



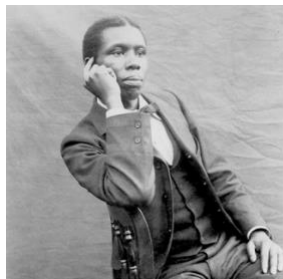
**African American Song Recital Project**  
**BU CFA SOM Departments of Voice and Collaborative Piano**  
**April 2021**

**Program Notes – Shiela Kibbe**

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Art songs by African American composers and composers of the African diaspora are rich and diverse in poetic heritage, harmonic language, and compositional style. This project has introduced pianists and singers to a catalogue of repertoire that is immensely rewarding to performers as well as listeners.

Although African American composers have set texts by many authors and poets, they have been especially drawn to the words of African American writers. Three of the most influential African American poets were Paul Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes.



**Paul Laurence Dunbar** (1872-1906) was the first African American poet to gain national recognition. Born to parents who were freed slaves in Kentucky, Dunbar's writing often referred to their stories of plantation life. He published poems in Standard English as well as in dialect; his poetry using dialect attracted the most attention. The H. Leslie Adams song *Sence You Went Away* is a beautiful example of the softened diction used in Dunbar's dialect poetry.



**James Weldon Johnson** (1871-1938) penned the words to *Lift Every Voice and Sing* in 1900. Set to music by his brother Rosamund, this glorious song became commonly known as the Negro National Anthem, and is sung today in churches, at sporting events, and as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Johnson was the First African American to pass the bar exam in Florida, and spent his professional life as an educator, a lawyer, the US Consul to Venezuela, and an officer in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).



**Langston Hughes** (1902-1967) was one of the principal founders of the movement that became known as the Harlem Renaissance. As African Americans left the south and traveled north looking for jobs and hoping for more hospitable environs, Harlem became a mecca for Black artists. A community of musicians, writers, and visual artists began to give voice to the story of the African American experience and its representation in American culture, laying the foundation for the civil rights movement that continues through the present day. Hughes' writing used vernacular expressions to share stories of the Black experience and raise issues of racial justice and political radicalism.



**Harry Burleigh** (1866-1949) is perhaps most recognized for his arrangements of African American Spirituals. In addition to his compositional pursuits, he was active as a church musician and baritone soloist, appearing in US performances of works by Samuel Coleridge Taylor. Burleigh's epic song *Ethiopia Saluting the Colors* presents Walt Whitman's poem describing an interaction between a newly freed slave woman and a northern Union soldier who marches past. Wondering at her enthusiasm, the soldier realizes that there is a world of difference in their backgrounds and experiences.



**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (1875-1912) the composer was named after and inspired by the poet of the same name. Born and educated in England, he heard the Fisk Jubilee Singers on their 1899 European tour and became enamored of African American folk music. He incorporated ideas from that genre into his compositions, and the popularity of his orchestral / choral works led to the formation of the Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Society in the US. Promoted and supported by this group, he enjoyed three successful tours throughout the United States, and was invited to the White House by President Theodore Roosevelt.

*We include Samuel Coleridge-Taylor in this recital as an important song composer and an influential musician from the African diaspora. His compositional style incorporated elements of African melodies over romantic harmonies from the world of Dvorak and Brahms. He was befriended and supported by African American communities during his tours throughout the US, and sympathized deeply with their plight.*

**Florence Price** (1887-1953) was the first African American female to have a work performed by a major symphony orchestra in the U.S.. In 1933, her First Symphony was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She had a close relationship with singer Marian Anderson, who performed her song 'My Soul's Been Anchored in de Lord' on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday 1939 in a concert organized by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.



**Undine Smith Moore** (1904-1989) was the first graduate of Fisk College to be awarded a scholarship to the prestigious Juilliard School of Music. During her 40-year teaching career at Virginia State College (now University), she was the proud co-founder of the Black Music Center on that campus, aiming to “share the contributions of Black people to the music of the United States.” Composer of more than 100 works, only 26 of which were published during her lifetime, she is lovingly known as the “Dean of Black Women Composers.”

**Howard Swanson** (1907-1978) attended the Cleveland Institute of Music and studied in Paris with famed composition pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. Praised specifically for his songs, a comparison was made with the great French composer of mélodie, Gabriel Fauré, and Swanson was sometimes referred to as the “American Fauré” for the refinement, elegance, and sophistication of his art songs. He was personal friends with the poet Langston Hughes, and his songs are considered by many to be the best musical settings of Hughes’ poetry.



**Margaret Bonds** (1913-1972) studied composition with Florence Price as a child, and was, in turn, a childhood teacher of American composer Ned Rorem. She was a deeply talented pianist, and in 1935 gave the premiere performance of Price’s Piano Concerto with the Women’s Symphony Orchestra of Chicago. Active as a song composer, she frequently set texts by Langston Hughes, and also composed the famous setting of *He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands* for Leontyne Price in 1963.



H. Leslie Adams (b.1932) is compositionally best known for his art songs. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, he attended Oberlin Conservatory of Music, simultaneously studying piano, voice, and composition. During the last years of his life, Langston Hughes corresponded with H. Leslie Adams and granted permission for use of several of his poems in song settings. Adams' compositional style is characterized by arching melodies, lush harmonic language, and patterned accompaniments.



Adolphus Hailstork (b.1941), originally from NY state, was educated at Howard University, Manhattan School of Music, and the University of Michigan. He studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. A prolific composer in all genres, Hailstork has been the winner of several national and international composition prizes and has enjoyed performances of his works by major US symphonies. His songs are characterized by piquant harmonic language and evocative text setting.



Julius Williams (b.1954) is an active conductor and bountiful composer. He is the winner of numerous prizes in both fields of expertise, and has worked with organizations across the country as guest artist and resident conductor. His song *A Song* is an exquisite setting of a Paul Dunbar poem – the same words heard earlier in this program as set by H. Leslie Adams in his song *Love Memory*.