The first movement begins with an extended and solemn introduction. From the perspective of a soldier, it is an anthem expressing the realities of war, but also the pride for her country and the service and sacrifice she's willing to give for the place she calls home.

The second movement is a melancholic waltz from the perspective of the loved one of a soldier off to war. With only letters and anxiety, there is still space for hope that his beloved will return home.

The third movement—ever so soulful, requiring the baritone voice to engage his falsetto—is an introspective lament from the viewpoint of an injured soldier who is mindful that he is about to die and transition to his eternal home.

From the perspectives of the guards who protect the tomb 24 hours a day, the fourth movement is a dignified march, sustained by an irregular-metered drum cadence: 21/8. The number 21 is significant because a soldier who guards the tomb marches 21 steps, rests for 21 seconds, and repeats this routine in all directions until the soldier's shift is over. I subtly quote *Taps*, the bugle call that happens during military funerals at, coincidentally, 21:00 hours. And, I also briefly quote *America the Beautiful* as an homage to the third verse, which says,

*Oh beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife
Who more than self, their country loved
And mercy more than life.*

The final movement is a poetic *In Memoriam* for the unknowns, and in a way, serves as a reprise for the cycle. This contemplative setting brings back motives, harmonies, themes, and texts from the previous four movements, musically embodying the various aspects of what it means to go off to war.