

The Mills College Music Department and
the Center for Contemporary Music present

Mills Music Now 2021-2022

Samantha Ege

Dewing Piano Recital

Jeannik Méquet Littlefield Concert Hall

April 3, 2022 3:00 pm

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Dewing Piano Recital

Margaret Bonds:

Spiritual Suite

Valley of the Bones

The Bells

Troubled Water

Florence Price:

Fantasie Nègre No. 1 in E Minor

Zenobia Powell Perry:

Homage

Betty Jackson King:

Four Seasonal Sketches

Spring Intermezzo

Summer Interlude

Autumn Dance

Winter Holiday

Nora Holt:

Negro Dance

Intermission

Vítězslava Kaprálová:

Sonata Appassionata, Op. 6

Maestoso

Theme and Variations

Florence Price:

Fantasie Nègre No. 2 in G Minor

*The Dewing Piano Recital Series is made possible by a legacy gift
from pianist Janet Dewing, a Mills graduate of the class of 1927.*

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Spiritual Suite, Margaret Bonds (1913 - 1972)

Margaret Bonds was a child prodigy and daughter of the Black Chicago Renaissance. Her music teachers included her mother Estella Bonds, who was an influential community figure in Chicago. Margaret also studied under Florence Price, William Dawson, and other prominent names in the Black classical scene. The Bonds family home was open to the community as a rehearsal space, intellectual salon, and place of refuge for those in need. The Bonds' circles included composers such as Will Marion Cook, performers such as the soprano Abbie Mitchell and poets such as Langston Hughes. Though an accomplished concert pianist, Margaret Bonds also rose to prominence with her own compositions, representing a new generation of Black Renaissance composers.

Spiritual Suite for solo piano (1967) comprises three movements that draw upon specific spirituals. "Valley of the Bones" is based on "Dry Bones," "The Bells" is based on "Peter Go Ring Dem Bells," and "Troubled Water" is based on "Wade in the Water." Bonds encases the spiritual melodies in jazzy chords and, at times, builds up to moments of gushing Romanticism. Yet, the distinctive spiritual melodies ground each movement in the unromantic reality of African American history. Although Bonds was no longer living in Chicago when she wrote the *Spiritual Suite*, the influence of women like Nora Holt and Florence Price is undeniable. Like her predecessors, she brings together Black vernacular idioms and classical conventions. She finds inspiration in the past, and shapes this into a distinct voice that suggests hope for the future.

Fantasia Nègre No. 1 in E Minor, Florence Price (1887 - 1953)

Florence Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887. William Grant Still was one of her childhood friends. Price's musical education began at the age of 3 with piano lessons from her mother. At the age of 19, she graduated with the highest honours earning a double major in piano teaching and organ performance from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Five years after moving to Chicago, Price entered the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker Music Contest, which was a national competition for African American composers. Price came first in the piano composition category with her Sonata in E Minor and also won the symphonic category with her Symphony in E Minor. Price became the first African American woman composer to achieve national success when the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered her winning Wanamaker work in 1933.

Fantasia Nègre No. 1 in E minor (1929) begins with a slow, stately introduction, replete with Romantic pianistic gestures, from broad chords and cascading notes to rapid flourishes and pensive phrases. The main melody comes from the spiritual 'Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass.' It features the idiomatic musical language of the enslaved and circles the five familiar notes: E G A B D. The theme is always recognisable, but its accompaniment varies with each iteration. Sometimes we hear thin lines, other times we hear thick textures. Sometimes the accompaniment aligns to the beat, other times it dances around it. The fantasia's folk-dance evocations led to its premiere as a ballet in December 1932. Renaissance woman Katherine Dunham led her troupe of Black female dancers. Price and Margaret Bonds (to whom this fantasia is dedicated) played a two-piano version for the occasion.

Homage, Zenobia Powell Perry (1908 - 2004)

As a socially conscious and civically aware practitioner, Zenobia Powell Perry was well attuned to the intellectual and creative developments of the Black Renaissance and the activities of its key players. Born in Boley, Oklahoma, Perry pursued the serious study of classical music, which led to her attending private classes with the famed Robert Nathaniel Dett through the 1920s and 30s. Dett inspired Perry to begin notating her musical ideas; he was, in fact, an inspiration to many

classical practitioners (Black and white) during this time and a sought after composer, pedagogue, and performer. Perry went on to study with William L. Dawson, one of the great composers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the modernist composer Darius Milhaud.

Perry composed *Homage* (1990) as a tribute to William Dawson for his 90th birthday. The melodic theme derives from one his favourite spirituals: "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned." *Homage* begins with a solo melody, akin to a solo vocal part, that follows the shape of the original spiritual tune. The tempo picks up slightly as more musical lines enter. The chordal textures thicken and the melody begins to wander, retaining some of the original shape, but largely venturing into new directions. The middle section increases in emotional intensity, introducing further chromaticism, before mellowing and drawing the work to a peaceful close. Though a short composition, *Homage* is full of intriguing cultural inspirations and musical developments, making it a fitting tribute to one of the giants of the Harlem Renaissance.

Four Seasonal Sketches, Betty Jackson King (1928 - 1994)

Betty Jackson King was born and raised in Chicago. She belonged to a very musical family. Her mother, Gertrude Smith Jackson, was deeply involved in musical life in the city, and together with Betty's sister Catherine, they formed the Jacksonian Trio, touring Chicago and beyond. King's father, Reverend Fred D. Jackson, was very supportive of his wife's and children's musical pursuits, notably assisting Gertrude in organizing her own opera company. With vocal music and performance being very much a part of King's upbringing, it is no surprise that she went on to study voice, piano, and compositions at Chicago's Roosevelt University, which is where she earned her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Musicologist Helen Walker-Hill remarks upon how the close harmonic singing style of the Jacksonian Trio influenced Betty's own compositions. Indeed, we can hear vocal influences in her *Four Seasonal Sketches* (1955), such as the flowery lyricism of the opening "Spring Intermezzo," the warm harmonic colourings of "Summer Interlude," the melodic catchiness and singability of "Autumn Dance," and the close harmonies and crisp dissonances of "Winter Holiday." Little has been documented about the performance history of this work, but one striking detail is that she dedicates *Four Seasonal Sketches* to her Chicago colleague and friend Geneva Handy Southall. Dr. Southall was a pianist and pioneer in Black music scholarship. This dedication therefore demonstrates the collegiality and reverence that defined the dynamics between the women of the Black Renaissance.

Negro Dance, Nora Holt (ca. 1885 - 1974)

Nora Holt was born in Kansas City and died in Los Angeles. As a music critic, performer, scholar, and socialite, Holt rose to prominence in the era of both the Harlem and Black Chicago Renaissance. In 1918, she became the first person of African descent in the USA to attain a master's degree. She earned this at the Chicago Musical College. For her thesis composition, she presented an orchestral piece called *Rhapsody on Negro Themes*. She composed over 200 works including orchestral music, chamber music and art songs. Unfortunately, many of them were lost. Only two survive: the art song "The Sandman" and *Negro Dance* (1921) for solo piano.

One of the earliest known Chicago performances of *Negro Dance* was 100 years ago. She would perform this piece in the lecture-recitals that she gave to the younger generation. Through *Negro Dance*, she would highlight the importance of musical study and the beauty of Black American folk traditions. *Negro Dance* draws inspiration from African American antebellum rural dance music, most notably the pattin' juba. As Solomon Northup described in *Twelve Years a Slave*, "the

patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.” These percussive, rhythmic influences can be heard in the lively left-hand patterns that accompany the jaunty melody. They give us a glimpse into how Holt might have approached Black musical idioms in her wider compositions.

Sonata Appassionata, Op. 6, Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915-1940)

It would be easy to define the young Czech composer Vítězslava Kaprálová by the men in her life. After all, her father, composer Václav Kaprál, was a student of Leoš Janáček; one her professors, Vítězslav Novák, was a student of Dvořák; and her mentor and lover, Bohuslav Martinů, paved the way for Czech modernism. Yet Kaprálová forged her own identity, earning accolades on a par with her male counterparts. Kaprálová excelled in composition and conducting and became the first woman to graduate from the Brno Conservatory. Her works were premiered by renowned musical institutions such as the Czech Philharmonic and the BBC Orchestra, with Kaprálová at the helm as their conductor. These performances garnered worldwide attention. However, her life was cut short by a severe bout of illness. She died at the age of 25.

Kaprálová composed *Sonata Appassionata, Op. 6* (1933) during her time at the Brno Conservatory. The work is in two movements: the first is a harmonically rich movement that undulates beneath an ever-searching melody and is framed either side by a majestic densely-textured theme. The harmonies in the exposition are awash with impressionistic colours. The development amps up the impassioned energy before resettling into the main themes of the opening movement. The second movement opens with a simple folk-like theme with sparse accompaniment. The theme evolves over the course of six variations and climaxes with a devilish fugue and a return to the majestic chords that open the sonata's first movement.

Fantasia Nègre No. 2 in G Minor, Florence Price (1887 - 1953)

The performance history of *Fantasia Nègre No. 2 in G minor* (1932) is hard to trace, but we can imagine that Price wrote the second fantasia in a similar vein to the first fantasia. She opens with a slow, majestic musical statement before introducing a melodic theme that is, again, based on the same pentatonic scale, but transposed into a different key: G B^b C D F. The melody is Price's original creation. She evokes the spiritual sound world, using the five-note construction to convey the tone of the mournful and hopeful. Like the first fantasia, the form is not a strict one. What follows is a fluid theme and variations: the main melody is always identifiable, but it ebbs and flows in a sea of musical ideas. Price invokes the language of the German Romantic tradition, as her use of rippling figurations, rich harmonies, and dense chords show. The second fantasia gives us a glimpse into the more intense and introspective side of Price's compositional personality.

Dr. Samantha Ege

Dr Samantha Ege belongs to a new generation of practitioners who are redefining classical music and illuminating the diversity of its past, present, and future. Ege released her debut album, *Four Women: Music for solo piano by Price, Kaprálová, Bilisland and Bonds* (Wave Theory Records) in May 2018. She released *Fantasia Nègre: The Piano Music of Florence Price* in March 2021 (Lorelt). *Fantasia Nègre* received critical acclaim in BBC Music Magazine, The Telegraph, New York Times and Washington Post. She gave the world premiere performance of *Fantasia Nègre* at the London Festival of American Music in September 2021, followed by the second UK performance of *Fantasia Nègre* and the UK premiere of Vítězslava Kaprálová's *Sonata Appassionata* at her Barbican debut in November 2021. Her latest album is called *Black Renaissance Woman: Piano Music by Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, Nora Holt, Betty Jackson King, and Helen Hagan* (Lorelt). Ege is the Lord Crewe Junior Research Fellow in Music at Lincoln College, University of Oxford.

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ABOUT MILLS COLLEGE

Mills College was founded in 1852 in Benicia, California, as a Young Ladies Seminary. Cyrus and Susan Mills purchased the site of the present 127-acre campus and built Mills Hall in 1871. Mills became a chartered college for women in 1885. Mills offers a bachelor's degree in music with emphasis on Performance, Composition, Electronic Media, or History/Theory as well as master's degrees in Composition, Electronic Music and Recording Media, and Performance and Literature. The Music Department includes the world-renowned Center for Contemporary Music. At Mills students can study traditional and contemporary music in a creative environment that fosters experimentalism. The Department's faculty includes composers Tomeka Reid, James Fei, Zeena Parkins, Laetitia Sonami, Steed Cowart; scholars David Bernstein and Nalini Ghuman; and performers including William Winant, Jennifer Ellis, Kate Campbell, Molly Holm, Robert Schwartz, Hrafnhildur Atladottir, Hank Dutt, Kala Ramnath, and Gianna Abondolo. For information on studying music at Mills, phone (510) 430-2135 (Undergraduate Admission) or (510) 430-3309 (Graduate Studies), or contact the Music Department Administrative Assistant, Kristian Dahlbom, at (510) 430-2171. Brendan Glasson (510) 430-2336 is Technical Director of the Center for Contemporary Music. The Concert Coordinator is Steed Cowart, (510) 430-2334.