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# Deep Rivers: Selected Songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds

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Article abstract

This essay examines the songs of two African-American women, Florence Price (1888–1953) and Margaret Bonds (1913–72), who embarked upon their compositional studies and careers only a couple of generations after the emancipation. Both discovered in the poetry of Langston Hughes (1902–67) the means for reconciling the musical traditions of their African-American heritage with those of their European training. Through detailed analysis of the textual and musical symbolism in Price's *Song to a Dark Virgin* and Bonds's *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and *Three Dream Portraits*, the author demonstrates the influence of spirituals ("plantation songs"), blues, and jazz and reveals how these African-American idioms are integrated with the melodic and harmonic idioms from the early twentieth-century European tradition.

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## DEEP RIVERS: SELECTED SONGS OF FLORENCE PRICE AND MARGARET BONDS

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*Penelope Peters*

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If a musical setting is able to vitalize and vivify one among the many aspects of the total form of a poem, by so doing it presents a unique interpretation of the poem's meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in Edward Cone's assertion and explicit in the continuation of his discourse is the notion that the successful musical setting must give the reader more understanding of, more insight into the poem; but how a composer achieves this, and why some poems lend themselves to musical settings are questions that engage not only authors like Cone but also most art-song enthusiasts.

How does the composer, responding to the multivalent features of a poem, create a musical setting that will make it more convincing and comprehensible to either the same or a new audience? Ultimately, the music must do more than merely accompany the poem. In the successful art song, the music and the poem must be integrated to such an extent that the music becomes part of the environment of the poem. Moreover, the music of the art song, no matter how well crafted, should not be able to stand alone; it must imply the poem. The task of defining a successful art song is elusive, but in the songs of two North American women composers, Florence Price (1888–1953) and Margaret Bonds (1913–72), we find gripping, effective settings that fuse their music with the compelling images and words of the African American poet Langston Hughes (1902–67), thereby creating unified, lyric structures.

The three artists, who share common ideals and heritage, were prominent and influential figures in their respective fields in the United States for much of this century. Price was born in Arkansas but began her formal musical training at the age of fourteen in Boston at the New England Conservatory of Music. After graduation she embarked on a career as a teacher and performer and also continued to study composition and orchestration with leading teachers, especially in Chicago.<sup>2</sup> During the 1930s she began to gain national recognition as a composer through various awards and performances of her works.<sup>3</sup> One of her students in Chicago was the young Margaret Bonds, with

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<sup>1</sup>Edward T. Cone, "Words into Music: A Composer's Approach to the Text," in *Music: A View from Delft—Selected Essays*, ed. Robert P. Morgan (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 123.

<sup>2</sup>Price studied at the American Conservatory of Music and Chicago University with Carl Busch, Arthur Anderson, and Leo Sowerby.

<sup>3</sup>Some performances of Price's works include the premiere of her Symphony in E minor at the Chicago World's Fair by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1933), the performance of Symphony No. 3

whose family she lived for a time. Price and Bonds had the opportunity to meet several contemporary African American artists who influenced their work, including the poet Langston Hughes and the composer Will Marion Cook. Bonds soon came into her own too, graduating with a Master of Music from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and continuing to study composition at the Julliard School of Music in New York. Upon completion of her studies, she remained in New York composing orchestral works, chamber music, theatre and movie pieces, choral compositions, and art songs and touring the country as a concert pianist.<sup>4</sup>

The two composers had similar educational and career experiences, but they shared another far more connective and profound bond—their African American heritage. Both women were fiercely proud of this heritage and looked for ways to celebrate and memorialize it in their life's work; yet, the musical traditions of their studies and of their compositions were European, not African American. They were faced with the dilemma of discovering a means of reconciling the musical traditions of their heritage with those of their training. They found a solution in the poetry of Langston Hughes, whose words and images spoke directly to the African American experience.

Both the content and manner of expression in Hughes's poetry immediately engage the reader: he presents realistic pictures of present-day African Americans in gritty urban areas but elegantly expresses their attitudes and emotions in imagery that reaches every audience. Hughes may have begun "as a disciple of the New Poetry giants, Sandburg and Lindsay, writing unrhymed verse in praise of the 'little people,'" but he soon developed a personal style, irresistible in its communication of sorrow and laughter.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a powerful device in Hughes's poetry is the opposition of nonchalant humour on the surface against a background of pathos. Another striking feature is the infusion of ethnic consciousness, instilled in Hughes by his maternal grandmother.<sup>6</sup>

In order to envelop Hughes's poetry musically and to authenticate the combination of words and music, Price and Bonds were compelled to give equal voice to their musical heritage and to their training. Thus, in setting Hughes's poetry, they follow standard European traditions of the genre, such as the formal designs and the use of text and tone painting, but to provide

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under the direction of Walter Poole in Detroit (1940), and Price's performance of her *Concerto in One Movement* on the above program. She was also soloist in performances of her first two piano concertos in Chicago and Pittsburgh (1932 and 1934). For more bibliographical information on Price and Bonds and a complete list of their works, see Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) and Mildred Denby Green, *Black Women Composers: A Genesis* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>As a pianist, Bonds performed as guest soloist with major orchestras in Canada and the United States. She received numerous awards including the Rodman Wanamaker Award for composition and the alumni medal from Northwestern University. Many of her songs exist in the repertoires of leading artists such as Leontyne Price, William Warfield, and Todd Duncan.

<sup>5</sup>Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes (1902–1967)* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books), 112.

<sup>6</sup>Mrs. Langston, of Indian and French ancestry, grew up free in ante-bellum North Carolina, attended Oberlin College, and spent a productive lifetime fighting racial injustice at the side of each of her two husbands; see James A. Emanuel, *Langston Hughes* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1967), 18.

continuity with their African heritage, they incorporate melodic and aesthetic aspects of spirituals, the harmonic language of the blues, and the improvisatory character of jazz. Price and Bonds appropriate the vivid images and raw emotions crammed into Hughes's taut, compact verses and fashion them into a unified African American musical expression.

Before turning to a selection of art songs that combine the music of Price and Bonds with the poetry of Hughes, it will be useful to examine some characteristics of the spirituals, more accurately called "plantation songs," of African Americans in Colonial America; for not only do Price and Bonds make use of their melodic and esthetic characteristics, but many of the jazz and blues idioms of African American composer-performers derive from this same tradition.<sup>7</sup>

The plantation songs, the earliest body of music identified with African Americans, provide insight into their musical heritage and personal conflicts. Traditionally, plantation songs were largely improvised and performed by a leader and chorus in a call-and-response procedure that often resulted in the leader or soloist ending phrases with a long, sustained pitch. These sustained pitches, which usually emphasize expressive words, were treated in a variety of ways: at times the leader would improvise a vocal flourish on the pitch, drawing attention to the key word while at the same time mentally composing the next part of the song; or, the leader would sustain the pitch while the chorus either repeated the preceding phrase or sang short improvised responses such as "Yes Sister," or "Amen Brother." The call-and-response technique, improvisatory nature, and utilitarian purpose of most plantation songs demanded simple diction, frequent repetition, straightforward rhyme schemes, and short verses with memorable tunes.

Since the early part of this century, the history, uses, categories, and social implications of the plantation songs have been explored in a number of studies and collections. Of particular interest the *double-entendres* in the text, which James Baldwin describes as the "private vocabulary" or "sleight-of-hand" used by African American slaves for communication meant to exclude white understanding.<sup>8</sup> In all but the simplest work songs, African Americans expected to look beneath the surface of the text, for when it was not designed to conceal a "private vocabulary," the song frequently functioned as an allegory. For example, trains, a common theme in song texts, provide ideal allegorical

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<sup>7</sup>The spirituals were just one of the classifications of songs that plantation workers composed for their work, play, courting, and spiritual activities; for example, work songs were used to make repetitive tasks such as rowing, laying a railway line, husking corn, or stacking hay easier. White plantation owners and foremen encouraged singing for a variety of reasons: the songs made the workers more productive, workers' whereabouts could be traced and monitored through their singing, and finally, the workers were happier if they could compose songs to accompany their after-work activities of singing, dancing, and worship.

<sup>8</sup>See studies by Henry E. Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folk Songs* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1914); Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1925); William E. DuBois, "The Sorrow Songs," in *Souls of the Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 250-64. A complete list of collections and studies of spirituals can be found in *The American Negro: His History and Literature*, ed. Bernard Katz (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 128-37; James Baldwin, "Sermons and Blues," in *Critical Essays on Langston Hughes*, ed. Edward J. Mullen (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 85-87.

material: "Christians were likened to travellers on the railway train, Jesus was the conductor, brakemen were the servants of the church, and stops were made at Gospel depots to take up waiting converts or replenish the engine with the water of life or the fuel of the holy zeal."<sup>9</sup> Whether the plantation songs were intended as ballads or religious or work songs, a double meaning was an important component of most texts. Recent musicological studies assert that by using a unique vocabulary in plantation song texts, African Americans developed and communicated thoughts that were not understandable to others, thereby maintaining some control over their intellectual development and freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Melodically, the pitch structure of plantation songs can be grouped loosely into two categories: pentatonic or modal types and melodies with diatonic characteristics.<sup>11</sup> As with all collections of aural traditions carried by different generations to various regions, however, both the tonal and chronological classifications are inexact.<sup>12</sup> What are believed to be the earliest plantation songs (ca. 1700–1780) use a five-note scale comprised exclusively of major seconds and minor thirds, some songs dating from the same period add a sixth note or intermittent alterations of notes, without, however, changing the overall pentatonic structure. Other songs from this same period correspond either to the Dorian or Mixolydian modes or a combination of modes. Melodic cadences in this early group of songs follow the interval patterns typical of the pentatonic or modal scales, that is, the tonic in the cadence may be preceded by an ascending or descending minor third or by a descending or ascending major second, and sometimes two or more patterns—minor thirds and major seconds—are combined to form a longer, embellished cadence (see Example 1.) These cadence types appear to be requisite to the integrity of plantation songs, for they recur together with diatonic cadence patterns as a unifying trait in all plantation song periods as well as in the vocal parts of the spiritual arrangements. More frequent addition of notes and triadic patterns from the diatonic scales occurs in the later plantation songs (ca. 1800–1867), for African Americans could not help but absorb the diatonic scales and the I–IV–V harmonic patterns of the hymns that they heard and sang in church; consequently, these melodies reflect a mixture of pentatonic origins with underlying diatonic

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<sup>9</sup>John Mason Brown, "Song of the Slave," *Lippincott's Magazine* 2 (December 1868): 617–23; reprinted in Katz, *The American Negro*, 27.

<sup>10</sup>See Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), ix–x.

<sup>11</sup>The two categories do not take into account arrangements of the spirituals that date from the beginning of this century, because, from all accounts, they were made by musicians who had received formal training at schools, such as the New England Conservatory or Oberlin College, and who attempted to present the songs within the trappings of their training for audiences accustomed to European musical traditions.

<sup>12</sup>Some transcribers were musically well trained, while others possessed more sympathy than skill, and for both types, their projects seldom received unconditional support; in addition, some collectors took liberties in copying the songs either because they were unable to notate unfamiliar patterns or they found them too vulgar. Finally, some degree of authenticity is lost during a conscious recording of a performance; individual performers may deliberately have altered either the music, the words, or both, whether from a desire to impress their audience or to conceal particular aspects of the song.

where to go, wan - der - in' a - round from  
 door to door, well, a hard time

1a.

**Example 1a:** *Motherless Children*, transcribed from “Folkways Records,” Columbia 14343; singer, Blind Willie Johnson, mm. 55–59.

nat - ur - al man, he drive  
 steel like a nat - ur - al man!

1b

**Example 1b:** *John Henry*, transcribed from “Negro Folk Music of Alabama,” Ethnic Folkways Library, mm. 48–52.

harmonic structures.<sup>13</sup> Price and Bonds use the various pentatonic-type cadences in their art songs as a deliberate allusion to the plantation songs.

A frequent though not entirely consistent formal characteristic of the plantation is the precise or varied repetition of the melody in two or more antecedent phrases followed by a concluding consequent phrase, a-a-a-b.<sup>14</sup> *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* is an example of an early plantation song constructed on a pentatonic scale and using this formal structure (see Example 2.)

<sup>13</sup> Although most readers are familiar with spiritual arrangements by Harry T. Burleigh and Nathaniel Dett, early sources do not agree as to whether plantation songs were sung only in unison or harmonized. For example, John Mason Brown claims that “... the slaves in the U.S. never attempted even a rude bass in their singing and their most effective hymns were sung in unison”; “Songs of the Slave”, *Lippincott’s Magazine*, reprinted in *The American Negro*, 30. In contrast, James Weldon Johnson remarks that the early collectors were “... more or less successful in getting down the melodies correctly, but none of these pioneers even attempted to set down the anarchic harmonies that they heard”; *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, quoted by George Spaulding in “Under the Palmetto,” *Continental Monthly*, August 1863, 196–200, reprinted in Katz, *The American Negro*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Lawrence Zbikowski who pointed out that this same, or a similar, formal pattern exists in many blues songs as part of the improvisatory tradition, in which the performer mentally formulates the “b” line while repeating “a.”

Traditional

Traditional

a)

1.Sometimes I fell like a moth-er-less chile, \_\_\_\_\_  
 2.Sometimes I feel like I'm al - mos' gone, \_\_\_\_\_

a)

Some-times I feel like a moth-er-less chile, \_\_\_\_\_  
 Some-times I feel like I'm al - mos' gone, \_\_\_\_\_

a)

Some times I feel like a moth-er-less chile, \_\_\_\_\_ A  
 Some-times I feel like I'm al - mos' gone, \_\_\_\_\_ A

b)

long ways from home, \_\_\_\_\_ A  
 long ways from home, \_\_\_\_\_ A

b)

long ways from home.  
 long ways from home.

Example 2: Traditional, *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile.*

Characteristics of the plantation songs, as well as those of blues and jazz, provide ideal material for the art songs of Price and Bonds. On the one hand, the musical patterns, familiar to many African American listeners, give their art songs an immediate appeal; on the other hand, characteristics such as the pentatonic and modal melodic structures of the plantation songs, and the expanded and dissonant harmonies typical of the jazz repertoire could be integrated seamlessly into the melodic and harmonic idioms of early twentieth-century European traditions. But more significantly, the African American musical idioms proved an ideal vehicle for expressing the innermost thoughts and desires of the African American world of Hughes's poetry.

In 1941, Schirmer published Price's setting of Hughes's poem *Song to a Dark Virgin*:

Would that I were a jewel,  
 A shattered jewel,  
 That all my shining brilliants might fall at that feet,  
     Thou dark one.

Would that I were a garment,  
 A shimmering silken garment  
 That all my folds might wrap about thy body,  
 Absorb thy body  
 Hold and hide thy body,  
     Thou dark one.

Would that I were a flame  
 But one sharp leaping flame  
 To annihilate thy body,  
     Thou dark one.

I propose two different interpretations of this poem. In the first, the poem appears simply to describe the protagonist's increasing enchantment with the dark virgin. His attentions increase in intimacy and intensity from the image of a jewel placed at the virgin's feet, to that of a robe that envelops and caresses her body, and finally to that of a flame that will consume and forever transform her. The second interpretation takes as its point of departure the two disturbing verbs "hide" and "annihilate," which conflict with this simple picture of love or even lust, suggesting another dimension. In this reading, there is no lover, only the dark virgin who is addressing herself, perhaps while looking at her reflection in the mirror. Because society (white society) has made her abhor her dark skin, she first tries to adorn herself with jewels; alas, they do not conceal enough of her loathsome dark flesh. Next, she tries to hide it in silken garments; still not sufficiently disguised, she is left with no recourse but to annihilate her body in fire. Unable to change her skin colour, in self-loathing she destroys herself. In other words, rather than having written a love poem, Hughes comments on the self-destruction of so many African Americans by their surrender to the desperation of their predicament.



The tension created by the symbolic references in this work is not unique—indeed, it is a vivifying attribute of a good poem—but the precise version of symbolic tension that follows from these rival interpretations defines the alienation of the African American experience. The impact of the message is overwhelming; for, the alienation simultaneously expresses the African American collective experience and provides the reason for the layered meanings—the need to conceal the sense of despair from an alien society. Hughes’s motivation for concealing the feelings and emotions of the dark virgin in an apparent love-ballad springs from the same source that compelled African Americans to use a private vocabulary in the plantation songs.

Melodic parallels with plantation songs certainly exist in Price’s setting: each vocal phrase ends with a sustained pitch, the altered and sustained pitches within the phrases accompany expressive words in the text (“hold,” “hide,” “flame,” “annihilate,” etc.), the text-setting is syllabic, and there are three short varied strophes. These characteristics combined with the simple, largely conjunct melody result in a folk-ballad character in the vocal part.

Hughes deliberately introduced ambiguity into his poem through the verbs “hide” and “annihilate.” Price captures that ambiguity by using an unstable tonic harmony throughout the accompaniment, including the tonic chord in the final cadence. The vocal part, constructed around dominant and tonic chords, is convincingly in  $A\flat$ , but, in the accompaniment Price uses a more complex recurring sonority— $F$ ,  $A\flat$ ,  $C$ ,  $E\flat$ —that functions intermittently as predominant, tonic, and even dominant harmony, depending upon which pitches are emphasized. For example, as the initial sonority it functions as a predominant VI chord over a V pedal in the lowest voice, which propels the chord to V; however, when it arrives on V (mm. 2–3) the upper notes of the VI triad might be considered suspension figures, with C displacing  $B\flat$  and  $A\flat$  displacing G. In other words, the first six beats could be interpreted as a sustained  $V^{13}$  chord moving to the more stable  $V^9$  in m. 2. The same sonority, repeated in the same register, serves as the tonic chord in the authentic cadence at the end of strophe 1 (mm. 5–6). This time, however, Price reinforces the  $A\flat$  tonic by placing  $A\flat$ s at either extreme: the highest note of the chord in the vocal part, and the lowest pitches  $A\flat$ - $E\flat$  in the piano accompaniment (see Example 3). Thus, although the opening sonority in its original register permeates most of the first strophe (and much of the remainder of the song), Price is able to change its function by emphasizing different components of the sonority through reinforcement and spatial placement.

As with many expanded sonorities in late tonal works, the label for this chord is not clear-cut. When it functions as tonic, it can be spelled as an A-major chord with added sixth—a fairly common sonority in music of the early decades of this century, including popular and jazz styles; however, Price’s spatial arrangement of the chord’s two interlocking triads of  $A\flat$  major and F minor suggests the combined sonority of a tonic complex.<sup>15</sup> The two possible

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<sup>15</sup>For a discussion of the tonic complex, see Robert Bailey, “An Analytical Study of the Sketches and Drafts,” in *Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from Tristan and Isolde*, Norton Critical Scores,

LANGSTON HUGHES

Andante con moto

FLORENCE PRICE

1  
Would that I were a jew - el,

1  
*pp*  
ex. a)

3  
*cresc.* *mf*  
a shat-tered jew - el, That all my shin - ing bril - liants

3  
*cresc.* *mf*

5  
might fall at thy feet, Thou dark one. *rit.* *a tempo* *poco rit.*

5  
*colla parte* *pp*

Example 3: Price, *Song to the Dark Virgin*, mm. 1–2; 5–6.

analyses of the expanded chord correspond with the two readings—the double meaning—of Hughes's poem, and the Janus-like complexity of the sonority

also mirrors Price's attempt to reconcile her natural musical heritage with the European musical tradition of her formal studies.

In 1942, the year after Price composed *Song to a Dark Virgin*, Bonds set Hughes's first published poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, a work often characterized as an "epic tribute to the Negro Race."<sup>16</sup> The poem chronicles the history and migration of black people across the globe, from the River Euphrates ca. 3000 B.C. to the Mississippi River early in this century; indeed, Hughes describes the central visual image of this poem as "the rivers of the world along whose banks the Negro had lived in his transition from Africa to America."<sup>17</sup>

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human  
blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New  
Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

In setting this poem, Bonds makes use of a single motive, transforming it by means of changing harmonic and textural treatment to convey an image of a common river flowing through four different geographic regions. Soaring leaps in the voice and piano call to mind the grandeur of the Nile pyramids; open fifths and octaves in the piano summon ancient times. In contrast, life along the Mississippi river in the nineteenth century is represented by the rhythms and idioms of the American piano rag. To communicate the identity of the Negro in the music, Bonds incorporates the blues harmonies of African American performers and melodic characteristics borrowed from plantation songs. Most of the vocal phrases and sub-phrases end with long pitches sustained into the following phrase, while most of the vocal cadences follow the pentatonic cadence patterns characteristic of the pentatonic plantation melodies (see Example 4.)

Almost two decades later (1959), Bonds selected more topical poems by Hughes for her song set *Three Dream Portraits*.<sup>18</sup> Although the emotions expressed in each of the poems are complex, the mordant text is straightforward

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<sup>16</sup>Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes*, 13.

<sup>17</sup>Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill, 1983), 305.

<sup>18</sup>Bonds's use of "dreams" in her title is particularly apt, for Hughes entitled the sixty-poem collection from which the poems are taken *The Dream Keeper*, and dreams are a recurrent theme.

decrease

poco rit

lull'd me to sleep

poco rit

**Example 4:** Bonds, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, mm. 29–30.

and easily understood. The poems progress from the grimmest of ordeals in *Minstrel Man*, to the African American's wish for tolerance and acceptance in *Dream Variation*, to a sense of defiance and pride in *I Too*. Mildred Green describes the poems as “a mirror of the reality of black life in America from the early 1900s to the late 1950s.”<sup>19</sup>

The text of *Minstrel Man* requires little probing beneath the surface to understand the humiliation and pain the protagonist must endure. “Pain swallowed with a smile” is a recurrent theme for Hughes. This poem centers on the irony that the Minstrel Man, although allowed to perform, must continue “dancing to the tune” of white society, in effect enacting a parody of his talents instead of being allowed to realize his art form honestly.

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
And my throat  
Is deep with song,  
You do not think  
I suffer pain

So long?  
Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
You do not hear  
My inner cry?  
Because my feet  
Are gay with dancing,  
You do not know  
I die?

<sup>19</sup>Green, *Black Women Composers*, 55.

Bonds captures the heart of this poem—the exterior laughter that hides the inner anguish—by manipulating processes of modal mixture. She uses conventional mixture by juxtaposing the major and minor forms of tonic in the piano introduction and uses both forms of tonic intermittently throughout the song (see Example 5).

**Example 5:** Bonds, *Minstrel Man*, mm. 6-8.

In another process of mixture, Bonds gives different scale types to the voice and the piano parts: frequent use of dominant harmony with raised  $\hat{7}$  scale degree establishes the diatonic scale of B in the piano, but, the voice is in the mixed mode of B $\flat$  Dorian/Aeolian—e.g., B $\flat$ -C-D $\flat$ -E $\flat$ -F-G $\flat$ -G-A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ , with the addition of a single raised  $\hat{7}$  in the final phrase. Bonds's deliberate choice of different scales for the two parts is confirmed in the clash of A $\flat$  in the voice against A natural of the dominant harmony in the piano on the word "pain" (see Example 6). Providing a separate tonal colour for the piano and voice fulfills two roles: poetically, the two forms of the scale underscore the dichotomy in the poem; historically, Bonds's process recalls the technique of harmonizing the modal or pentatonic melodies of the plantation songs with diatonic harmonies.

Bonds's tonal and harmonic language in this song represents a fusion of her formal training and her musical heritage: the use of modal scales and combinations of modes is typical both of early twentieth-century compositional techniques and of the melodies of plantation songs; although expanded chords are commonplace in the late tonal music written during the first decades of this century, many of Bonds's expanded harmonies and dissonances operate as an evocation of the blues and jazz chords of African American performers. In the accompaniment, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth harmonies abound. Other chords include simple and altered non-chord tones that may or may not resolve, and a frequently used dominant harmony is the so-called augmented V with  $\flat\hat{2}$ , or, in jazz terminology, V with a flatted fifth (see Example 7). In Bonds's

Example 6: Bonds, *Minstrel Man*, m. 22.

Example 7a: Bonds, *Minstrel Man*, mm. 10–11.

music, dissonant chords resolve to other dissonant chords resulting in chord streams and successions of chords rather than in progressions that can be accounted for in terms of traditional root movements.

In his poem *Dream Variation*, Hughes made use of a set of recurring images that acts to some extent as a trope in his work: the “gentle,” “tender,” “dark” night corresponds to the African American (e.g., “dark like me”), while the “harsh” sunny day represents white society (e.g., to “whirl and to dance, till the white day is done,” expresses the obligation to scurry and work until the whites’ demands are met).<sup>20</sup> These images complement the protagonist’s dream

<sup>20</sup>See also his poems *Negro*, which begins with the lines: “I am a Negro:/ Black as the night is black, and My People, which begins “The Night is beautiful/ So the faces of my people.” This parallel is not unique to Hughes, for it also occurs in Louise C. Wallace’s poem *Night Comes*, which Florence Price set. Although the image “whirl and dance” is easily understood as a metaphor for doing someone else’s bidding, historically the African American slave was required to dance and perform at two of the most difficult times of his

unresolved dissonance

**Example 7b:** Bonds, *Minstrel Man*,

**Example 7c:** Bonds, *Minstrel Man*,  
m. 37.

for freedom to be himself “in the face of the sun,” that is, in the face of white society. The analogies “gentle night” and “harsh day” are apt on another level as well, for the African American slave belonged to the white owner from sun-up to sun-down, but was generally without duties and free to relax at night. Thus, the night represented a magical time of dreams and freedom.<sup>21</sup>

To fling my arms wide  
 In some place of the sun,  
 To whirl and to dance  
 Till the white day is done.  
 Then rest at cool evening  
 Beneath a tall tree  
 While night comes on gently,

Dark like me —  
 That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide  
 In the face of the sun,  
 Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
 Till the quick day is done.  
 Rest at pale evening ...  
 A tall, slim tree ...

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captivity. Contemporaneous reports attest that ships’ captains regularly required their captured cargo to dance and sing, in the belief that it would keep up their morale and prevent possible suicides during the difficult voyage. The second instance occurred on the slave dock, where African Americans were required to sing, dance, and perform for prospective buyers—yet another humiliating and bewildering ordeal.

<sup>21</sup> The night was a true time of freedom for the slaves; indeed, numerous accounts relate that slaves, who were believed to be sleeping, in fact travelled for miles under the cover of darkness to attend dances, religious assemblies, or meetings where they planned escape routes.

Night comes tenderly  
Black like me.

Of the three songs that make up *Three Dream Portraits*, *Dream Variation* possesses the least sense of tonic centrality in the vocal part. Neither tonic nor dominant chords are outlined in the vocal line, and only three-and-one-half isolated measures in the vocal line suggest C# as tonic. Significantly, they occur with, or near, the text “dark like me.” For the primary and secondary images in the text, respectively “dark/black like me” and “a tall tree” representing strength and permanence, Bonds uses a single distinctive vocal motive of a large ascending leap of a seventh followed by a descending interval of a third (the final time the motive is modified to an ascending major sixth and descending fourth). The motive for the “tree” appears on IV in both strophes, while “dark like me,” identified with the tonic C, appears in the first strophe, at the end of a two-measure antecedent phrase centered around natural III (E natural), but not until the text continues with “That is my dream,” does the vocal melody imply C as tonic for the first time in the vocal line (see Example 8).

In the second strophe, the motive occurs definitively in C in the final and antepenultimate measures of the voice (see Example 9.)

In other words, the C# tonic, paralleling the African American’s individuality, is only hinted at—can only be dreamed about—in the first strophe; not until the end of the second strophe is C# stated emphatically, tonally affirming that the African American will eventually attain recognition in his adopted country. Thus, with a masterly use of tonality in the vocal part, Bonds has captured and expressed the essence of the poem, the African American’s ultimate dream for equality.

In contrast to the tonal ambiguities of the vocal line, the piano introduction establishes C# as tonic at the outset, and while the C# triad is more strongly represented in the accompaniment than in the vocal part, Bonds reflects the dream aspect of the poem by using chords typical of the jazz vocabulary in combination with progressions that suspend rather than reinforce tonic centrality. In mm. 9–10 and 14–15, the melody is accompanied by streams of seventh chords constructed from stacked fourths; many of the harmonies are expanded ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords; most sonorities appear to be selected for their tone colour rather than tonal function; and finally, the last four-measure extended cadence eschews root movement by fifth in favour of half-step connections between  $\flat II^7-I-\flat I/\sharp VII-I^7$  (see Example 10).<sup>22</sup>

Closure in both text and music is achieved in the final song of the set *I Too*. The poem expresses the African American’s emerging sense of defiance, the realization that things have changed or that things will change: “Nobody’ll

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<sup>22</sup>Most jazz musicians would refer to the  $\flat II$  in the cadence as the “dominant tritone-substitution,” the  $II$  chord being substituted for the dominant—the roots of each chord lying at the interval of a tritone from the other. One way of deriving this progression is to recognize that the  $\flat II$  chord takes its origins from a variant of the progression: German augmented sixth– $V^7-I$ ; if the German augmented sixth is reinterpreted as a  $V^7/II$ , it would resolve to a  $\flat II-V-I$ ; suppress the augmented sixth and the  $V$ , and the listener is left with the dominant tritone substitution— $\flat II-I$ .



E major I C# major

night comes on gent - ly ——— dark like me, ——— That is my

*p*

dream. ———

*p*

**Example 8:** Bonds, *Dream Variation*, mm. 12–14.

black like me;

Example 9: Bonds, *Dream Variation*, m. 25.

mm. 9-10

rest at cool evening beneath a tall

*p*

Example 10a: Bonds, *Dream Variation*, mm. 9-10.

sun, Dance!, Whirl!, Whirl till the juckday is

*cresc.*

Example 10b: Bonds, *Dream Variation*, mm. 26-27.

Night com - ing ten - der - ly, — black like me; —

Night com - ing ten - der - ly, — black — like me.

**Example 10c:** Bonds, *Dream Variation*, mm. 26–27.

dare/Say to me, ‘Eat in the kitchen.’” It also illustrates the indomitable spirit of the African American, a spirit that, despite many travails, has not been destroyed: “They’ll see how beautiful I am.” Finally, there is an expression of pride by the African American that he is an important citizen of the United States and acceptance that whatever his roots, he is here to stay: “I, Too, am America.”

I, too, sing America

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I’ll sit at the table

When company comes.  
 Nobody'll dare  
 Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"  
 Then.

Besides,  
 They'll see how beautiful I am  
 And be ashamed —

I, too, am America

Bonds aggressively utilizes jazz and blues idioms to underscore the more militant tone and the assertion of African American equality expressed in the poem. Blues harmonies and ostinato-like progressions predominate throughout the accompaniment. The piano also echoes the voice in antiphonal passages that stylistically resemble jazz performers' spontaneous imitation and historically resemble the call-and-response practice of plantation songs (see Example 11).

But the technique that sets this art song apart as uniquely African American is Bonds's adoption of the jazz performer's technique of improvisation, of crafting the second strophe of the vocal line into what Green aptly describes as "a very free, quasi-improvisatory variant of the first."<sup>23</sup> Like the jazz musician, Bonds anchors her improvisatory-like passages between key notes of the vocal line in the first strophe, usually the first, last, lowest, or highest. To give the voice complete rhythmic freedom and prominence in this quasi-improvisation, the piano fades into an ostinato "lick" based on blues harmonies (see Example 12). Thus, in this concluding song, in which the African American proclaims his equality, Bonds asserts the equality of African American musical traditions by integrally and indissolubly fusing them with the structure and design of the traditional European art song.

Florence Price and Margaret Bonds are recognized and admired as composers who assimilated the traditional European genres—symphony, concerto, chamber music, piano solo, and art song—and as women, visible minorities embarking on their studies and careers in the United States only a couple of generations after the emancipation, their achievements represent a laudable, a seemingly unattainable objective. But perhaps a more telling accomplishment is the musical vocabulary they created for their art songs, integrating the musical structures of both African American musical idioms and traditional European music; although characteristics of each style can be isolated and labeled, each composer has fused them into a balanced unity that defies simple description. In their attempt to capture the explosive energy of Hughes's poetry, Price and Bonds succeed in creating a personal, musical setting that embodies their identity and the identity of the poem. Indeed, their art songs approach what Cone defines as the "successful song": "Music and words appear to be, not parallel structures, but two aspects of a single organism. For

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<sup>23</sup>Green, *Black Composers*, 60.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piece "Bonds, I Too". Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff).  
 The first system features a vocal line with the lyrics "Eat in the kitchen" then, where "kitchen" is split as "kitch - en". The piano accompaniment includes a section labeled "Response" in the bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C).  
 The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "beau - ti - ful I am" and "and be a". The piano accompaniment includes a section labeled "Response" in the treble clef. The key signature remains one flat, and the time signature is common time. Dynamics include a piano (*p*) marking in the vocal line.

Example 11: Bonds, *I Too*, mm. 28–29, 33–35.

**1st Phrase**

**a.** **b.**

Strophe 1  
I, too— sing A mer-i-ca,

**a'.** **b'.**

Strophe 2  
To mor row— I'll sit at the ta ble when com-pan-y comes,—

**2nd Phrase**

**c.**

Strophe 1  
They send me to eat in the kitch-en— when

**c'.**

Strophe 2  
No-bod-y - 'll dare say to me "Eat in the kitch-en" then,

**3rd Phrase**

**d.** **e.**

Strophe 1  
But I laugh— and eat well and grow strong—

**d'.** **e'.**

Strophe 2  
Be-sides— they'll see how beau-ti-ful I am—

**Example 12:** Bonds, *I Too*, first phrase, mm. 6–8, 20–24; second phrase, mm. 10–12, 25–29; third phrase, mm. 14–18, 30–34.

this reason the text and settings of the best songs give the illusion of being 'twin-born' even when not actually so. Sometimes it is impossible to think of either element in isolation once they have been heard so joined."<sup>24</sup>

### **Abstract**

This essay examines the songs of two African-American women, Florence Price (1888–1953) and Margaret Bonds (1913–72), who embarked upon their compositional studies and careers only a couple of generations after the emancipation. Both discovered in the poetry of Langston Hughes (1902–67) the means for reconciling the musical traditions of their African-American heritage with those of their European training. Through detailed analysis of the textual and musical symbolism in Price's *Song to a Dark Virgin* and Bonds's *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and *Three Dream Portraits*, the author demonstrates the influence of spirituals ("plantation songs"), blues, and jazz and reveals how these African-American idioms are integrated with the melodic and harmonic idioms from the early twentieth-century European tradition.

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<sup>24</sup>Cone, "Music: A View From Delft," in *Music: A View from Delft—Selected Essays*, 20.