Margaret Bonds

Born: March 3rd, 1913, Chicago, Illinois
Died: April 26th, 1972, Los Angeles, California
Period of Music: Modern Era

"Women are expected to be wives, mothers, and do all the nasty things in the community (Oh, I do them). And if a woman is cursed with having talent too, then she keeps apologizing for it. It really is a curse, in a way, because instead of working 12 hours a day like other women, you work 24." — Margaret Bonds

Biography:
Margaret Bonds was a prolific composer in the American Concert Spiritual tradition. She was also a famous pianist who performed all over the country. Born on March 3rd in 1923, Margaret grew up in a very musical household. Her father was a doctor and her mother was an organist. Her home functioned as a salon of sorts where many famous black musicians, writers, and thinkers would gather including Will Marion Cook and Florence Price. Early on, Margaret showed much promise on the piano. In high school, she took lessons with the famous composer and pianist Florence Price. While learning piano, she also studied composition.

Bonds fell in love with composing and later studied at Northwestern University, getting a Bachelor and Master's degree in Music. She also studied both piano and composition at Juilliard. Margaret began gaining recognition for her amazing compositions early on. She won the Wanamaker prize, a composition award, for her piece Sea Ghost in 1932. The next year, she was the first African American person to appear as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony. She played a piano concerto by her former teacher Florence Price. It is interesting to note, however, that there is little of her piano music in print due to the fact that as an accomplished concert pianist and improviser, most of her piano music was committed to memory and not written down. Beyond her personal success as a performer and composer, Bonds was highly focused on giving back to her community. She opened a school called the Allied Arts Academy for musicians in Chicago. Later, she moved to LA and became the director of the Inner City Repertory Theater.

Bonds was known for writing vocal music. Bonds composed over 200 songs, over a dozen choral works, and composed for film; however, fewer than 75 of her compositions exist today. Most of her pieces were solo vocal settings of concert spirituals. She also wrote many works of musical theater including Shakespeare in Harlem, Romey and Julie and U.S.A. Musically, Bonds was a product of the Harlem Renaissance. She focused on combining jazz musical idioms into traditional European styles. She worked with many famous figures from the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, the poet, on her oratorio The Ballad of the Brown King. Bonds also wrote popular songs for Andy Razaf, Joe Davis and Harold Dickinson, the most famous of which is called “Peach Street.” Bonds also wrote a memoir called, A Reminiscence, where she recounts what it was like to be a black female composer in the mid 20th century.
Unfortunately, there is little written about Bonds’ life or musical works. She died unexpectedly in 1972, a few months after the LA Philharmonic premiered her work for chorus and orchestra, *Credo*.

**Quick Facts:**
- Her mother was an organist and Bonds childhood home was a gathering place for black musicians, writers, and artists including Florence Price.
- She wrote her first composition, “Marquette Street Blues” at the age of 5.
- Bonds collaborated frequently with famous poet Langston Hughes. Hughes wrote the libretto for her musical *Shakespeare in Harlem*.

**Selected Compositions for Listening:**

Spotify Playlist URL: [https://tinyurl.com/bondslisten](https://tinyurl.com/bondslisten)
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers (Solo Voice)
- 3 Dream Portraits
  - No. 1, Minstrel Man
  - No. 2, Dream Variations
  - No. 3, I, Too
- He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands, arr. Margaret Bonds
- Sit Down, Servant

YouTube Playlist URL: [https://tinyurl.com/bondsyoutube](https://tinyurl.com/bondsyoutube)
- Dry Bones, arr. Margaret Bonds
- Troubled Water
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers (Choir)
- Simon Bore the Cross (Easter Cantata) – Recently found and premiered in 2018
  - This Easter cantata, *Simon Bore the Cross* was found in a box by the dumpster outside of an auction and received its world premiere in February 2018 at the Kennedy Center.

**Learn More about Margaret Bonds:**
- AfriClassical – African American Heritage in Classical Music: [Margaret Bonds](https://www.africlassical.com/)
- Afrocentric Voices in “Classical” Music: [Margaret Bonds](https://www.afrocentricvoicesmusic.com/)
