

Undine Smith Moore

August 25, 1904 – February 6, 1989

African American Composer and Educator

20th Century



- Undine was born in 1904 in Jarratt, Virginia. When she was four, her parents moved the family to Petersburg, Virginia. Undine's early musical experiences included formal lessons, church music, and African American work songs and spirituals of her community.
- She enrolled at Fisk University, a historically Black college in Nashville, Tennessee. Fisk University had a strong musical tradition.
- Juilliard Graduate School in New York awarded Undine the first scholarship to study at Fisk. She continued her education and wrote her first large work, a choral cantata called *Sir Olaf and the Erl King's Daughter*.
- Undine graduated from Fisk in 1926. She began her career in education and accepted a job leading the music program for the public schools in Goldsboro, North Carolina.
- At 20, she took a position at Virginia State College (now University). Early in her career, she commuted to Columbia University in New York to complete a master's degree. The new music and ideas that sprang from the Harlem Renaissance movement happening in New York inspired her.
- Although Undine thought of herself as a teacher rather than a composer at this time, she wrote many works for her piano students and the choirs at Virginia State. Highlights include choral arrangements of the spirituals "I'm Going Home," "Is There Anybody Here That Loves My Jesus?" and a vocal solo setting of "Set Down, Servant."
- In the 1950s, Moore started to shift her focus from teaching to composing. She learned about the current trends in classical music and applied them to her own work.
- Undine combined the music of her African American heritage with her classical music training in her compositions. She wrote music in many styles, ranging from choral arrangements of spirituals she learned as a child, to atonal experimental instrumental works.
- During the 1960s, Moore was an activist for civil rights. She also advocated for the inclusion of Black music in school curriculums. She co-founded the Black Music Center at Virginia State in 1968 to educate the public about African American musicians. The Center organized lectures and performances by Black musicians. She felt that founding this organization was one of her most significant accomplishments.
- Undine visited Africa in the early 1970s. She was moved by her experiences there and was particularly disturbed by the South African system of racial segregation called apartheid. She responded by writing a trio for violin, cello, and piano. Named "Soweto" after a South African township, this sophisticated work uses the twelve-tone composition technique.
- After 40 years of teaching, Moore retired from Virginia State in 1972. In retirement, Moore continued composing, traveling, lecturing on Black composers, and serving as a visiting professor.
- Undine is often called the "Dean of Black Women Composers" out of respect for her many years of teaching and composing.
- In 1981, Moore's *Scenes from the Life of a Martyr* (a large work for chorus, soloists, narrator, and orchestra based on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) premiered at Carnegie Hall. It was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Music, making Undine the first African American woman ever nominated for that award.
- Moore died in 1989. She wrote over 100 pieces of music, but only 26 were published during her lifetime. Her most famous compositions are written for choirs and rooted in traditional spirituals.

"One of the most evil effects of racism in my time was the limits it placed upon the aspirations of Blacks so that though I have been 'making up' and creating music all my life, in my childhood or even in college, I would not have thought of calling myself a composer or aspiring to be one."

— Undine Smith Moore



Composer Connections

Undine spent decades as a teacher, and among her most notable students was the jazz pianist and composer Billy Taylor. Taylor wrote “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free” in 1963, and it became a revered anthem of the civil rights movement. Another of her students was the songwriter Phil Medley, who co-wrote the 1960s hit song “Twist and Shout.”

Blending her classical music training with her African American heritage is a hallmark of Moore’s career. She stated that her musical inspiration came from two sources: Johann Sebastian Bach and African American spirituals.



Listening Lab

Daniel, Daniel, Servant of the Lord

This piece, probably her best-known work, is based on a song Moore heard her mother sing at home while working. Her arrangement is for an eight-part a cappella chorus. Notice how the choir shifts from being the main focus during the refrains to accompanying the soloist during the verses.

Before I’d Be a Slave

This solo piano piece was written in 1953 and is an example of atonal music, a style of writing that includes a lot of dissonance (a lack of harmony). It is full of intense emotions, from loud and crashing chords to beautiful, quiet moments, reflecting African American struggles. Listen for the sudden shifts between loud and soft sections and how they create a sense of emotional contrast.

Scenes from the Life of a Martyr

A powerful and emotionally charged work that tells the story of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., this oratorio is written for narrator, chorus, soloists, and orchestra. It is divided into four sections depicting stages of Dr. King’s life: 1. Childhood; 2. Young adulthood; 3. Rise to fame; and 4. Death and legacy. The *libretto*, or text, includes Biblical passages, spirituals, and poems. In the movement called “Martin’s Lament,” notice how the repeated notes of the melody make the listener focus on the emotion of the text.

“It suddenly dawned on me that the songs my mother sang while cooking dinner, the melodies my father hummed after work moved me very deeply ... It was these spirituals which I wanted first to arrange for chorus. In making these arrangements, my aim was not to make something 'better' than what was sung. I thought them so beautiful that I wanted to have them experienced in a variety of ways—by concert choirs, soloists, and by instrumental groups.”

— Undine Smith Moore

Reflect

What was Undine's role in promoting diversity and inclusion in classical music, and how did she inspire future generations of musicians?

What impact did Moore's experiences as a teacher have on her approach to composing, and how did she balance these two passions?

Writing Prompt

Imagine you are Undine Smith Moore as a young girl growing up in the segregated South. How would you feel about the limitations and challenges you faced in pursuing your dream of becoming a composer? How can we use empathy to better understand the experiences of others who face obstacles?
