

EPISODE 4: Margaret Bonds and MLK

Spirituals, Margaret Bonds, and Montgomery Variations

STUDENT LEARNING GOALS:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of the spiritual.
- Students will read and listen to the life and influences of American composer Margaret Bonds.
- Students will learn about the background and inspiration of Bonds' Montgomery Variations

ACTIVITY 1: 20-25 MIN

- Ask students if they have a favorite song? Have they ever heard a song that moved them or made them happy, sad, ect?

-Ask students what they think of when they hear the term, "spiritual"? Students can respond orally, write down, or record responses.

-Define a "spiritual" is a religious folk song associated with the enslavement of Africans in America and one of the most significant forms of American folk song. Spirituals served as a way to express how individuals or communities were feeling.

-Play "Swing low, sweet chariot from the Fisk Jubilee Singers"

-Fisk Jubilee Singers background: Six months after the end of the Civil War, Fisk University was founded in Nashville, Tennessee to offer quality education to newly freed slaves. The school had financial trouble and the school's treasurer heard students singing songs he had never heard. He gathered 9 students and toured the united states hoping to make enough money to save the school. "The singers struggled at first, but before long, they traveled throughout the United States and Europe moving audiences to tears" introducing the american spiritual to the world. - [Fisk University Website](#)

-Teacher passes out listening guide for two versions of "Wade in the water".

-Play and listen to "Wade in the Water" by the Fisk jubilee singers before students learn about the lyrics and write/respond/record about what you hear and how it makes you feel.

-Read/listen and learn the meaning behind the lyrics and then play again and write/respond/record about what you hear and how it makes you feel.

-Play and listen to "Troubled Water" from Margaret Bonds write/respond/record what you hear and how it makes you feel.

ACTIVITY 2: 25-30 MIN

Composer Spotlight: Margaret Bonds (1913-1972) - Read individually or as a class (make voice recording for students to listen to)

Margaret Bonds began her career in a time when few African-American women could aspire to join the music profession. Bonds became well known for both classical and popular music and she wrote not only arrangements for spirituals, but also original solo songs, classical instrumental works, and film music.

She studied at Chicago's Northwestern University and became the first black soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Although she wasn't able to use her university's library due to racial segregation, she

discovered poetry by poet Langston Hughes. They worked closely together setting music to his poems, creating art songs, and versions of spirituals.

After Bonds' death in 1972, her daughter, Djane Richardson, was caretaker for her music. In 2011, after Djane passed away, boxes of her music were passed to a bookseller who tried to get rid of the music. Montgomery Variations and other pieces by Bonds were found in 2017 "next to a dumpster, waiting to be thrown out."

-Ask students to reflect on Margaret Bonds spotlight by writing/responding/recording:

- What were some of Margaret Bonds' successes?
- What were some of her challenges?

Montgomery Variations

Bonds composed "Montgomery Variations" in the wake of the 1963 bombing of Birmingham, Alabama's 16th Street Baptist Church which was a center of Black organizing for equal rights. The attack injured dozens of church members and killed four young girls. Five days later, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a touching and forceful eulogy, calling it "one of the most viscous and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity."



Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. King was a leader of the Civil Rights Movement protesting against the discrimination of African Americans and for equality for all peoples. After facing death threats, violence, and even jail-time, Dr. King and the other leaders helped the federal government to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making discrimination by race, color, gender, or religion illegal.

King organized the Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery. After many attempts and setbacks, the marchers finally made it from Selma on March 7th to Montgomery, the capital city of Alabama, on March 24th. This march, as well as other events across the nation, led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in August, five months after the Freedom March. The Freedom March inspired Margaret to write "Montgomery Variations".

Margaret Bonds wrote her own program notes, and these are as follows:

"The Montgomery Variations" is a group of freestyle variations based on the Negro Spiritual theme, "I want Jesus to Walk with Me." This piece was written in the same form as Bach constructed some of his pieces.

-Play ["I want Jesus to walk with me" by Fisk Jubilee Singers](#) and then the [first movement of Montgomery Variations](#).

ACTIVITY 3: 20-25 MIN

- Have students respond/write/record: Why would "Montgomery Variations" be considered a spiritual?
- Have students listen/read/discuss lyrics to "this little light of mine".
- Have students write/respond/record an example from their own life where "this little light of mine" would help express how they were feeling or be the soundtrack (i.e. "This little light of mine" is a positive, hopeful, and empowering song so it would help me express how I feel when I'm getting ready to do something difficult.)

Links, Resources, and Recommendations:

Audio:

[Fisk Singers - "Wade in the Water"](#)

[Margaret Bonds - "Troubled Water"](#)

[Margaret Bonds - Montgomery Variations](#)

[Fisk Singers - "I want Jesus to walk with me"](#)

Resource:

[Fisk University Website](#)