

## **Margaret Bonds (1913-1972): *Montgomery Variations* (1964)**

Until recently, Margaret Bonds' music, aside from a few songs and arrangements of spirituals, was hardly known at all. Apart from a single concert performance in 1967, the *Montgomery Variations* was not heard again until 2018. While Bonds composed over 200 works in a wide diversity of styles and genres—jazz, film music, art and popular song, orchestral, and choral works—only a few dozen were published during her lifetime. Many of the original manuscripts of her works were scattered around the country following her death, making a revival of her music a challenge, particularly because the ownership and publication rights to the works were uncertain. Fortunately, as many of the legal rights have now been determined, audiences are hearing more and more of her remarkable music

Bonds was born and raised in Chicago. Her father was a doctor, author, and local activist for civil rights, and her mother was a respected educator and musician. Bonds composed her first work when she was just 5, a blues, and she showed extraordinary gifts early on as a pianist. Her parents divorced when she was young, but Bonds' mother fostered an incredible creative environment for the young composer. Hosting weekly salons for prominent Black writers, poets, and musicians, the Bonds household became an important social hub for the Chicago Black Renaissance of the 1920s. There Bonds had the opportunity to meet important Black musicians and composers of the period, including William Grant Still, Will Marion Cook, and Florence Price. Price in particular became an early mentor for Bonds, encouraging her to pursue composition and piano at Northwestern University, which Bonds did despite the obstacles presented by her race. At age 20, she premiered Florence Price's Concerto for Piano with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, becoming the first African American to be featured as an instrumental soloist with that orchestra.

Bonds dedicated *Montgomery Variations* to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for his and others' continued fight for social justice. Each movement is a variation on the Negro spiritual, "I want Jesus to Walk with Me." According to sacred music historians Victoria Schwarz and Rev. Wilson Pruitt, "'I Want Jesus to Walk with Me' is simultaneously several different things: it is a song of lament, a song of personal invitation, and a statement of assurance that Jesus walks alongside those who suffer." Many of the lines also serve as an invocation: "In my trials, Lord, walk with me.../When my heart is almost breaking... walk with me/When my head is bowed in sorrow... walk with me." These words, while never sounded in these purely instrumental variations, nonetheless reverberate throughout the work. Through Bonds' titles of the movements and her brief descriptions below, she bears witness to some of the most difficult and tragic events in the history of Civil Rights Movement—from the boycott of Montgomery Alabama's segregated buses, to the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that took the lives of four young girls. Bonds provided the following descriptions:

I. Decision "Under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC, Negroes in Montgomery decided to boycott the bus company and to fight for their rights as citizens."

II. Prayer Meeting "True to custom prayer meetings precede their action. Prayer meetings start quietly with humble petitions to God. During the course of meetings, members seized with

religious fervor shout and dance. Oblivious to their fellow worshippers they exhibit their love of God and their Faith in Deliverance by gesticulation, clapping, and beating of feet.”

III. March “The Spirit of the Nazarene marching with them, the Negroes of Montgomery walked to their work rather than be segregated on the buses. The entire world, symbolically with them, marches.”

IV. Dawn in Dixie “Dixie, the home of the Camellias known as ‘pink perfection,’ magnolias, jasmine and Spanish moss, awakened to the fact that something new was happening in the South.”

V. One Sunday in the South “Children were in Sunday School learning about Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Southern ‘die-hards’ planted a bomb and several children were killed.”

VI. Lament “The world was shaken by the cruelty of the Sunday School bombing. Negroes, as usual, leaned on their Jesus to carry them through this crisis of grief and humiliation.”

VII. Benediction “A benign God, Father, and Mother to all people, pours forth Love to His children—the good and the bad alike.”