

# Choral Reviews

*John C. Hughes, Editor*

## *The Ballad of the Brown King*

Margaret Bonds (1913–1972)

Sam Fox Publishing

Soprano, Tenor, and Baritone solos; Soprano and Tenor and Soprano and Alto duets; SATB Choir; 2 flutes/piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, percussion, harp, celeste, strings

Nine movements;

Of The Three Wise Men

They Brought Fine Gifts

Sing Alleluia

Mary Had a Little Baby

Now When Jesus Was Born

Could He Have Been An Ethiope

Oh Sing Of The King Who Was Tall And Brown

That Was A Christmas Long Ago

Alleluia!

Text: Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

In a letter, titled “December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1955,” composer Margaret Bonds penned the following to Harlem Renaissance poet laureate Langston Hughes: “I’m hard at work on the ‘Brown King’ a whole year ahead...and I want it all to be so fine that I can show it to the most distinguished conductors with no apology.”<sup>1</sup> Margaret Bonds was a significant figure in the African American

cultural Renaissances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century centered in Chicago and Harlem. Raised in a highly educated and musical family, Bonds was a talented pianist and attended Northwestern University to study music. The University did not have “colored” housing, and segregation forced her to live at home. She would work on her earliest compositions during her hour-long journey to Northwestern.<sup>2</sup> Bonds composed in diverse genres including jazz, art song, musical theater, spiritual arrangements and multi-movement choral works. Many of her compositions, including *Ballad of the Brown King* (text by Langston Hughes) are both musical and cultural statements. The poetry, musical language, and extra-musical impetus of her compositions all demonstrate that like many African-American composers, her work is as much a form of socio-political protest as it is an example of her aesthetic prowess.

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<sup>2</sup> Althea N. Kilgore, “The Life and Solo Vocal Works of Margaret Allison Bonds (1913–1972)” (DMA Dissertation, Florida State University, 2013), 11. <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu:185122/datastream/PDF/view> (accessed February 10, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Langston Hughes from Margaret Bonds, Dec. 27 1955, Margaret Bonds Papers GTM 130530, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Box 1, folder 7 (Georgetown University; Washington D.C).

Georgetown University's Booth Family Center for Special Collections acquired and dutifully manages a large portion of Margaret Bonds's archives (the wealth of her documents posthumously discovered in a storage locker owned by her daughter and in a discarded box from a book dealer).<sup>3</sup> The musical elite recognized Bonds as a reputable performer and composer during her lifetime. She was the first black piano soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, was a member of ASCAP, and published with several notable companies including Handy Brothers Music Corporation and Sam Fox. Heralded singers, pianists, and choral organizations regularly performed Bonds's works in recital at various venues. The circles in which she most frequently collaborated were those of the renowned black cultural elite in Chicago and New York, including with Florence Price—the first African American female composer to have a work performed by a National Symphony Orchestra—and Hughes, with whom she would collaborate on several works.

In recent years, due partially to a lack of either awareness or accessibility, there have been few performances of her original compositions, including her recently revived *The Ballad of the Brown King*. Several scholars have embarked upon a concentrated effort to remedy this oversight. For example, Georgetown's Concert Choir, under the direction of Professor Frederick Binkholder, recently began "A Year of Margaret Bonds," which included a performance of

*The Ballad of the Brown King* in November 2017.<sup>4</sup> The compositions of Bonds carried two intentions: to be well crafted, and culturally relevant. A conscious goal of many African Americans active in the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances was to have an artistic and intellectual response to racism. Bonds, who ascribed to W.E.B. Dubois's philosophy of the "talented tenth," sought to dispel the myths of inferiority perpetuated upon black people."<sup>5</sup> "I want to project my own people to blot out the negative image. I want to show that the Negro is not a rapist, or ugly, or stupid."<sup>6</sup> A plea for the humanity of African-American people weaves throughout the entire work, including the text, musical language, and (most obviously) the dedication to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the early days of the civil rights movement.

*Figure 1 on next page.*

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Midgett, "A Forgotten voice for civil rights rises in song at Georgetown," *Washington Post* (November 10, 2017): par.2, online: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/a-forgotten-voice-for-civil-rights-rises-in-song-at-georgetown/2017/11/10/c71f66ec-c341-11e7-a441-3a768c8586f1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5865f277c381](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/a-forgotten-voice-for-civil-rights-rises-in-song-at-georgetown/2017/11/10/c71f66ec-c341-11e7-a441-3a768c8586f1_story.html?utm_term=.5865f277c381) (accessed March 14, 2018).

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<sup>4</sup> Georgetown University: Ballad of the Brown King, [https://guevents.georgetown.edu/event/gu\\_concert\\_choir\\_ballad\\_of\\_the\\_brown\\_king#.Wqquesn8h3Dd](https://guevents.georgetown.edu/event/gu_concert_choir_ballad_of_the_brown_king#.Wqquesn8h3Dd) (accessed March 10, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Charlene Diane Harris, "Margaret Bonds, Black Woman Composer" (MM thesis Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green Ohio, 1976), 3.

<sup>6</sup> The "talented tenth" references Dubois's belief that it was the role of educated and classically talented African Americans was to be the primary means for advancement. These individuals were to work to reach out to elevate the standing of blacks in America. This was also the design of the NAACP for which Dubois was one of the primary founders.

Figure 1.



WORLD PREMIERE  
of the  
revised and extended  
**THE BALLAD OF THE BROWN KING**  
A CHRISTMAS CANTATA  
dedicated to Martin Luther King  
with text by Langston Hughes  
and music by Margaret Bonds  
also: Christmas Spirituals, and  
a Community Sing  
place: CLARK AVE. Y.W.C.A. 50<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> ave.  
time: SUNDAY DEC. 11<sup>th</sup> 1960 3:30 P.M.  
chairman: Eugene S Callender, Associate  
minister, Church of the Master  
music director: Theodore Stent, M.D.  
art director: Wm. Ves Harper, II  
press rep. : Roberta Bosley Hubert  
production staff: Emergency Committee  
for the Southern Freedom Struggle

TICKETS: S.C.L.C. 312 west 125<sup>th</sup> str Un 6-2000  
Church of The Master Mo 6-7190  
YWCA CI 6-3700 ex 32

<sup>7</sup> Program Ballad of the Brown King, Margaret Bonds Papers GTM 130530, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, box 4 folder 2 (Georgetown University, Washington D.C.).

*Ballad of the Brown King* is a multi-movement Christmas Cantata for SATB mixed chorus and orchestra. The work includes both vocal and instrumental writing indicative of jazz, gospel and blues (Figure 2). Bonds divides Hughes's poem into nine movements alternating between solos, duets, treble and bass choruses respectively, and an SATB chorus. The poetry presents more than a purely religious statement of devotion. Rather, the work is the outcry of a marginalized people demanding validation.

“Could he have been an Ethiope  
From an Ethiopian Land?  
I do not know just who he was  
But he was a kingly Man...”

Oh among the kings who came to call  
One was dark like me!  
Oh I'm so glad that he was there  
Our little Christ to See...”<sup>8</sup>

Langston Hughes's text reads as a folk narrative told in a colloquial voice. The text dedicates several stanzas to the “Kings” color. Both Bonds and Hughes created art that reveal the pain present in black America before the Civil Rights Bill of 1964. Many of their collaborations (*Negro Speaks of Rivers, Minstrel Man, I Too*) elaborate upon the experience of being ignored and dehumanized by American society. *Ballad* presents a King who is “wise,” “beautiful,” and “dark”. Although written to celebrate the birth of Christ, the text primarily functions to inform that God loves the ‘brown’ person too.

Each movement has a character that is distinct, yet tied together through similar harmonic language, text, and structure. The elements of jazz are not the only devices present in the choral and instrumental writing. Characteristics of Middle Eastern music clearly influence her use of rhythm and melodic structure in the sixth movement, “Could He Have Been an Ethiope.” Sixteenth note turns ornament melodic minor phrases in both the choral and solo sections. (Figures 3 and 4). She composes with a clever manipulation of the harmonic language through tonicizations and borrowed chords, which by the second half of the section create a seamless transition for the Tenor solo. The blending of sophisticated harmonic colors prevents the reference of a Middle Eastern style from becoming trite. In all of the movements, Bonds deploys a variety of textures while simultaneously creating beautiful arcs in the horizontal vocal line. The effect is a seamless blend of stylistic and harmonic devices indicative of a composer who was equally capable of writing jazz and traditional classical music.

The structure of the work metaphorically represents a black church experience with several sections imitating a “call-and-response” element seen also in culturally traditional black churches in America. The technique is common in spirituals; however, there is a subtlety in Bond's cantata. She constructs with the musical functions of jazz avoiding the overtly religious devices present in the African American Spiritual. She alternates between direct repetition, when either a group or soloist states a phrase from the section, followed by its restatement, and a call-and-response of exclamation, answer to a question, or the missing part of the phrase (Figure 5). She thereby mirrors some of the different call-and-response idioms present in the worship services of black charismatic or Pentecostal churches.

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<sup>8</sup> Poem written by Langston Hughes to Margaret Bonds, Sept. 17 1954, Margaret Bonds Papers GTM 130530, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Box 1, folder 6 (Georgetown University; Washington D.C).

Figure 2.

They came and bowed their heads in Jesus name.

They came and bowed their heads in Jesus name.

They came and bowed their heads in Jesus name.

They came and bowed their heads in Jesus name.

Figure 3.

But he fol - lowed the star

I don't know just\_ who he was,\_ But he followed the star that night,

But he fol - lowed the star\_ that night,

I don't know just\_ who he was,<sup>3</sup>\_ But he fol - lowed the star

<sup>9</sup> Bonds, Margaret, "They Brought Fine Gifts", *The Ballad of the Brown King*, (New York: Sam Fox, 1961), 11

<sup>10</sup> Bonds, Margaret, "Could He Have Been an Ethiope?", *The Ballad of the Brown King*, (New York: Sam Fox, 1961), 27.

Figure 4.

Could he have been an E - thi ope from an E - thi - o - pianland? I  
do not know just who he was, But he was a king - ly man.

Figure 5.

Tenor Solo (Call)	“Of the three wise men who came to the King, One was a brown man, so they sing.
Chorus (Response)	“Alleluia” (Text not Present in original poem)
Chorus (Call )	They Came and Bowed their heads in Jesus name
Chorus (Response)	“Sing Alleluia” (functions as a ‘gospel shout’)
Soprano Solo	Mary had a little baby, Jesus was His name... (Text not present in Hughes’s original poem)
Chorus	But within that lowly manger, behold how warm his love is; Oh, behold!
Baritone Solo	...I don’t know just who he was...
Chorus	But he followed the star that night.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 26 – 27.

The solos interconnect with the fabric of the choral sections. This also helps to project a communal church experience. Neither the soprano solo in the fourth movement, “Mary Had a Little Baby,” nor the choral writing were in the original version of the text Hughes sent to Bonds.<sup>12</sup> It is not even present in the poem, independently published by Langston Hughes as a part of his *Nativity Poems*: “Carol of the Brown King.” Rather, it exists in a revised version that Langston Hughes sent Margaret Bonds, found in her archives at Georgetown University and dated August 28, 1955.<sup>13</sup> The fourth movement eventually became a popular independent solo designated for recording by the esteemed jazz singer Nina Simone.

“Last week I visited Satz and Fox... I was in the office I reminded Frederick about ‘Mary had a Little Baby’ and Nina Simone. Fred called Nina’s husband right then and there...”<sup>14</sup>

All the solos are melodic and written in a comfortable range for a singer with a rounded middle voice. Unlike the choral writing, they are not immediately associated with jazz or blues.

The final movement of the work is a declarative “Alleluia” with a Soprano/Alto duet. The heterophonic clarion of the duet is short, and eventually the choral section is the clear focus. Like a well-reasoned Baroque or Classical sacred work, the final Alleluia concludes with a final declarative “Christ the King!” Thus reminding the listener and the performers that the purpose of the King’s visit was to see Jesus.

Recent performances of *The Ballad of the Brown King* by Georgetown in 2017 and University of Texas San Antonio in 2016<sup>15</sup> are examples of the slowly gathering revival of the American composer’s compositions. The work, along with so many of her sacred and secular compositions, is well crafted and sociologically relevant. Several scholars have begun to write about Bonds’s musical contributions in the areas of choral, vocal, and stage music. The attention is well deserved and a significant correction to decades of musical oversight.

— Merrin Guice

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<sup>12</sup> Poem written by Langston Hughes to Margaret Bonds, Sept. 17 1954, Margaret Bonds Papers GTM 130530, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Box 1, folder 6 (Georgetown University; Washington D.C).

<sup>13</sup> Anna Celenza, “Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship” (August 20, 2016?): par. 7 online, <https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship> (accessed March 1, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Langston Hughes from Margaret Bonds, Aug. 8 1965, Margaret Bonds Papers GTM 130530, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Box 1, folder 6 ( Georgetown University; Washington D.C).

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<sup>15</sup> A performance of the *Ballad of the Brown King* by John Silantian and the University of Texas San Antonio Concert Choir is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsdixi0jVSo> (accessed March 1, 2018).