

## Notes on the Vocal Solos

Our concert this evening features several art songs by Black American composers. In 1977, the great Black American tenor George Shirley wrote, “the creative talents of our composers and poets are well-known in the spheres of popular and sacred music: Rhythm and blues, jazz, gospel, the spiritual; these labels conjure up aural and visual images of unmistakable identity.”<sup>1</sup> Describing a collection of art songs in the classical tradition, all by Black American composers, Shirley further stated “we are indeed capable of creative excellence on yet another level of musical endeavor.”<sup>2</sup> The songs on tonight’s program demonstrate a level of compositional excellence of the highest order. Art songs by black composers are plentiful but unfortunately, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they have not always been performed as frequently as they could be. Tonight, we will hear but a tiny sampling of some of the classical songs contributed to the repertoire by black American composers.

### *Four Songs on poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay*      **Notes by Susan Hurley**

**Margaret Allison Bonds (1913-1972)** was an American composer, pianist, and music educator. As a pianist, she maintained an active concert schedule throughout the U.S and Canada, and she was the first African American soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Through salons at the home of her mother, also a musician, Bonds was connected socially to numerous Black artists, writers, and musicians of her time, and she maintained close friendships with poet Langston Hughes and composer Florence Price. Bonds’ compositional output includes many outstanding vocal works: concert spirituals (both solo and choral), art songs, and popular songs.

In 2020, Hildeward Publishing released a new collection of songs by Bonds. Although the composer died in 1972, 2020 was the first time these songs had ever been published! All the songs in that edition are set to words by American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. I’ve been drawn to Millay’s poems for as long as I can remember. Imagine: words by Millay and music by Bonds!! I eagerly ordered the book and when it arrived, the music absolutely lived up to my expectations. These are gorgeous sounds, rich in complex harmonic interest, oftentimes expansive and lyric for the voice. The piano part moves independently of the voice – it is NO mere accompaniment – and it includes concerto-like soloistic figures when it isn’t flowing in a manner more orchestral than pianistic. As editor Michael Cooper writes in the preface, “Bonds’s music renders the compelling and occasionally heart-wrenchingly painful beauty of.... female sexuality in tones as

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<sup>1</sup> George Shirley, Preface to *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1977), page IV.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

profoundly moving as Millay's poems themselves. These settings are poised to assume their rightful position as milestones in twentieth-century art song."<sup>3</sup>

### *Clear Water*

### Notes by Tiffani Jernigan

**Nadine Shanti** (b. 1953) is a black female composer born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1953. She has spent much of her career traveling the world performing various different genres of music in addition to recording two albums that she composed and sang herself. Her song "Clear Water" is considered a *vocalise*, due to the song not having any words at all. Listening to the piece, one can hear the almost hypnotic effect that both the singer and the collaborative pianist create and the visualization of the peaceful, yet slightly rippling water.

### *A White Rose*

### Notes by Moira Cairns

A love song short enough to be inscribed on a Valentine and sweet enough to promise a response, "A White Rose" was composed by **Florence B. Price** (1887-1953), the first African American woman to receive national fame for her symphonic compositions. We see in this piece her conservatism in how she adheres to the Romantic nationalist style of her time.

### *Three Dream Portraits*

### Notes by Jerry Brown

*Song Cycle: Three Dream Portraits (1959)*

**Margaret Bonds** (1913 - 1972) was a prominent American composer and pianist who left an indelible mark on the world of classical music. Born in Chicago, she received her early musical education from her mother, an organist. Bonds' journey thrived in the vibrant musical atmosphere of Chicago, where she studied composition with Florence Price. Notably, in 1933, she performed Florence Price's piano concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

**Langston Hughes** (1902 - 1967), a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, used his poetry to champion civil rights and racial equality in America. His works, including "The Negro Mother" and "Montage of a Dream Deferred," passionately reflected his evolving views on the American dream.

*Three Dream Portraits* is a mesmerizing collaboration between Hughes and Bonds. The song cycle, composed by Bonds in 1959, takes Hughes' evocative poems and sets them

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<sup>3</sup> John Michael Cooper, ed. *Six Songs on Poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (Hildegard Publishing Company, 2020).

to music. Each song, including "Minstrel Man," "Dream Variation," and "I, Too," brings Hughes' words to life with powerful melodies and poignant harmonies. "Minstrel Man" explores the dichotomy of outward joy and inner suffering, echoing Hughes' theme of concealed pain. "Dream Variation" celebrates the dream of equality, while "I, Too" asserts the determination of African Americans to overcome discrimination. In *Three Dream Portraits*, Margaret Bonds' compositions deepen the emotional impact of Langston Hughes' poetry, creating a profound and moving journey through the African American experience.

### *The Pledge*

### Notes by Tiffani Jernigan

**Betty Jackson King** (1928-1994) was a prominent black female composer born in Chicago in 1928. While she is mostly known for her voice compositions, she was also both a university and high school music teacher and had received the Teaching Recognition Award from Thomas Kean, the former governor of New Jersey. Her song "The Pledge," composed in 1991, is the last vocal piece that she composed before her death in 1994.

### *An April Day*

### Notes by Moira Cairns

**Florence B. Price** composed deliciously complex art songs which drew the attention of highly esteemed performers, including Marian Anderson, Blanche Thebom, Etta Moten, and Leontyne Price. "An April Day" expresses the joy of mere existence on a beautiful spring day. The poetry was written by Joseph S. Cotter Jr., an African American who established himself as a successful playwright, journalist, and published poet before his death at the age of 24.