



## Reflections: Voices of the Underrepresented

Program Notes for October 3, 2023

by Linda Berna

“Reflections” is a compelling program of song that highlights under-acknowledged creative spirits and celebrates artistic collaborations between women and men. Each of these composers fought against the rules and prejudices of a world that ignored their personhood, denied their gifts, and decreed that they had no right to artistic pursuits. Their victories shine in the ways that each one overcame these obstacles to forge an illustrious career and develop a particular musical persona, melding different styles in individual and innovative ways, thus helping to erase the false boundaries between “high art” and “popular art” and between people.

### H. T. Burleigh: *Five Songs of Laurence Hope*

Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949), born in Erie, Pennsylvania, was the first Black American to achieve national distinction as a composer, arranger, music editor, and concert artist. His was an emerging modernist voice influenced by Pan-Africanism, the belief in the shared origin and heritage of Black people everywhere and in their identity as a global community, and in the value of their unique cultural products. The foot-stomping rhythms of the Quintet “Del Fandango” have made it one of Boccherini’s most popular and enduring pieces.

Burleigh, a gifted singer with little formal training, obtained a scholarship at age 26 to attend the National Conservatory of Music in New York. His entry to the Conservatory coincided with the arrival of its new director, Antonin Dvořák. Dvořák was the first to raise the possibility of creating an American school of music composition founded in the nation’s folk music, declaring in 1893, “In the Negro melodies of America, I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.” The two became close during Burleigh’s second year at the Conservatory when he became one of Dvořák’s pupils and his copyist. Burleigh shared the songs and spirituals that he had learned from his grandfather and absorbed his teacher’s ideas about employing Native American and African-American music as the basis for composition.

In his senior year, Burleigh was invited to join the Conservatory’s voice faculty, having worked successfully as a singer around the city. Most notably, he held the position of baritone soloist at St. George’s Episcopal Church from 1894 to 1946, where he established the tradition of presenting an annual Vesper Service of spirituals. Just before the turn of the 20th century, he began composing and arranging, graduating from simple ballads to art songs and instrumental works. Yet he maintained an active career as a recitalist and soloist and was in great demand nationally. Composition and performance worked hand-in-hand for Burleigh. As an arranger of spirituals for solo voice (*Album of Negro Spirituals*, 1917), he made available spirituals set in the manner of art songs for the first time in the history of American music, providing concert artists such as Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and many

others with a repertoire they would draw upon for decades. Burleigh's published works number more than 300. His songs were popular throughout his life.

Burleigh's *Five Songs of Laurence Hope* from 1919 is a stunning cycle based on texts by a most unusual poet, Adela Cory Nicolson (1865-1904). Cory was born in Gloucestershire, England, and raised by extended family there until the age of 16 when she joined her father, an army colonel, at his post in Lahore, India. She married another army colonel, Malcolm Nicolson of the Bombay army, in 1888 and traveled with him as he served. Colonel Nicolson was a skilled linguist who introduced Adela to the people and traditions of India, which she soon grew to love. In 1900, she began to publish her poetry under the pseudonym Laurence Hope, taking a man's name to avoid censure for the frank expositions of love, loss, and passion, which were not considered appropriate for a woman in Victorian/Edwardian England; this was also why she presented the poetry as translations rather than original. Her first collection, *The Garden of Karma*, was published in America under the title *India's Love Lyrics*. It was followed by *Stars of the Desert* (1903). In 1904, her husband died during a medical procedure; severely depressed, she poisoned herself two months later, at age 39. The final collection, *Lost Poems: Translations from the Book of Indian Love*, appeared posthumously in 1905 under her own name. Her three volumes were enormously successful during her lifetime, receiving much critical and popular attention, remaining popular into the 1930s and 1940s. Her poetry borrows themes and symbols from the poets of Northern India and Pakistan, as well as the Sufi poets of Persia. Burleigh set poems from all three of her books. His cycle draws on the richness of Hope's language and exuberance of expression with wide-ranging and impassioned angular vocal lines, dramatic pauses, and urgent syncopations. The piano usually begins with a relatively simple introduction, initially supporting or shadowing the singer, but quickly diverges into its own virtuosic, elaborate textures that reflect the turbulence of the speaker's emotions. Each song builds to a point of high intensity, sometimes powerful and triumphant as in "Worth While," and sometimes poignant and sad as in "The Jungle Flower" or "Till I Wake."

### **Pauline Viardot: *Trois Mélodies***

Pauline Viardot (1821-1910) never thought of herself as a composer, at least not primarily. Born in Spain to a family of musicians, she trained early as a concert pianist, studying for a time with Franz Liszt and playing duets with Frédéric Chopin. Her father, Manuel Garcia, and her older sister, Maria Malibran, were both international opera stars. But her sister's death when she was 15 changed the trajectory of her musical life, as her family decreed that she must now replace her and become a brilliant singer. And so she did. She was not quite 18 when she created a sensation with her opera debut as Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello*; on this beginning, she built an international career to wide acclaim, famed for her portrayals of Zerlina and Donna Anna (*Don Giovanni*), Rosina (*The Barber of Seville*), and the title roles in Bellini's *Norma* and Gluck's *Orfeo*.

It was not just her three-octave range and astounding vocal technique (which you can imagine from the songs you will hear tonight!) that earned accolades; her heartfelt interpretations were greatly admired by composers and the public alike. Hector Berlioz wrote in 1853, "Madame Viardot sang with her usual exquisite skill and poetic expression..." while Giacomo Meyerbeer praised her in 1849 for creating the role of Fidès in his opera *Le prophète*: "I owe a great part of the opera's success to Viardot, who as singer and actress rose to such tragic heights as I have never seen in the theatre before." Even after retiring from the stage in 1863, she remained an influential musical presence in France and Germany. Schumann dedicated his Op. 24 cycle of Heine songs to her; Brahms wrote his *Alto Rhapsody* for her; she sang the title role in Massenet's oratorio *Marie Magdeleine*. Clara Schumann is said to have called her the most gifted woman she ever met.

Viardot threw herself into teaching and composing even before her retirement and took on the role of artistic sponsor and mentor of her many musical friends, among them Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, Meyerbeer, Gounod, Berlioz, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Lalo, and Hahn. She composed hundreds of pieces, mostly original works for voice and piano in French but also in German and Russian, operas, pedagogical texts for singers, songs in the folk traditions of France, Spain, and Russia, and instrumental duos. She also made adaptations of instrumental pieces — Schubert waltzes, Haydn quartets, and Chopin mazurkas – into songs by adding texts. While we may look askance at this practice today, in her time, it served to spread knowledge of this repertoire far and wide. Her compositional activity was so diverse as to defy classification. The songs on tonight’s program reveal her own strengths as a performer: death-defying vocal athletics paired with brilliant piano writing, showing dramatic flair and high emotion. The texts for “Désespoir” and “Havanaise” were written for her by her close friend Louis Pomey. Though a painter, Pomey regularly supplied poetry for Viardot, both original and translations, including some of those she used for her Chopin mazurka adaptations. Alfred de Musset on the other hand, author of the poem “Les Filles de Cadix,” was a great French Romantic poet, dramatist, and novelist, and member of Viardot’s artistic circle. Like Viardot, he possessed great versatility of style, writing light satirical verses such as the one on our program as well as heartfelt lyrics of loss and sorrow.

“Désespoir” (1886): A woman rages, shamed by the one who was once proud of her love, but now insults her great sorrows and laughs at her tears.

“Havanaise” (1880): Silvery waves, blue sky, and soft breezes – the sea calls out to the speaker and charms her with its song.

“Les filles de Cadix” (1887): Three girls, clicking their castanets and dancing the bolero, mock first the boys who brought them to the bullfight, then a nobleman whose offer of money they spurn, and finally a poor wandering musician.

### **Margaret Bonds: *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1941), *Troubled Water* (1967)**

Margaret Allison Bonds (1913-1972) became her generation’s best-known Black woman composer. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., musicologist, and director of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago, considers her one of the seminal figures in the Chicago Renaissance, which flourished from 1930 to 1950 following the artistic activity of the Harlem Renaissance in the early decades of the 20th century. Both these Renaissances were movements that encompassed all art forms. Their aims were twofold: to use African and African-American folk art and literature to create new cultural forms; and on the basis of the integrity of these substantial creative products, to justify intellectual, social, political, and economic parity for African-American citizens.

On June 15, 1933, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra presented “An Evening of Negro Music and Musicians.” In that concert, along with works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Florence Price, and Harry T. Burleigh, young pianist Margaret Bonds performed Chicago composer John Alden Carpenter’s Concertino for Piano and Orchestra. Floyd declared, “Because of the unprecedented magnitude of this event, it should be taken as a landmark for the musical aspect of the Chicago Renaissance.” Bonds had attracted attention the previous year by winning the Wanamaker Prize for her song “Sea Ghost,” written while she was a student at Northwestern University. And in 1933, she became the first African-American soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, playing Florence Price’s Piano Concerto at the 1933 World’s Fair.

Bonds was a native of Chicago. Her mother was a church musician and accomplished pianist whose home was a gathering place for the city’s prominent African-American intellectuals and creative artists.

Her daughter's talent became evident early – Margaret was composing at the age of 5. Following serious study with Florence Price and William Dawson, Bonds entered Northwestern University, where she earned both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. In 1939, she moved to New York to attend the Juilliard School, and there she renewed her acquaintance with Langston Hughes, whom she had met several years earlier, and met the man who would become her husband, Lawrence Richardson.

It was in New York that Bonds built her career, dedicating herself to disseminating Black musical art. Her compositions fuse classical, jazz, and spiritual elements; they include vocal music for soloists and choruses, popular songs for Louis Armstrong's and Glenn Miller's bands, large musical theatre works, and orchestral and piano pieces. The Theatre Division of FDR's Works Progress Administration produced her "Romey and Julie," whose musical numbers inspired the vogue for "swinging the classics," leading to other dramas such as *Carmen Jones*. Her 1964 ballet "The Migration" celebrated the Great Migration of African-Americans from the south to the north as described in Isabel Wilkerson's magisterial book *The Warmth of Other Suns*. CBS televised her Christmas cantata, *The Ballad of the Brown King* in 1960, with texts written by Langston Hughes.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967), an American poet, writer, and social activist, exerted a strong influence on the writers and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance. His poetry gives us straightforward, vivid, and sensitive portrayals of Black life in America from the 1920s through the 1960s. He draws on the forms, rhythm, and styles of African-American musical traditions, shown in the wide adoption of his poetry by some 60 composers producing over 200 song settings. In addition to the texts mentioned above, Hughes wrote 5 gospel-song plays, a song-play with gospel music and spirituals, opera librettos, and dramatic musicals. His prose encompasses books on music, including *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (1967) and for children, *The First Book of Jazz* (1955).

One of Bonds' most fruitful and enduring collaborative relationships was with Langston Hughes. She first encountered his 1921 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" when a student at Northwestern, and she described in an interview years later how it bolstered her confidence in her identity as a creative spirit and the inheritor of a strong, rich heritage, at a time when she was suffering many indignities in an overwhelmingly white environment. Bonds set several of his poems and popular song texts, and in addition to the Christmas cantata mentioned above, together they wrote the musical theater piece "Shakespeare in Harlem" and the choral cycle "Fields of Wonder." Her setting of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" conveys a depth and timelessness of ancient waters through the repetition of figures that faithfully return but are never quite the same and in the vocal melody that rises slowly and majestically before returning to rest.

Bonds's *Troubled Waters* is in essence, a piano fantasy that employs the spiritual "Wade in the Water" to great effect. The spiritual melody anchors the piece; no matter how dense and agitated the piano becomes, as God "troubles the waters" in anticipation of the judgment day, that melody always shines through like a clarion call right up to the final climax.

### **Margaret Bonds, Lena McLin, Undine Smith Moore: Spirituals**

It has only recently been acknowledged that Black American musical traditions are fundamental to American music writ large. Over the span of more than 400 years, the composers of the African diaspora developed a rich musical heritage in our country, generating and nurturing several distinct genres – spiritual, gospel music, blues, and jazz – while concurrently developing expertise in the concert traditions of European classical music. It is the spiritual with which we are concerned here, the folk songs of Black Americans. For Africans, song and dance were religious affirmations, and the spiritual was created by those enslaved and brought to the Americas, as well as their descendants, both to maintain their

connection to African culture and traditions and to express their struggles, despair, and hopes, to “assert their humanity in an environment that constantly denied their humanness” (Eileen Southern, 1997).

Floyd describes two text types for the spiritual: sorrow songs that speak of past and present suffering, that of the enslaved peoples, as well as of biblical figures, and jubilee songs that express expectations of a better life to come. Music was present in all aspects of the lives of the African-Americans – worship, work, ceremonies and rituals, domestic situations, and socializing. The songs emanated from the format of ring shouts, with participants dancing in a circle, slowly at first and with a quickening pace and greater intensity, with body percussion for emphasis. Improvisation is an important part of the tradition; the melody is chiefly a vehicle for the text, so it is constantly adjusted to meet the needs of the words and the growing emotional level and to adapt to the tastes of the listeners and participants.

Spirituals were orally transmitted among geographic areas and populations until the 1860s when they began to appear in print. Black churches in the north helped preserve the spiritual traditions in free communities, but these folk songs remained unknown to most white people until a group of young Black students introduced them to the public in America and Europe. These were students at the newly established Fisk University in Nashville under the direction of George L. White. Encouraged by positive reactions to their local performances, they adopted the name Fisk Jubilee Singers and went on tour to raise funds for the University. The concerts they presented were similar to those of white ensembles of the time, except that they included a large number of spirituals. Their stirring performance at the World Peace Jubilee in 1872 earned global attention; demand for their music-making exploded in America, Germany, Switzerland, and Great Britain, and the folk songs of Black America took hold in places it had never been before.

From this point forward, the European-style choral training of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and similar groups from other historically Black educational institutions reshaped the vocal and expressive nature of the spiritual, which came to be seen as art music. The vocal refinement of these singers encouraged the creation of new arrangements as well as new spirituals. After Paul Robeson’s first historic recital consisting entirely of spirituals, nearly all Black concert singers, as well as many white singers, included them on their programs. Later, the spiritual assimilated the performance styles such as gospel, blues, and jazz. In this way, the tradition has thrived, transforming and revitalizing itself generation after generation.

Lena McLin was born in 1928 in Atlanta, Georgia. She lived as a child in Chicago with extended family and was encouraged in her musical activities by her uncle Thomas A. Dorsey, a professional musician and pioneer of gospel music; by the age of 8, McLin was accompanying gospel singers like Sallie Martin and Mahalia Jackson. After graduating from Spelman College, she returned to Chicago and began teaching in the Chicago Public School system, where she earned recognition for her innovative high school music programs, such as the one she designed at Kenwood Academy. McLin composes in a wide range of styles and genres – gospel, popular, rock, concert music, operas, and symphonies; she once recalled how incredulous audiences were in the 1970s upon seeing her introduced as the composer of whatever work they had just listened to! But she has not stopped teaching and composing. She authored a music history textbook, *Pulse – A History of Music* (1977), one of the first to incorporate Black Music, served as a pastor and Minister of Music, and, with her husband, founded an opera company.

Undine Smith Moore (1904-1989), known as the “Dean of Black Women Composers,” received her musical training at Fisk University and Columbia University Teachers College. Her output mostly consists of songs, and her works have been widely performed. In the early 1950s, she began to transcribe songs that her mother sang, which inspired her to employ African-American spirituals in her music, which she has described as having “uniquely Black” qualities of “unrestrained fullness, aspiration, and emotional intensity.” Also a dedicated teacher, she served on the faculty of Virginia State College for 45 years and was co-founder/co-director of the Black Music Center at Virginia State, bringing leading Black artists and

composers to the campus. In 1977 Moore participated in the Celebration of Black Composers, a 5-day festival at Lincoln Center that was sponsored by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra; this was the first festival entirely devoted to music written by Black composers and performed by Black artists to be sponsored by a major American Orchestra. Among her other honors was the presentation of a concert of her music at Carnegie Hall in 1988, produced by other major Black musical figures. The National Black Caucus recognized Moore's contributions to the art of music, and she was invited to deliver the keynote address at the first National Congress on Women in Music at New York University. Following her passing, Moore was named one of the Virginia Women in History.

Juxtaposing spiritual settings by Bonds, McLin, and Moore, each of whom speaks to us in a singular musical voice, allows us to hear in real-time how the spiritual tradition has become an inexhaustible creative wellspring that continues to inspire composers across the ages.