

MARGARET BONDS

March 3, 1913–April 26, 1972
American Composer, Pianist, and Teacher
Modern



- Margaret was raised by her mother, a church musician and member of the National Association of Negro Musicians. Her mother was her first piano teacher.
- The Bonds home became a gathering place for many leading Black musicians, writers, and artists. These encounters had a great influence on Margaret's career.
- During high school, she studied composition and piano with Florence Price and William Dawson. At only 16, she enrolled at Northwestern University. She was one of just a few Black students, and she faced a very racist environment on campus. Black students were not allowed to use some of the facilities or live on campus. Despite that, Bonds persevered and earned a Bachelor's and Master's of Music in piano and composition.
- Bonds was strengthened during college when she first read Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which she later set to music.
- Her composition *Sea Ghost* won the national Wanamaker Foundation Prize in 1932.
- In 1933, Margaret became the first African-American woman to perform as a soloist with a major American orchestra when she played with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
- She founded the Allied Arts Academy, a music and dance school for Black children in Chicago.
- An important point in her career was meeting the famed Black poet Langston Hughes in 1936. They were friends for decades and collaborated on many works.
- In 1939, Bonds moved to New York City and studied at the Juilliard School of Music. She worked as a music editor, played piano at the Apollo Theater, and wrote popular music.

- She was an active performer and composer in New York City and worked to promote the music of other Black musicians. She became involved in the Harlem Renaissance artistic movement, working to advance black musicians and composers.
- Margaret wrote *The Ballad of the Brown King* in 1954—a large-scale choral work with lyrics by Langston Hughes. This nine-movement piece tells the story of King Balthazar, one of the three kings from the Nativity story. It incorporates several originally Black styles, such as jazz, blues, calypso, and spirituals. A performance was broadcast on national television in 1960.
- Bonds arranged many African-American spirituals, including a famous setting of *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* in 1963 for the singer Leontyne Price.
- As the Civil Rights Movement began, Bonds worked to promote African-American artists by sponsoring concerts, founding a chamber music society dedicated to Black composers, and teaching free lessons in community centers. She wanted to serve as a bridge between her generation of Black artists and the next.
- In 1964, *The Washington Post* featured an article on Bonds titled, “She Has a Musical Mission: Developing Racial Harmony, Heritage Motivates Composing Career.”
- Her 1965 *Montgomery Variations* for orchestra was inspired by the “March on Montgomery” led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Margaret spent the last few years of her life living in Los Angeles where she worked with the Los Angeles Inner City Institute and at the Inner City Cultural Center, as well as writing movie music.
- Throughout her career, she was known for her compositions and her work advocating for social and racial justice.



COMPOSITIONS BY MARGARET BONDS



Ballad of the Brown King

A Christmas cantata (with text by Langston Hughes) originally written for solo voice, then revised for chorus, soloists, and orchestra.



Troubled Water

This piano solo is based on the spiritual “Wade in the Water.”



Three Dream Portraits

This three-song cycle for voice and piano uses poetry taken from Langston Hughes’s book of children’s poetry, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*.

COMPOSER CONNECTIONS

- As a teen, Margaret studied with black composers Florence Price and William Dawson.
- Bonds was a piano teacher to composer Ned Rorem when he was 10 years old.
- Margaret was employed as a rehearsal pianist for a production of William Grant Still’s ballet, *La Guiblésse*.

“

Margaret Bonds played with the authority of a professional...an authority stemming from the fact that she herself was a composer and thus approached all music from the inside out, an authority that was contagious.

”

– Ned Rorem

“

I think, if anything, if I deserve any credit at all, it’s that I have stuck to my own ethnic material and worked to develop it.

”

– Margaret Bonds



Review

How old was Margaret when she enrolled in Northwestern University?

- 18
- 43
- 16
- 22

Which of these composers did Bonds study with as a teenager?

- William Grant Still
- Langston Hughes
- Aaron Copland
- Florence Price

Margaret Bonds is considered a composer of the _____ Era.

- Romantic
- Baroque
- Modern
- Classical

What is the name of the composition by Bonds that was televised in 1960?

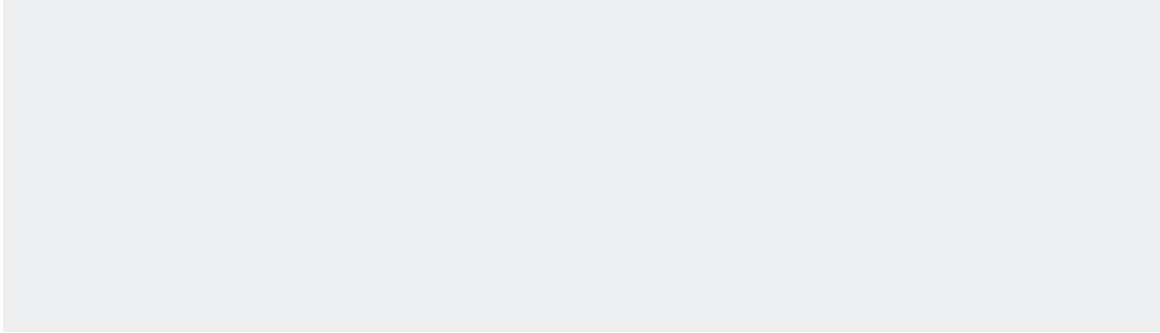
- Troubled Water*
- The Ballad of the Brown King*
- Three Dream Variations*
- Sea Ghost*

True or False: Margaret Bonds never arranged an African-American spiritual.

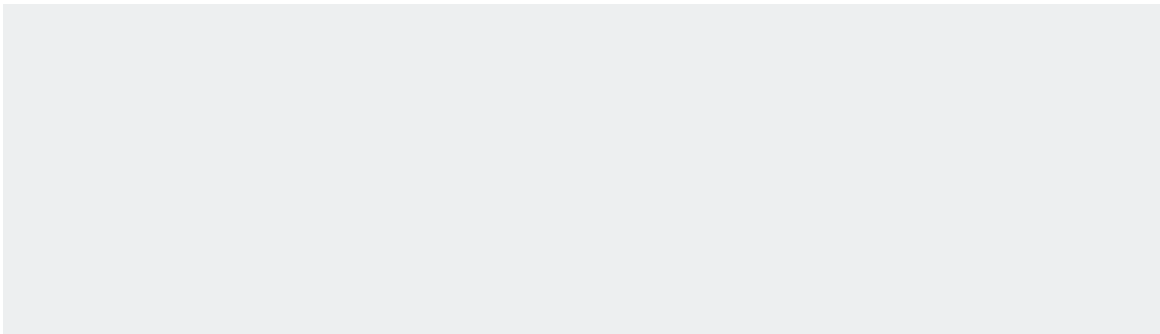
Name the famous African-American poet that Bonds often collaborated with.

Reflect

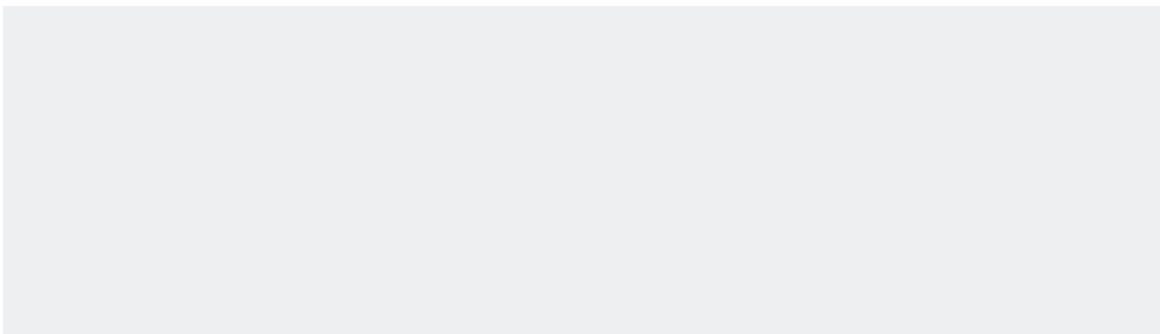
How do you think Margaret's career was impacted by meeting musicians and artists as a child?



Why do you think Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes collaborated for so many years? How are writing music and poetry similar or different?



Listen to a piece of music by Margaret Bonds. List the title and describe the work. What grabs your attention the most? What instruments do you hear? How does it make you feel?



Writing Prompt

Margaret Bonds worked to address racial and social injustice through music and the arts. Describe how music could bridge social and cultural differences between people and societies. Give examples of songs or styles that have had this kind of impact.

