

Discovering The Music Of Black Women Composers

by Helen Walker-Hill

LIKE virtually all classical musicians my age, I was trained in the standard repertory. Even today, many talented young pianists practice many hours every day for much of their lives without ever leaving the straight and narrow path of the masters — Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, Debussy and Ravel, with short excursions into Scarlatti, Haydn, Mendelssohn, perhaps a little Fauré or Franck, and some Prokofiev, Bartók and Hindemith.

I do remember an occasional youth escapade — the discovery of Nathaniel Dett's "Juba Dance" among my mother's sheet music collection, for instance — but I was quickly given to understand that it belonged in a class with Sinding's "Rustle of Spring," definitely second-rate and unworthy of serious consideration. At about the same time I came across Cécile Chaminade's "Scarf Dance," but it never really registered that this foreign-sounding name belonged to a woman. In any case, that composer was obviously not among the masters to whom one graduated as soon as possible, leaving all those method books and teaching pieces by various male and female pedagogues in the dust forever.

Many years later in the 1970s the situation began to change. The music of black composers was heard here and there, and even a few women composers emerged. My own odyssey into music by women did not start until 1986, with a lecture-recital of works by Clara and Robert Schumann. Soon after, while planning a program of piano music by American women compos-

ers of various periods and backgrounds, I discovered that not one black woman composer of the so-called serious art forms came to mind, although I knew of jazz, popular and gospel composers.

Cursory investigation drew slim leads. This field of musicological research is still in its infancy. I know of only one book on the subject, by Mildred Denby Green, and just a handful of articles and dissertations by scholars such as Barbara Garvey Jackson and Rae Linda Brown. Through these resources I found the trail of Florence Price, Margaret Bonds and Julia Perry, but published scores of piano music still in print were difficult to locate. After two years of inquiries, one available published piece surfaced, Margaret Bonds's *Troubled Water*. Fortunately, several other scores also turned up, copies of manuscripts and out-of-print works loaned by various libraries, and some publications by living composers.

The dearth of actual scores is puzzling, especially when one considers that Oxford University Press recently published a thirty-volume *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* (1988) — an amazing collection of poems, stories, journals, essays and novels. Correspondence with its editor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., while not solving the mystery, gave much-needed encouragement.

Alongside voices such as his are others in whose bemused silence I hear echoes of my own occasional misgivings: is this music all "good enough" to warrant the search, and is this category "ghetto-izing" when it should be integrating? These questions are left-over attitudes from those student years devoted to "the masters." Standards of excellence are restructured with each new stage of evolution; in retrospect we see, in what was once rejected, the beginnings of new creative power. Every newly discovered piece gives clues to stylistic development. Benign neglect is not integration, but rather an excuse to avoid the effort that is necessary to overcome centuries of prejudice and inertia.

Most of the information has to be obtained through painstaking search of uncataloged collections and interviews with composers, descendents, friends and colleagues. No one library contains more than a small fraction of the existing materials, although useful items may be found in the Library of Congress, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, Azalia Hackley Collection at the Detroit Public Library, Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale and the Special Collections at the University of Arkansas.

Black women composers have been active in the United States since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and several have gained national and international recognition during their lifetimes. Yet they are largely omitted from the growing body of scholarship on women composers. Thanks to early black authors, we know the names of such nineteenth-century figures as Amelia Tilghman, Mary Sinclair, Mrs. J. E. Edwards and Mrs. N. A. R. Leslie.¹ We are gradually learning about a few of the more recent composers: Florence Price (1888–1953), Helen Eugenia Hagan (1891–1964), Undine Smith Moore (1904–1989), Shirley Graham Dubois (1906–1977), Mary Lou Williams (1910–1981), Margaret Bonds (1913–1972) and Julia Perry (1924–1979).

Many composers are still living today: Eva Jessye (b. 1895), Evelyn Pittman (b. 1910), Betty Jackson King (b. 1928), Lena Johnson McLin (b. 1929), Valerie Capers (b. 1937), Micki Grant (b. 1941), Margaret Harris (b. 1943), Tania León (b. 1944) and many others. Their musical compositions represent significant contributions in many genres. The need for information, performances, recordings and, above all, published scores is obvious.

My own efforts have evolved into a project to catalog the known piano solo and ensemble works of black women composers. (See sidebar on page 21.) Thanks to the

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social conscience and good faith of Chicago's Newberry Library, I was able to spend a month there in the summer of 1989 as a Resident Fellow. Chicago has played an important role in the history of black women composers, and several live or have lived in that city. From mere names, they became multidimensional human beings with family histories, neighborhoods, churches, schools and friends who remember them vividly.

Among the Newberry Library holdings are programs and newspaper clippings from historic events such as the first "All Colored Composers Concerts" at Orchestra Hall in 1914 and 1915, organized by music lover Henry Hackney and financed from his earnings as a waiter. While the first concert consisted of such early black composers as Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, J. Rosamund Johnson, Harry Burleigh, Will Marion Cook and Nathaniel Dett, the second concert in April 1915 contained surprises: two women composers. Helen Eugenia Hagan, graduate of Yale and the Schola Cantorum in Paris, performed her Concerto in C Minor in a two-piano version, and Nora Lena James accompanied her song "Who Knows?" The reviews in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Herald* commended Hackney's "brotherly love and zeal in this endeavor," but condescendingly concluded that "Negro musicians may learn an important lesson from the concert. . . . The successful numbers, without exception, exploited the characteristic accents of negro folk song. The unsuccessful numbers imitated the white man's music."

These remarks were typical of American reviewers at that time who generally censured black composers for writing in European classical forms. The 1920s and '30s saw the emergence of several pioneer black symphonists who were determined to prove their capabilities: William Dawson, William Grant Still and Florence Price. This development is documented by another historic program at the Newberry from the Chicago World's Fair of 1933, when Florence Price's Symphony in E Minor was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Frederick Stock. This time, the reviews were unambivalently favorable.

Other Black Women Composers

Eva Jessye (b. 1895, Coffeyville, Kansas)

- Studied at Western University, Kansas; Langston University, Oklahoma; and with Will Marion Cook and Percy Goetschius.
- Taught at Morgan State College, Maryland; Claflin College, South Carolina; and Pittsburgh State University.
- Highly successful as voice teacher and choral director.
- Composed choral works, oratorios, cantatas: *Paradise Lost and Regained*, *The Chronicle of Job*, *The Life of Christ in Negro Spirituals*.

Betty Jackson King (b. 1928, Chicago)

- Studied at Glassboro College, New Jersey; Peabody Conservatory, Maryland; and Westminster Choir College, New Jersey.
- Composer of vocal, instrumental, choral works, cantatas, oratorios: *Saul of Tarsus*, *Simon of Cyrene*, *God's Trombones*.

Tania León (b. 1944, Havana, Cuba)

- Studied at Havana National Conservatory and New York University.
- Conductor of Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra.
- Composer of chamber music, ballets, orchestral and solo piano music.

Dorothy Rudd Moore (b. 1940, New Castle, Delaware)

- Studied at Howard University with Mark Fax, also with Chou Wen Chung and Nadia Boulanger.
- Taught at New York University and Bronx Community College.
- Composed symphonies, chamber music: *Modes* for string quartet; instrumental pieces and songs: *Twelve Quatrains from the Rubaiyat*.

Undine Smith Moore (b. 1904, Jarrat, Virginia, d. 1989, Petersburg, Virginia)

- Studied at Fisk University, Columbia University Teachers College, Juilliard School, Manhattan School and Eastman School of Music.
- Taught at Virginia State College 1927–1972, and elsewhere.

- Recipient of numerous honors.

• Composed choral music, spiritual arrangements, chamber music and instrumental pieces: *Afro-American Suite*, for flute, cello, and piano.

Julia Amanda Perry (b. 1924, Lexington, Kentucky, d. 1979, Akron, Ohio)

- Studied at Westminster Choir College, Juilliard School, and with Nadia Boulanger and Luigi Dallapiccola.
- Taught at Florida A & M College and Atlanta University.
- Recipient of Guggenheim and other awards.
- Composed symphonies, operas, concertos, chamber works, piano and instrumental pieces (lost): *Stabat Mater* for contralto and string orchestra, *Homunculus C.F.* for piano, harp and percussion.

Evelyn La Rue Pittman (b. 1910, McAlester, Oklahoma)

- Studied at Spelman College, Langston University, Juilliard School and with Nadia Boulanger.
- Public school teacher and choral director.
- Composed choral works, opera, songs: *Cousin Esther*, *Freedom's Child*, *Rich Heritage*.

Philippa Duke Schuyler (b. 1932, New York, d. 1967, Danang, South Vietnam)

- Child prodigy concert pianist, composer, writer.
- *Manhattan Overture* for orchestra, *Nile Fantasy* for piano and orchestra, *Fairy Tale Symphony* and many piano pieces.

Mary Lou Williams (b. 1910, Atlanta, d. 1981, Durham, North Carolina)

- Leading jazz pianist, arranger and composer.
- Taught at University of Massachusetts and Duke University.
- Composed for orchestra and chorus as well as piano, *Zodiac Suite*, several Masses.

Discovering The Music of Black Women Composers

Selected Books And Articles

Books . . .

Willis Patterson, ed., *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, (E. B. Marks/Hal Leonard, Milwaukee, 1978). Songs by Price, Bonds, D. R. Moore, and U. S. Moore.

Margaret Bonds, "A Reminiscence," *The Negro in Music and Art*, International Library of Negro Life and History, ed. by L. Patterson (Publishers Company, Inc., New York, 1967), 190-193.

Rae Linda Brown, "The Orchestral Works of Florence B. Price (1888-1953): A Stylistic Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1987).

Mildred Denby Green, *Black Women Composers: A Genesis* (Twayne, Boston, 1981).

Articles . . .

Carl Harris, Jr., "Conversation with Undine Smith Moore," *The Black Perspective in Music*, Spring 1985, 79-88.

Barbara Garvey Jackson, "Florence Price, Composer" *The Black Perspective in Music*, Spring 1977, 31-43.

Lena Johnson McLin, "Black Music in Church and School," in *Black Music in Our Culture*, ed. by Dominique-René de Lerma (Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio, 1970), 35-41.

Kathryn Talalay, "Philippa Duke Schuyler, Pianist/Composer/Writer" *The Black Perspective in Music*, Spring 1982, 43-68.

Alice Tischler, *Fifteen Black American Composers* (Information Cooperative, Detroit, 1981). Bibliographies on Margaret Bonds and Dorothy Rudd Moore.

Sister Marie Yuhasz, "Black Composers and Their Piano Music" *American Music Teacher* February/March 1970, 24-25. Discussion of works by Bonds and Price.



Photo courtesy of University of Arkansas Libraries

Florence Price

Florence Price

Florence Beatrice Smith Price was the first black woman composer to gain widespread recognition. She was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1888, and at age fourteen entered the New England Conservatory of Music from which she graduated in piano, organ and composition in 1906. She returned to Little Rock to teach and compose, married an attorney, Thomas Price, and started a family. They moved to Chicago in 1927 to escape rising racial tensions and Ku Klux Klan violence in Arkansas, and she remained there until her death in 1953.

Price composed close to three hundred works, including numerous songs and piano pieces, chamber works, concertos and symphonic works. Her symphonies were performed in the 1930s and '40s by orchestras in several U.S. cities and as far away as England, where Sir John Barbirolli commissioned one of her works. In 1964 the city of Chicago recognized the importance of her achievements by dedicating the new Florence Price Elementary School. Every year on her birthday, April 9, two dozen yellow roses are anonymously delivered there.

Price's works are in a late Romantic style, reflecting the influence of her conservative New England Conservatory training and the advice of Antonin Dvořák to American composers to develop a national style through the use of native materials. The Sonata in E Minor, her major work for solo piano, illustrates her use of idiomatic Negro



Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture

Margaret Bonds

rhythms and melodic intervals. Her art songs, on the other hand, are exquisite miniatures revealing no racial characteristics.

Margaret Bonds

In the next generation, Margaret Bonds showed early ability and, as a young girl, studied composition with Florence Price. She graduated from Northwestern University with bachelor's and master's degrees in music in 1934 and started a music school, the Allied Arts Academy, before moving to New York in 1939. She continued her studies at the Juilliard School and was active as a concert pianist and teacher, as well as composer of popular and art songs, choral and theater music, collaborating with poet and playwright Langston Hughes, among others. In 1967 she moved to Los Angeles where she continued to compose and teach. Shortly after her death in 1972, her *Credo* for chorus and orchestra was performed by the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra under Zubin Mehta.

Bonds's style is a fusion of classical techniques, jazz and popular idioms. Her arrangement of the spiritual "You Can Tell the World" for solo voice and piano illustrates her use of pop style and stride bass. *Troubled Water*, a solo piano concert piece based on the spiritual "Wade in the Water," displays broad sweeping lines and blocks or layers of activity. It employs jazz riffs and harmonies in open positions encompassing wide expanses of keyboard.



Irene Smith

Irene Smith

A former associate of both Price and Bonds, retired school teacher Irene Britton Smith is a highly trained and sensitive composer in her own right. Most of her music is unknown, even to her contemporaries. Born and raised in Chicago, she taught elementary school there for many years while taking courses in composition on the side. She earned a bachelor's degree from the American Conservatory and a master's degree from DePaul University and attended the Juilliard School during a sabbatical. She also studied in summers at Eastman, Tanglewood and the Fontainebleau Conservatory with Nadia Boulanger.

Smith's works include a Sinfonietta for full orchestra, chamber pieces, anthems, songs and piano pieces. They are carefully crafted gems well worth attention and publication. Many of them exhibit the neoclassic simplicity, linear counterpoint and transparent textures of early twentieth-century French style. Her three-movement Sonata for Violin and Piano, by turns serenely lyrical and mischievously playful, is a good example. Others, like her Prelude for Piano, a study in the interval of the fifth, are angular and dissonant.

Lena McLin

Lena Johnson McLin is perhaps Chicago's best-known black woman composer. She has won recognition for her achievements as a music educator at Kenwood Academy High school and director of the McLin Singers, and is also



Lena McLin

founder and pastor of Holy Vessel Christian Center in Hyde Park. She was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929 to a Baptist minister father and a mother who was a gifted musician and leader in the community. Her uncle is composer Thomas A. Dorsey, the Father of Gospel Music. She graduated from Spelman College in 1951, then came to Chicago to attend the American Conservatory and begin her teaching career.

McLin is the author of a textbook titled *Pulse: A History of Music* (Neil A. Kjos, 1977). She is a facile, prolific composer of works ranging from art music to rock and including symphonies, operas, songs, chamber and solo works. She is best known for her choral works, produced as needed for her various roles. Her cantata, *Free at Last* for soprano and orchestra, composed in one night after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., presents material drawn from Negro spirituals with soaring intensity, in a richly orchestrated setting. Her solo piano piece *A Summer Day* is an example of her lighter, improvisatory style, with Impressionistic harmonies featuring added-sixth chords, clusters of seconds and unusual polytonal seventh and ninth chords.

The four women described here are not the only composers to come from Chicago, nor is it the only center of activity by black women composers. But their work is illustrative of the variety and range to be

**Some Available
Solo Piano Music**

Margaret Bonds, *Troubled Water*: Moderate to difficult (Sam Fox Publishing Co., 1967); recorded by Ruth Norman on Opus One 39.

Betty Jackson King, *Four Seasonal Sketches*: Easy to moderate. *Mother Goose Parade*: Late intermediate. *Aftermath*: Moderate to difficult (Jacksonian Press, Inc., Box 1556, Wildwood, NJ 08280).

Tania León, *Momentum* and *Rituál*: Moderate to difficult. (Peer-Southern Concert Music, 1984 and 1987).

Dorothy Rudd Moore, *A Little Whimsey*: Intermediate. *Dream and Variation*: Moderate to difficult. (American Composers Alliance, 1973).

Florence Price, *Sonata in E Minor*: Difficult (inquiries may be sent to Dr. Rae Linda Brown, editor and publisher of a private printing, c/o University of California at Irvine, Dept. of Music, Irvine, CA 92717). *Dances in the Canebrakes*: Intermediate to moderate (Affiliated Musicians, Los Angeles, 1953; out of print) and many other pieces at all levels (send to University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections, Fayetteville, AR 72701, for a list of their holdings, and also to Dr. Rae Linda Brown at the address given above for her list). Both titles recorded by Althea Waites on Cambria Records.

Irene Britton Smith, *Two Short Preludes for Piano*: Late intermediate. *Variations on a Theme from MacDowell*: Moderate. Send for information to the Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College, 600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605-1996.

Philippa Duke Schuyler, *Nine Little Pieces*: Intermediate (private printing; out of print). *Rumpelstiltsken*: Moderate to difficult (Ricordi, Buenos Aires, 1955; out of print). Send requests for photocopies to the James Weldon Johnson Collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the Yale University Library, New Haven, CT 06520.

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Black Women Composers

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found. All four display a confidence and expertise with European traditional forms and techniques as well as with black idioms, and they use them freely as contrivances for purposes of their own that often transcend the European origins. Their works are characterized by expansiveness of spirit, manifested in a variety of ways: large forms, long sweeping lines, lavish harmonies, rich orchestral colors and climaxes of striking fullness.

The discovery of the music of black women composers provides ample riches and insights and continues to reward persistent search.

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NOTES

1. Early black authors who refer to black women composers include Monroe A. Majors, *Noted Negro Women* (Chicago, 1893), and Lawson Scruggs, *Women of Distinction* (Raleigh, N.C., 1893), as well as Gertrude Bustill Mossell, *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (Philadelphia, 1884).

Anyone Can Win, Round One

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Regardless of age, repertory or stage of career development, the factor common to any success in competitions always has been the display of a high level of competence and achievement. In addition to that, the paying public, along with most jurors, looks for something extraordinary — that elusive quality that makes a star. It is given various labels, all translating to individuality and insight combined with compelling conviction that can move the listener where he or she could not otherwise go. Not only the times and the skill made Cliburn such a hero at Moscow, but also the personal qualities, the charisma, his way of responding to the situation with an originality that, within the context of those times, was extremely appealing.⁸

As Reynolds Price wrote in a *Saturday Review* article, society needs its heroes: "... figures whom we feel to be unnaturally charged with some force we want but seem to lack . . . and by imaginary contact with whom we experience a transfer of the force desired."⁹ Sometimes a common receptivity or hunger for particular qualities is present,

but much of the time people have their own individual ideas of what moves them. Therefore, the attempted objective method of making decisions in a competition conflicts dynamically with society's appetite for stars.

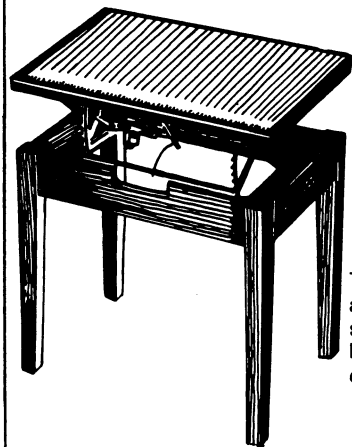
As competitions proliferated, a need for an element of firstness and then newness increased. Gradually no more firsts were to be won, few new faces were to be found, and a certain predictability in technical accuracy and correctness of interpretation developed. The stage was set for receptivity to the unusual. But now even the maverick element is rarely of value except at the most advanced stages of competition participation.

When competition organizations are building their own reputations as credible discoverers of talents that can bring box-office interest to the presenters who provide prize engagements, a generous degree of social and traditional acceptability is essential. The support of orchestras and concert organizers often depends on personal attractiveness, agreeableness and a certain degree of sophistication, especially in a day when so many people play so well. As one artist said, he knew one reason he got certain reengagements was that the

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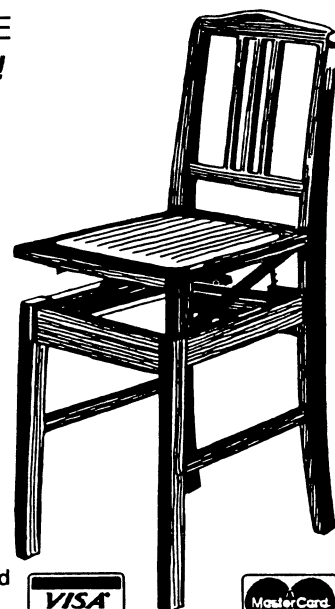
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