

# PRELUDE

DECEMBER 2024 • MASTERWORKS #4



HARTFORD  
SYMPHONY  
ORCHESTRA

## Tchaikovsky & Bonds – December 13 – 15, 2024

Margaret Bonds is not a lightweight in the world of music. A child prodigy and one of the few Black musicians to receive both a Bachelor and Master of Music from Northwestern University, she was the first African American soloist to appear with the Chicago Symphony in 1933.



Margaret Bonds

Margaret Bonds was born in Chicago on March 3, 1913, into an educated family. Her father, Monroe Majors, was a physician, lecturer, author and activist, whose work included the founding of a medical association for Black physicians who were denied membership in the American Medical Association because of unjust racial barriers. Her mother, Estella Bonds, was a trained musician and member of the National Association of Negro Musicians, who taught piano and served as the church choral director and organist. Her parents separated when Margaret was two, and when they divorced, Margaret's last name was changed to Bonds. Margaret grew up in her mother's household, which routinely welcomed the leading artistic and literary figures of the day, including composers Florence Price and Will Marion Cook. The encounters were so extensive that in later years, Bonds would later claim that she knew every living African American composer.

Bonds started piano lessons with her mother at an early age and wrote her first composition, *Marquette Street Blues*, at age five. By age eight, she won a scholarship to study piano at the Coleridge-Taylor Music School in Chicago. While in high school, she

studied composition with William Levi Dawson (a famed Black composer of the time), and studied piano and composition with Florence Price, the first African American woman composer to have her music performed by major orchestras.

By the age of 16, in 1929, Bonds was one of the few Black students admitted to Northwestern University. She pursued a Bachelor of Music and, later, a Master's degree in piano and composition. Unquestionably, the racism she encountered made the environment intimidating and nearly intolerable. She was permitted to study but was denied the right to live at the school or use their swimming pool or other facilities. It was Margaret's first encounter with institutional racism, and she found strength in the poetry of Langston Hughes, which she discovered in the Evanston Public Library:



Margaret Bonds

**"I was in this prejudiced university, this terribly prejudiced place—I was looking in the basement of the Evanston Public Library where they had the poetry. I came in contact with this wonderful poem, "The Negro Speaks**

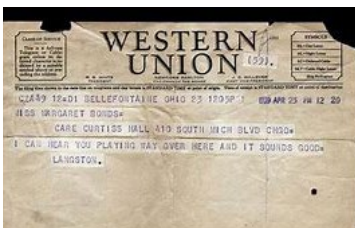
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**of Rivers," and I'm sure it helped my feelings of [in]security. Because in that poem he [Langston Hughes] tells how great the Black man is. And if I had any misgivings, which I would have to have – here you are in a setup where the restaurants won't serve you and you're going to college, you're sacrificing, trying to get through school – and I know that poem helped save me."**

In Bonds' third year at Northwestern, her song, *Sea Ghost*, won the prestigious Wanamaker award. On June 15, 1933, Bonds made history as the first Black person to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, playing *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra* by John Alden Carpenter, as part of the CSO's *Century of Progress* series.



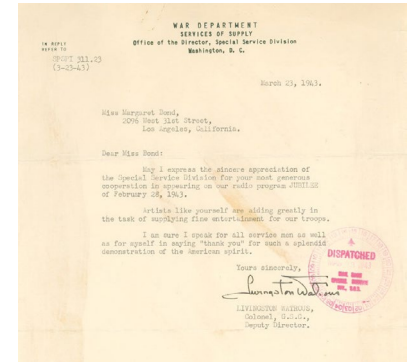
Telegram from Langston Hughes

In 1936, she finally met famed poet/playwright Langston Hughes through a mutual friend, and the two became exceedingly close friends. Hughes attended a Sunday afternoon musical hosted by Bonds' mother, and from that day forward, "we were like brother and sister, like blood relatives." Soon after they met, Bonds set to music one of Hughes' best-known poems, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*.

In 1936, Bonds founded the Allied Arts Academy in Chicago, an institute for talented African American children in Chicago, and began a collaboration with Hughes. Economic difficulties forced the closure of her school, and at Hughes' urging, Bonds relocated to New York in 1939. In New York, she married William Richardson, had a daughter, and began work as an editor for the Clarence Williams Publishing House. Bonds soon embarked on a successful career composing for the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Cab Calloway, and others, and she performed regularly on radio. Her compositions were performed by countless concert artists, including Louis Armstrong

and Woody Herman. She routinely performed at the Apollo Theater, and musicians began to commission her works. While educated as a classical composer, her work was versatile and strongly influenced by jazz and blues.

In 1942, Bonds finally published her composition, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, and dedicated the work to Marian Anderson with the hope that she would premiere the song. When Anderson



Letter from Langston Hughes

declined, the honor went to Etta Moten, the singer Gershwin had in mind to portray Bess in *Porgy and Bess*. During the years of the Civil Rights Movement, Bonds and Hughes worked together to create music that celebrated African American culture and values. She composed two important works dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr., one of which was *The Ballad of the Brown King*. You can hear a performance of the piece here: [The Ballad of the Brown King: I. Of the Three Wise Men \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

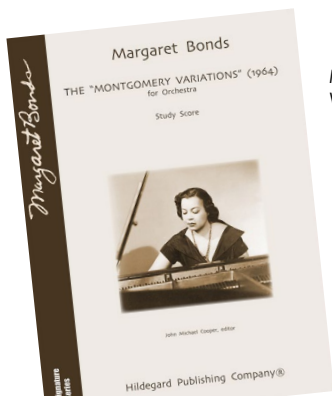
Bonds arranged *He's Got the Whole World in His Hand* for Leontyne Price in 1963. To hear Leontyne Price singing the piece she commissioned from Bonds, click here: [He's Got the Whole World in His Hand \(Negro Spiritual\) - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

Bonds had difficulty coping with two profound personal tragedies: the death of her mother in 1957, and the death of Langston Hughes in 1967. Upon Hughes' passing, she retreated. Devastated, Bonds left her husband and daughter in New York and moved to Los Angeles, where she remained until her death. In Los Angeles, Bonds taught at the Los Angeles Inner City Institute and the Inner-City Cultural Center, while working for music studios and continuing to compose art songs, as well as music for orchestra, solo piano, and chorus. She became active in theater, acting as music director for numerous productions and writing two ballets. In 1972, just a few months before

her death from a heart attack, Bonds' work *Credo*, for chorus and orchestra, was performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, conducted by Zubin Mehta.

Sadly, following Bonds' passing, much of her music was lost. According to musicologist Helen Walker-Hill, author of *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African American Women Composers and Their Music*, of more than 200 compositions by Bonds, only 75 scores exist today, and of those, only 47 were published during her lifetime. Bonds did not maintain a catalogue of her works and often sent original copies directly to the artist who had commissioned the piece. It is likely that her manuscripts are all over the country but, owing to a great stroke of luck, one box of her scores was found next to a dumpster in New York City. Bonds died four years before the passage of the Copyright Act of 1976, without leaving a will. In 2011, her daughter and only heir, Djane Richardson, also passed without heirs and without a will. This left the copyright status of much of Bonds' body of work murky, making it unclear who controls the rights. Nevertheless, her music is being performed today with increasing frequency.

One of her largest and most important works, *Montgomery Variations*, was written in 1965 during the Selma Freedom March, and was dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The work was performed for the first time in 2018 by the student orchestra of the University of Connecticut, conducted by Paul McShee.



Montgomery Variations

*\*The Joyce C. Willis Artist in Residence is made possible by a generous grant from The Roberts Foundation For The Arts.*

The story of Margaret Bonds continues, and today, more than fifty years after her death, her music is still a discovery for most audiences. She faced racism every day of her life and is quoted as having said that the worst prejudice she faced was as a woman composer in classical music. In a 1964 interview, Bonds said,

**"Women are expected to be wives, mothers and do all the nasty things in the community. 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

## JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on December 13 - 15, 2024, to hear Margaret Bonds' *Montgomery Variations*, and pianist Clayton Stephenson, HSO's Joyce C. Willis 2024/25 Artist in Residence,\* perform the emotional *Concerto for Piano* by Tchaikovsky. The HSO will also perform *Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 3* in D Major, all under the baton of our thrilling guest conductor, Maestro Jonathan Rush.

**Did you borrow this *Prelude*? Get your own free copy! Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to [dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org](mailto:dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org). We'll make sure you receive *Prelude* by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!**



**Interested in the music of Margaret Bonds? We have a few suggestions we think you'll enjoy:**

One of Bonds' piano compositions, *Troubled Water*, is performed by pianist Samantha Edge:

[\*\*Troubled Water by Margaret Bonds \(Samantha Edge, piano\) \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)

Parts of *Montgomery Variations* were performed by the Santa Fe Youth Symphony in 2019:

[\*\*Santa Fe YSO, 2019 Winter Concert \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)

In February of 2018, the Concert Choir of Georgetown gave the world premiere of Bonds' cantata, *Simon Bore the Cross*, with words by Langston Hughes. This work, one of the pieces rescued from the box near the dumpster in New York, may be enjoyed here:

[\*\*The Concert Choir of Georgetown University - Millennium Stage \(February 24, 2018\) \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)

You can't help but smile when listening to this beautiful performance of Bonds' *You Can Tell The World* by famed mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry:

[\*\*Grace Bumbry: "You Can Tell the World" by Margaret Bonds | Voices of Our Time \(7/10\) \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)

And finally, listen to Bonds' *Three Dream Portraits* performed by bass-baritone Dashon Burton at the Lakes Area Music Festival:

[\*\*Margaret Bonds - 3 Dream Portraits \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)



**WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!**

Enjoy this performance of Bonds' *Montgomery Variations* by the Minnesota Orchestra:

[\*\*Margaret Bonds - Montgomery Variations \(1964\) - YouTube\*\*](#)

Delight in Yuja Wang's exciting performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23:

[\*\*Yuja Wang - Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23 \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)

Please enjoy Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 3 by the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, conducted by Valery Gergiev:

[\*\*Tchaikovsky - Symphony No. 3 in D major, Op. 29 \(Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, Valery Gergiev\) \(youtube.com\)\*\*](#)



# CASEY'S CLASSICS

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus, and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

The firebrand Martha Argerich sets fire to the Tchaikovsky's **Piano Concerto No. 1** with Kirill Kondrashin following her every step of the way in this classic live recording with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (DECCA).

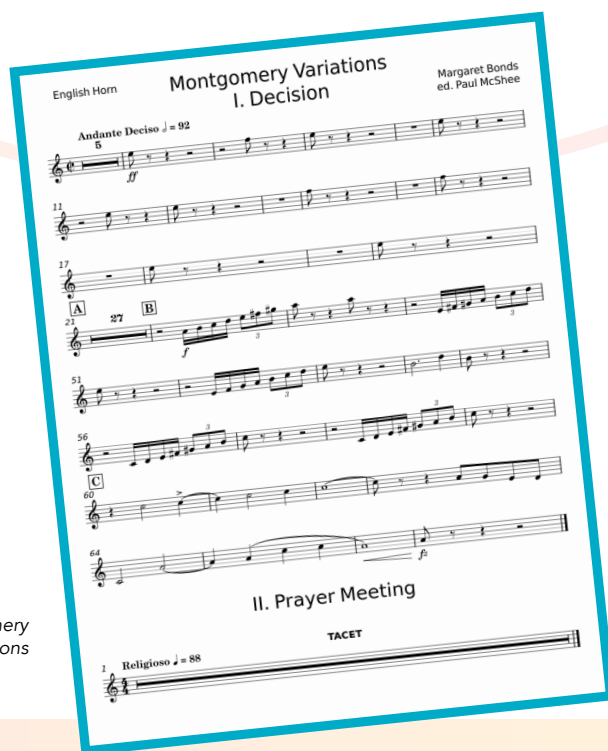
Tchaikovsky's **Symphony No. 3 ("Polish")** has a crisp and suitably balletic reading from Igor Markevitch and the London Symphony Orchestra (DECCA).



Margaret Bonds  
and Eartha Kitt



Margaret Bonds



Montgomery  
Variations

## SOURCE MATERIAL

[Margaret Bonds Biography – Afrocentric Voices in “Classical” Music \(afrovoices.com\)](#)

[Margaret Bonds \(1913 -1972\) - \(blackpast.org\)](#)

[Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship | Georgetown University Library](#)

[Margaret Bonds studied with Florence Price, and was the first Black musician to... - Classic FM](#)

[Open Ears: The Endlessly Unfolding Story of Margaret Bonds - Classical KUSC](#)

[Harlem's Margaret Bonds, Composer, Pianist, Arranger, Teacher And One Of The First Black Composers, 1910-1970 \(harlemworldmagazine.com\)](#)