

Programmatic Essay in Support of Hartford Chorale's and Hartford Symphony Orchestra's
February 23, 2023 Connecticut Premiere Performance of two works by

Margaret Bonds

The Montgomery Variations

For orchestra

and

Credo

Text by W.E.B. Du Bois

For chorus, soprano and bass soloists, and orchestra

Programmatic essay by Richard H. Wilson, Jr., Ph.D.

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Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two Black leaders of overlapping but distinctly different views were deeply influential among African Americans.¹ Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), born a slave, educated at Hampton Institute, founder of Tuskegee Institute and the National Business League for support of Black entrepreneurs, preached what has been called *accommodationism*: acceptance of white supremacy and segregation as facts of life, and, through discipline, hard work, and education, acquiring the skills necessary to prosper and feel satisfaction in that world. W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), B.A. from Fisk University, Ph.D. from Harvard, faculty member at multiple universities, cofounder of the NAACP, “a man of aristocratic bearing and cultivated tastes,”² took up the mantle of Frederick Douglass in advocating for unrestricted participation by Blacks in the national body politic, as full-fledged, not second-class, citizens. In his first major work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he opposed Washington’s accommodationism in principle, argued for the value of higher education for what he called the “talented tenth,” the Black intelligentsia, whom he urged to become leaders for the entire African American community, and articulated the concept of “double consciousness,” describing “this American world” as one which

yields [the African American] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-

consciousness... [as] an American, [as] a Negro... two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³

Margaret Bonds grew up in a household and community deeply informed by both Washington's and Du Bois's competing philosophies in complex synthesis. Her parents and their friends, having attained success in Washington's terms—they were educated, distinguished in their fields, financially secure—were also inspired by Du Bois's vision, using their talents and education as leaders of the entire Black community.

Monroe Alphus Majors, Margaret's father, was a distinguished physician, medical researcher, poet, journalist, and medical/social/political activist; her mother, Estella Bonds, was a well-known pianist, organist, choir director, and teacher. The two divorced when Margaret was four years old. Estella was well known for years for her Sunday afternoon musicales, attended by artistic luminaries of Black society. She was also a founding member of the National Association of Black Musicians, an organization in which Margaret was actively involved throughout her life.

Margaret, endowed with precocious musical talent as both pianist and composer, was thus also blessed in her youth with parents with the means and inclination to support and encourage it, and a social environment filled with shining role models, both in the arts and in social activism, and ample encouragement to excel at both.

Bonds's first sustained encounter with discrimination and prejudice began when she entered Northwestern University in 1929, at age 16, where she ultimately was to earn both her bachelor's and master's degrees in piano and composition. Because there was no housing at the university for Black students, she commuted each day from Chicago to Evanston on the train, using the time to write down some of her musical ideas. The dining hall would not serve her. The school swimming pool was closed to Black women.⁴

It was during this difficult period that she first encountered the poetry of Langston Hughes. She wrote:

I was in this prejudiced university, this terribly prejudiced place... I was looking in the basement of the Evanston Public Library where they had the poetry. I came in contact with this wonderful poem, "The Negro speaks of Rivers," and I'm sure it helped my feelings of security. Because in that poem he [Langston Hughes] tells how great the Black man is. And if I had any misgivings, which I would have to have — here you are in a setup where the restaurants won't serve you and you're going to college, you're sacrificing, trying to get through school — and I know that poem helped save me.⁵

Hughes was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance in the tens and twenties, a movement championing Black pride and culture — in many ways, an extension of Du Bois's ideas. In music, this meant enthusiastically proclaiming the inherent value and worth of ragtime, blues, jazz, and Negro spirituals. Bonds set many of Hughes's poems to music (including "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"). Through his poetry, and later, through a lifelong close friendship with him—"we were like brother and sister, like blood relatives"⁶—as well as with many other artists and writers who were part of her circle during her teens and beyond, Margaret confirmed and

deepened her sense of the importance of valuing and fostering the cultural and musical heritage that was her birthright.

Though she began composing at a young age—and composing was her true passion and vocation—Bonds made a name for herself initially as a pianist. This began during her years at Northwestern: in 1933 she became the first Black performer to solo with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in a program that also featured the *Symphony in E Minor* by Florence Price, a gifted Black female composer who was a family friend and role model for Bonds. And in October 1934, just after completing her master’s degree, she was the soloist in Price’s *Piano Concerto in D Minor* with the Women’s Symphony Orchestra of Chicago. Reviews for both performances were uniformly glowing.

Despite much of her work remaining unpublished—a particularly bitter fact of life for a composer of that era who was both Black *and* a woman—over the ensuing decades Bonds had a successful career as a composer, pianist, and teacher, based first in Chicago, later in New York, and finally in Los Angeles. She was active in music education for African American youth throughout her life, and promoted other Black musicians any way she could. Her own compositions were performed regularly by Black musicians and made inroads into white musical culture as well. Indeed, by 1967 she was renowned enough so that Chicago Mayor Richard Daley proclaimed January 31 as “Margaret Bonds Day.”

Bonds’s music spanned genres: she wrote so-called classical music in many forms—among them, her one surviving orchestral work, *The Montgomery Variations*, and four large-scale choral works, of which three survive complete, including *Credo*. She also set spirituals for piano and voice for distinguished singers to perform and record, composed musicals, and wrote pop and big-band songs for Tin Pan Alley.

A part of Margaret Bonds’s genius lay in her uncanny ability to blend the spirit, soul, and sound of African-American traditional music with European compositional forms and traditions, each part of this synthesis contributing to a whole that is fresh, beautiful, new, and often deeply moving. *The Montgomery Variations* is her orchestral masterpiece, and brilliantly showcases her abilities in this regard. As with *Credo*—her choral masterpiece—melodies are never less than lovely (and beautifully fitting the text, if there is one); harmonies, rhythms, colors, and forms range from mainstream classical, to cinematic, to tin pan alley, to bluesy, to gospel, to jazzy, flowing seamlessly from one to the other; textures move freely from straightforward homophonic to “learned” contrapuntal, and everything in between; emotions are rarely so straightforward as happy or sad, but more nuanced, more lived: sad/happy/serious/playful/worried/brave/afraid/tender/tough/suffering/ecstatic and so on—opposite and complex *simultaneous* feelings at play, as in all great art, in a way that is entirely her own.

Hughes’s death in 1967 seems to have prompted Bonds’s rather sudden move to Los Angeles, leaving her husband of 27 years and 21-year-old daughter behind. (According to Djane Richardson, her daughter, Margaret had wanted the two of them to move with her, but the work of Margaret’s husband, Lawrence Richardson, would not permit it.) She found work that stimulated her, at the Inner City Cultural Center and Repertory Theater, where she worked on theater productions and founded her own music school. According to one scholar, “she [also]

composed prolifically for movies and television (many of these titles uncredited) as well as concertizing and writing concert music of virtually every variety.”⁷ Still, while in Los Angeles, her lifelong tendency towards depressive episodes seems to have increased, probably exacerbated by compensatory excessive drinking. Some conjecture that the latter habit shortened her life. She died suddenly of a heart attack in 1972 at age 59.

Margaret Bonds had never been tidy about maintaining her collection of her compositions. Her life, often on the road, as a musician, wife, and mother was hard enough without adding librarianship to her load. Often, for example, she would leave her scores in the hands of her collaborators in various cities around the country. As a result, many of her documented compositions have been lost. Furthermore, of the scores she did possess, some came dangerously close to being lost as well, following her death. Djane and Lawrence collected the manuscripts they found in her apartment. Those from Lawrence ended up in Yale University’s rare-book library, purchased by them from a book dealer in 2012. (How the materials made their way from Lawrence to that dealer is unclear.) Djane initially kept the items she had retrieved in (or in a storage unit near) her apartment in New York. When she died in 2011—like her mother, without a will—

this collection passed first to a landlord and then to a bookseller, who took it to a book fair in Washington, D.C. These papers... missed being taken to a landfill by a matter of hours after they failed to sell and ended up next to a dumpster.⁸

Rescued by a book dealer,⁹ they ultimately landed in the special-collections library at Georgetown University.

Among the treasures they contained were the complete composer’s autograph scores for both Bonds works on this program, *The Montgomery Variations* and *Credo*.

Tonight’s Program

In the view of John Michael Cooper, editor of the editions of both the Bonds works to be performed tonight—and author of a forthcoming book about them—the Chorale’s programming this evening is both “historic” and exciting.

Margaret Bonds heard the *Montgomery Variations* performed by orchestra precisely once—and that was in a concert that also included the *Credo*. In other words, what Hartford is doing is, in some poetic sense, recreating the only concert in which Margaret Bonds heard both of her racial-justice orchestral manifestos performed in tandem with one another. (That concert happened in San Francisco in 1967)...

It (the historical perspective) really is quite amazing... while it's possible that someone has already combined these two works on a single program, I've heard nothing of it if they have.

I’m quite excited about it...¹⁰

The Montgomery Variations (1964)

In 1963 Margaret Bonds made a concert tour of the American South with baritone Eugene Brice and a group called the Manhattan Melodaires.¹¹ Moved, we may surmise, by her experiences, both with the hope and promise of the burgeoning civil rights movement and the fierce backlash against it, she began sketching musical responses to the former, trying to convey in music the determination, resolve, and faith of the courageous individuals fighting non-violently for their rights, and the newfound sense of expectation their efforts were engendering.

On Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, after Bonds had returned from her tour, someone set off a bomb at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls.¹² The horror of this event, as well as her reflections on how one might properly respond to such hatred, seem to have galvanized her to complete *The Montgomery Variations* in 1964, dedicating the work to Martin Luther King, Jr.

There is an overall program to the seven movements: an arc from the hope, determination, prayer, and action that drove the victorious Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56; to a sense of a new beginning in the South, flowing from that victory, as well as from numerous other difficult, successful civil protests; to a musical depiction of an ordinary Sunday morning shattered by a bomb; to despair and grief; to a hoped-for reconciliation and redemption rooted in God's love. Each movement is a free variation on the same theme: the Negro spiritual "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me." The hymn is a powerful cry from the heart for heavenly support during times of trial, both expected and welcome (the effort and risk implicit in the bus boycott, and indeed, in so many other civil-rights protests of the era) and unexpected and bitterly sad (the bombing). Its music—every bit as compelling as its words—thus serves as an eloquent expression of the muscular, honest, undefeatable faith that underlay the entire civil rights movement, and as a structural through-line for Bonds's work.

Perhaps the title of the piece—which, somewhat unusually, doesn't reference the theme being varied (the spiritual), but, rather, the city in which the events and experiences depicted musically had their beginning—is meant to suggest that all those events and experiences were, in a sense, "variations" on the determination, faith, and organized, united action, so strikingly depicted in the first three movements, that first burst into full flower in that city.

Every movement in *The Montgomery Variations* is in D (minor, mostly, but some major). When the theme is stated outright—which happens more (and more frequently) in some movements than others—it is instantly recognizable, not overtly "developed" very much. Most of the variations of the title are thus located in the richly varied accompaniments, even among thematic repetitions within a single movement, rather than in alterations to the melody itself. Distinguished American composer Ned Rorem, a piano student of Bonds's in his youth and a lifelong friend, reviewed the score and seems to have been bothered by these qualities, regarding the end result as a bit too static for his taste. While he found no flaw in the orchestration, praising it in a letter to her as "shimmering and foolproof," he suggested that she consider rewriting the work as a shorter, single-movement fantasy. Bonds was undeterred. She wrote back to him confidently that she felt she had given the spiritual's melody the right amount of "handling"—

neither too much nor too little.¹³ She respected it, and its cultural resonances, too much to alter it overmuch. (See her program note below.)

The degree to which the theme, stated directly, is on display varies considerably from movement to movement. There are movements where it is completely clear and intelligible, sometimes in minor, sometimes major (I, V, and, especially, VI); two movements where it doesn't appear straightforwardly at all (II and IV); one movement where it's transformed into a march (III) that still feels recognizably related (and where it also appears once, in its original version, as a quiet countermelody to the march); and one where it appears briefly twice, though it only gets about halfway through each time (VII). But every movement is nonetheless saturated, both melodically and harmonically, with motivic elements derived from the theme: patterns of ascending thirds and of descending thirds and fourths, along with various rhythmic "fingerprints," are the most common. Whether one consciously identifies them as such or not, these elements undeniably and deeply unite the work as a whole, while also serving in endlessly varied, original, and nuanced ways the distinct "program" of each individual movement. In a way, each movement, each "variation," is itself a miniature fantasy on the theme.

Here are the words of the spiritual:

I want Jesus to walk with me.
I want Jesus to walk with me;
all along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

In my trials, Lord, walk with me.
In my trials, Lord, walk with me;
when my heart is almost breaking,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me.
When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me;
when my head is bowed in sorrow,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.¹⁴

And here is Margaret Bond's own program note (slightly abridged) for a 1964 performance of her work, referring to herself in the third person, with added comments, in brackets, from this writer.¹⁵

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The "Montgomery Variations" is a group of freestyle variations based on the Negro Spiritual theme, "I want Jesus to Walk with Me." The treatment suggests the manner in which Bach constructed his partitas – a bold statement of the theme, followed by variations of the theme in the same key – major and minor.

Because of the personal meanings of the Negro spiritual themes, Margaret Bonds always avoids over-development of the melodies.

“The Montgomery Variations” were written after the composer’s visit to Montgomery, Alabama, and the surrounding area in 1963 (on tour with Eugene Brice and the Manhattan Melodaires)[...]

THE MONTGOMERY VARIATIONS

I. Decision

Under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr and SCLC, Negroes in Montgomery decided to boycott the bus company and to fight for their rights as citizens.

[After a pair of brief, dramatic tympani rolls, the melody of “I Want Jesus to Walk With Me” peals out powerfully in unison in the brass, accompanied by *ff* punctuations, like hammer blows, from the rest of the orchestra. The strings respond with a quieter commentary, then pass things to the woodwinds. Tension builds. Syncopated licks from the trumpets lead to a reprise of the brass with the melody, this time accompanied by flourishes in the woodwinds. The strings affirm; the movement ends with another hammer blow. The “Decision” of the movement’s title has been made, but not lightly; sadness and pain inform it as much as courage and resolve.]

II. Prayer Meeting

Trut [sic] to custom prayer meetings precedes [sic] their action. Prayer meetings start quietly with humble petitions to God. During the course of the meeting, members siezed [sic] with religious fervor shout and dance. Oblivious to their fellow worshippers [sic] they exhibit their love of God and their Faith in Deliverance by gesticulation, clapping and beating their feet.

[Every motive, every melody, in this movement is derived from the basic spiritual theme. That theme is varied so freely as to be almost unrecognizable. But it is there.

A rapid tambourine roll evokes night sounds, the urgency of a snake’s hiss, secrecy, and nervous excitement, all at once. It continues under a plaintive oboe solo, joined by flute, over tremolo strings; the bassoon and clarinet echo. The same foursome plays variations on the spiritual melody’s third phrase. The tempo picks up, and the rhythm becomes jazzier, dancelike; the church members are starting to move. The rapture that Bonds describes above is alluded to, but is oddly muted; perhaps the worshipers are not able to be as free as the might wish, or perhaps they’re simply emotionally constrained by the immensity of what they’re about to embark on—the bus boycott. A trombone plays a jazzy / bluesy solo. The dance resumes. The emotional high point follows, in a powerful and moving full-orchestral *tutti*, an organlike chorale whose full-volume sonority encompasses notes from the very bottom of the lowest instruments—tuba, string bass, contrabassoon—to the very top of the highest (piccolo). The first violins lower the temperature with another, improvised-sounding solo. Having traversed a remarkable range of emotions in just a few short minutes, the movement then ends quietly and contemplatively with a brief return to the opening material.]

III. March

The Spirit of the Nazarene marching with them, the Negroes of Montgomery walked to their work rather than be segregated on the buses. The entire world, symbolically with them, marches.

[The structure of this movement is very clear, requiring little additional comment. The march theme, military in character (but clearly derived from that of the spiritual; its harmony, structure, and motivic content are the same), is proclaimed over and over: first by a solo bassoon; next by the cellos, somewhat louder, along with a lovely, accompanimental commentary by the three flutes; then full-volume in the violins, in unison with the upper woodwinds; then softer again, in the English horn. (Under the English horn, quietly, in the first violin—harmonized in a hymn-like way in other strings—Bonds inserts, almost mischievously, a sprightly, even jaunty statement of the original spiritual theme, in counter-melody to the march theme, which itself is derived from that very theme! They fit together as ingeniously as a lock and key.) The accompaniment through most of these repeated statements of the march theme is punctuated, martial, one often-accented chord per beat.

The excitement in this opening section rises, then falls, along with the volume, as just described. It then rises gradually again as the march theme is, for the first time, briefly broken apart and developed. The energy builds, leading finally to a last, full-throated statement of the theme in the horns and trombone, accompanied by whirring, swirling commentary from the rest of the orchestra. The emotion finally bursts—perhaps one can maintain a military mindset only for so long, even when the cause is just—with a bluesy, chromatic interlude, led by the unison strings, over throbbing low Ds in the tympani, one per beat. A pair of bassoons briefly revisits the beginning of the theme. It all ends with a bang.]

IV. Dawn in Dixie

Dixie, the home of the Camelias known as “pink perfection,” magnolias, jasmine and Spanish moss, awakened to the fact that something new was happening in the South.

[John Michael Cooper, editor of the edition of this work used in this performance, rightly calls this movement “the emotional heart” of the work.¹⁶ It was the first movement to be composed, some years before the others. While the spiritual melody never appears literally, the thematic material here, as in other movements, is derived from it.

The structure is simple. After an eight-bar introduction, thirty measures present the materials with reduced forces—most notably, the violins and violas are silent. After a four-bar bridge, those thirty measures are then, in effect, repeated, clothed in the sonorities, and with the volume, of the full orchestra. Over the final four bars of that reiteration, a trumpet solo, improvisatory in style (but not in actuality) closes out the movement.

But there is more to say. Each of the thirty-measure sections just described is actually a paraphrase—a venerable musical term applied aptly here by Cooper¹⁷—of the thirty-two-measure spiritual melody. Like a vein of rock under a landscape, lending its shape to things, perhaps protruding here and there, somewhat bent and altered by time and nature, the spiritual melody is never directly stated, but is always implicitly present.¹⁸

Clearly Bonds meant for the “dawn” of the title to be taken metaphorically, as her note above suggests. But perhaps we may take it, to some extent, literally, too. The motives presented in the first half, in various woodwinds in succession, evoke bird calls as dawn arrives. They assemble gradually into full-fledged melodies and countermelodies, and energy and volume increase.

The opening sixteen measures—and therefore the first sixteen of the second half, too—are a passacaglia, a very old form in which a repeating bass line, usually descending, repeats slowly over multiple measures, with melodic and harmonic development above it. (Here the bass line, one note per measure, consists of the four notes D-C-B \flat -A.) The bass line loosens up in the remaining measures in both halves of the movement, and the rhythm opens up a little more, too, but the music always retains its one-harmony-per-measure character.

The full-orchestra setting of the materials in the second half allows for full-volume, full-sonority, dramatic climaxes—a musical expression of the feeling of having “awakened to something new happening in the South.” The jazzy trumpet solo that ends the movement, already mentioned, is strongly reminiscent of the trombone (especially) and first-violin-section solos in the second movement.]

V. One Sunday in the South

Children were in Sunday School learning about Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Southern “die-hards” planted a bomb and several children were killed.

[This movement is set in D major. True to its program, its themes throughout evoke childlike innocence and play, invoking several Baroque (and Baroque-sounding) dance forms to do so. A rocking, lightly syncopated, somewhat off-kilter introduction—a sort of jazzy pastorale (in 4!)—becomes the accompaniment to a singing, major-key statement of the spiritual melody in the solo trumpet.

A two-bar bridge leads, in the next section, to what is harmonically essentially a restatement of the theme—but without the melody(!)—only countermelodies (albeit counter to nothing) and accompanimental figures are presented, while the structure and harmonies of the theme are retained. The primary countermelody, which is new, is essentially a bourrée, a Renaissance/Baroque dance form, whose characteristic, playful rhythm and descending, arpeggiated line, tossed from flutes to violins and back, and ultimately to the trumpets, remain important through the rest of the movement.¹⁹ This whole section has a delightful Baroque feel to it, not just thematically but in texture and color as well (listen for those trumpets in particular).

The opening of the bourrée melody, unaccompanied, is then passed down the woodwinds from high to low over several measures, leading to yet another dance-like section, more rhythmically varied and rustic- (and still archaic-) sounding, but no less warmhearted and good-natured. A repeat of the trumpet-solo rendition of the spiritual theme, again accompanied by the bourrée, follows.

The bourrée melody is again passed down the woodwinds, though starting and ending much lower than previously (it goes all the way down to the contrabassoon). This time, however, the woodblock follows, all alone, picking up the bourrée rhythm, sounding it out over four measures.

As it does, first the tympani starts a roll, softly; in the last repeated measure the bass drum and cymbal enter very loudly; together they pound out one more bar of eight eighth-notes, with great power; the movement then ends abruptly.

The bomb has exploded.]

VI. Lament

The world was shaken by the cruelty of the Sunday School bombing. Negroes, as usual[,] leaned on their Jesus to carry them through this crisis of grief and humiliation.

[The movement consists of three slow, heart-broken statements of the spiritual's theme, without interlude. The first is set, chorale-like, in the strings, with the melody stripped of all ornamentation. A sigh of grief. Then the dynamic drops to a whisper as the theme is stated in unison strings, unaccompanied; in its second half, the line (and the volume) rises a full third above normal in a subdued cry of anguish, with some ornamentation added to the descending line. The final repetition is in the cellos and bassoons, with flowing, softly syncopated commentary from strings and woodwinds. This eloquent depiction of grief and pain ends with a brief restatement of the final phrase, followed by a hollow, open-fifth chord.]

VII. Benediction

A benign God, Father and Mother to all people, pours forth Love to His children – the good and the bad alike.

[The movement begins with a gentle, lush introduction in the strings, then an eight-measure, new theme (with a family resemblance to the spiritual melody, as always) played in the upper woodwinds. One could call it a “teardrop” theme,²⁰ remembering that tears fall in times of both suffering and joy, sometimes simultaneously. The theme begins in D minor, but moves in its second half to D's relative major, F. As it completes its first full statement and is about to repeat, the original spiritual melody sneaks in softly as a countermelody, carried by the cellos (in the usual D minor).

After two of the spiritual's four phrases, hammer blows from the strings and trumpets abruptly cut both of the themes (spiritual and “teardrop”) off, unfinished: the forces of division and discord. A unison, held, rising melodic sixth in the strings and flutes begins the soaring, song-like second theme, a “benediction” theme,²¹ one derived, again, from elements—the third phrase, basically²²—of the spiritual melody. It is accompanied by the entire orchestra and played full-volume whenever it occurs, offering a heartfelt, affirming, and emotional climax to the entire work. Tonally it reverses the movement of the first, beginning in F major, ending in D minor. Together the two themes—which, especially later, can also be experienced as two parts of a single, long theme—thus contribute to a tonal ambiguity that permeates the entire movement. They trade off, with interludes, set to endlessly beautiful, rich, evolving, varied accompaniments.

The original spiritual melody begins once more near the end in the horns and trombone—under the final statement of the “teardrop” theme, accompanied by chattering, floating trumpets²³—though it again does not complete (but it is not violently cut off, either). As the energy dissipates,

the movement moves to a close—for the very first time in this piece, in an unambiguous, serene F major. Reconciliation is complete. F major has “absorbed” D minor. The two themes have been joined. Peace has won.]

Credo (1965)

In 1960, Bonds wrote to Hughes, “Some day [sic] we must do that really profound piece of work. I’d like the texture of the music to be similar to the *Mass in D Minor*.”²⁴ When Hughes failed to deliver the text she hoped for, she turned to W.E.B. Du Bois. His stirring “Credo” appears as the opening words of his 1920 autobiography, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*.

Musicologist John Michael Cooper, editor of the recently (and first) published edition of this work, wrote:

The text of [Du Bois’s] *Credo* was widely read, republished, and circulated for years to come, emerging as one of the most iconic texts of the Civil Rights movement before Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The text is a masterpiece of the strategy of dual-perspective: its verbiage of racial harmony and scriptural images of children in green pastures beside still waters — language designed to convince skeptical Whites that Du Bois was committed to a racial harmony founded in the Judeo-Christian institutions that they professed to adhere to — is nested in a fierce pride in Black lineage and self, condemnation of war, and (most importantly) the overarching thesis that racial equality and justice were not things that were granted by humans (let alone White society), but rather were divinely ordained. The text begins by proclaiming belief in God, and then proceeds to characterize God in each of its nine articles – so that the closing exhortation for “patience” emerges as an exhortation to perseverance in God’s divine mandate for racial equality.²⁵

Speaking of Bonds’s masterful setting, he continues:

The *Credo* is a masterpiece. Even a cursory consideration will note Bonds’s virtuosity in meeting the formidable challenges of setting prose (rather than poetry) to music, the work’s wide emotional range, its ingenious orchestration, its alternately beautiful and powerful melodic language, and its rich harmonic palette. Even more significant from a compositional and interpretive point of view, however, is Bonds’s brilliant translation of the underlying large-scale concept of Du Bois’s text into a large-scale musical cycle [which we shall be considering below]...

Altogether, Bonds (who, unlike Du Bois, was a devout Christian) creates a rich web of motivic, thematic, and tonal interrelationships that confirm that the *Credo* is not merely an assemblage of professions of belief, but rather a profoundly unified vision that reaffirms the beauty of Blackness and the sanctity of those professions’ overarching theme of racial justice.²⁶

Bonds took *Credo* very seriously and had high expectations for it. In October 1965, she wrote to Hughes: “I live so much under the guidance of the divine, I know there had to be a reason for me

to set those words, so in time, something good will happen with ‘Credo,’ and sometimes in my own mind I hear it.”²⁷ And in November 1966, she wrote to him: “I’m sure every line contains a Universal Truth — and with my Universal Language — music — the Public will hear.”²⁸

Credo’s Individual Movements

As Cooper makes clear, Bonds sets Du Bois’s “prose poem” with consummate skill. Each movement has its own internal logic, fused with heart, soul, and a careful attentiveness to the text.

I.

The first movement begins with a tremolo crescendo in the low strings on the tonic pitch of A. The chorus enters with the basic theme of the entire work, a simple, powerful melody on “I believe in God,” on stark, parallel, open fifths:

E	E	E	D	E
A	A	A	G	A

The strong, simple two-pitch melody here, often with pitches intact (hereafter to be called the “God” motive²⁹), sometimes just its rhythm (long short long long long—the “God” rhythm), recurs as a unifying motif throughout the work. The D in the upper line above (circled), on the fourth chord, turns out to be an important forecasting pitch, beginning to condition the ear, the unconscious, for what’s to come: most of the middle section of the work is in D. After that initial statement, a C is added in the tenors and orchestra to the harmony, suggesting A minor as the key, but by the end of the first sentence of text, on its last word, “dwell,” the music settles in a beautiful and tender A major.³⁰ Each section of the chorus enters, fugato style, one at a time, each entrance a fifth higher than the last, singing the beginning of the second sentence, “I believe that all men...” Sung in the “God” rhythm, the feeling here is nonetheless very different from the first time: the rising, staggered entrances of the chorus sections suggest a feeling of warmth, aspiration, and hope. As the text continues, “Black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, but differing in no essential particular,” Bonds migrates masterfully through a number of keys, segueing from harmonies that sound cinematic at one spot, like a spiritual at another, and like something more classical at a third. The final phrase, “and alike in soul,” returns on those words to the “God” motive. At the end of the last line, Bonds adds a repeat of “I believe in God,” same melody, accompanied by a brooding trumpet fanfare in the orchestra, and a gradual diminution in volume and lowering of register to the end,

back in A minor. Despite all the positive declarations, the final feeling is one of incompleteness, uncertainty.

II.

The second movement is in a radiant A major throughout, and features a soprano soloist in a soaring, impassioned solo, first with orchestra alone (strings and woodwinds), then in added—and very beautiful—interplay with the chorus. Bonds adds harmonic spice to the proceedings by incorporating bluesy flatted sevenths (on “Negro” and “its soul”) and flatted thirds (on “meekness”). The text line “I believe” is sung simply and repeatedly by the chorus; the soloist sings it with greater freedom, as if improvising. She pours it forth one final time, soaring to a high C#, as the chorus declaims it quietly, to end this exquisite, moving affirmation of pride, dignity, and hope.³¹

III.

Bonds combined Du Bois’s third and fourth declarations, “I believe in Pride for all men” and “I believe in Service,” into a single movement, performed by tenors and basses. It is homophonic and in close harmony throughout; most of the harmony in *Credo* is like this. The first declaration, speaking out in favor of a pride that is strong, yet not arrogant, but rather, open-hearted, is in D minor, and the second, lauding “humble, reverent service... making no distinction between the Black, sweating cotton-hands of Georgia”—what remarkable, sliding harmonies those words are set to, evoking back-breaking labor and suffering!—and the First Families of Virginia...” moves back to A minor briefly, before settling back into D. The “God” motive returns in its original pitches on “I believe in Service,” but “softened” in effect: the empty, open fifths are gone (the third of the chord, C, is filled in), the accompaniment is lighter and warmer, and the volume is softer, too. The movement ends with the “God” motive played in the trumpets, with a hard tympani strike (on the tonic pitch, D) on each beat.

IV.

The tympani blows, still on D, carry over into the fourth movement, “I believe in the Devil and his angels.” The chorus is divided into five parts; the accompaniment is pared down to percussion, bassoons, and lower strings. Harmonies are close, chromatic, parallel, dissonant; the sounds overall, as the words, describing hatred, violence, racism, and contempt, would suggest they should be, are harsh, rough, mechanical. The tympani continues to pound, unchanging, all the way through. The movement ends abruptly, with a brief woodblock flourish and a cymbal crash. The overall effect is grim: this is a musical depiction of evil, manifesting in the cruel, unthinking, unfeeling ways that way human beings often treat one another on this earth.³²

V.

The fifth movement, “I believe in the Prince of Peace,” begins what Bonds apparently regarded as the second (of two) large section of this work.³³ Here we move from the relentless D minor of the Devil and his angels to its relative major, a lilting F major. The tempo marking is a calm *andante*. All of Bonds’s marvelous skills as a composer and orchestrator are on display in this single movement. After a brief, lovely orchestral introduction, the sopranos and altos repeatedly

sing the first sentence, “I believe in the Prince of Peace,” in varied and beautiful ways, “in the sweet, close harmony of gospel style,”³⁴ thus balancing the setting for tenors and basses in movement 3. The tenors and basses join in for the second sentence, “I believe that War Is Murder.” The style changes completely here: louder, more strident, more contrapuntal, more unsettled: back in D minor, though modulating rapidly through several other minor keys. The setting for the start of the third sentence changes dramatically yet again: “I believe that armies and navies are at bottom the tinsel and braggadocio of oppression and wrong.” Trumpet, trombone, and percussion rise above the full orchestra in brittle military splendor, an ironic commentary on the text. And finally, the setting of the final phrase, “and I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength,” traverses emotional territory that is better experienced directly than described. The music rises to a deeply felt climax on “strength,” in C major, with a dramatic (and poignant) high G in the sopranos; it then returns gradually and gently to the beginning. The sopranos and altos repeat their opening section; they are joined again by the tenors and basses in an extension of that music; and the opening instrumental introduction is repeated once more, bringing things peacefully to a close.

VI.

The sixth movement moves from the F major of movement five to D major. Here Bonds once again combines two of Du Bois’s declarations: “I believe in Liberty for all men” and “I believe in the Training of Children.” They are united by visions of freedom, beauty, goodness, love; they do make sense together. The movement is set for baritone solo and chorus, thus balancing the soprano solo in movement two. The word painting and orchestration here, once again, are a marvel. “Sunshine” is set in a full volume high F for the soloist. For the words “thinking, dreaming, working,” the woodwinds and harp create a sweet, undulating, dreamy underpinning. The strings reenter on “beauty”, and even more fully, on “love,” swelling into a romantic, almost cinematic depiction of those words.

The mood changes, though not dramatically, for the second declaration. For images of children walking in green pastures and beside still waters, the accompaniment is simpler, the baritone’s rhythms more straightforward. Why train “little children, black even as white”? Du Bois tells us why: “Not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth,” and to instill in them the conviction that they enjoy a “birthright in a mighty nation.” Humanity? The Black race? The United States? Perhaps “mighty nation” refers to any or all of those. In any case, these words, affirming the intrinsic value of life, and the necessity of fighting for, and from, that value, may come close to the heart of Du Bois’s vision. From that perspective, what happens next musically should come as no surprise. On those final words, “a mighty nation,” the baritone rises to a held, full-volume high E, the tympani enters, the full orchestra swells, its sonority positively organ-like, the chorus soars above it all with wordless “ahs.” and a glorious, cinematic, heartfelt, almost overwhelming climax gradually winds towards a final statement by the full chorus of the opening line, “I believe in liberty,” and a quiet conclusion.

VII.

In the clearest example of the carefully balanced structure of *Credo*, the last movement, “I believe in Patience,” is modeled very closely on the opening movement, “I believe in God.” It is

again in the opening key of A minor; the movement opens with the “God” motive; it has its own fugato section, similar to that in the first movement; and so on. The setting of “patience with the tardy triumph of Joy and the mad chastening of Sorrow” is moving and unforgettable, and leads directly into the ending, which is quite different from that of the first movement. In place of the feeling of incompleteness that we were left with there, here the music rises to a powerful climax, the “God” motive roaring forth in the orchestra, on the striking, final words of the text, “Patience with God!” The different sorts of patience that the text exhorts us to maintain all boil down to just that. And that in turn is an implicit affirmation that the struggle for equality, grounded in the God-given worth of all people, is a sacred undertaking, one that – as long as those committed to it persist – is sure to triumph in the end.

Credo’s Overall Form

As the alert the reader may have already sensed, *Credo* has a symmetrical, “arch” form, balanced around the central movement IV. This diagram^{35,36} will help make that clearer.

“I believe in...”

God	the Negro Race	Pride of race and lineage and self + Service	the Devil and his angels	the Prince of Peace	Liberty for all men + The Training of Children	Patience
Du Bois section: 1	2	3 + 4	5	6	7 + 8	9
Bond movement: I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
A minor	A major	D minor	D minor	F major	D major	A minor
Choral / fugato	Sop. Solo + chorus	Tenors and Basses	5-part choral	Sopranos and Altos	Bar. solo + chorus	Choral / fugato

Text of *Credo*
W.E.B. Du Bois

(Roman numerals indicate Bond's division of the text. Each paragraph is one of Du Bois's original nine declarations.)

I.

I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.

II.

Especially do I believe in the Negro Race: in the beauty of its genius, the sweetness of its soul, and its strength in that meekness which shall yet inherit this turbulent earth.

III.

I believe in Pride of race and lineage and self: in pride of self so deep as to scorn injustice to other selves; in pride of lineage so great as to despise no man's father; in pride of race so chivalrous as neither to offer bastardy to the weak nor beg wedlock of the strong, knowing that men may be brothers in Christ, even though they be not brothers-in-law.

I believe in Service—humble, reverent service, from the blackening of boots to the whitening of souls; for Work is Heaven, Idleness Hell, and Wage is the "Well done!" of the Master, who summoned all them that labor and are heavy laden, making no distinction between the black, sweating cotton hands of Georgia and the first families of Virginia, since all distinction not based on deed is devilish and not divine.

IV.

I believe in the Devil and his angels, who wantonly work to narrow the opportunity of struggling human beings, especially if they be black; who spit in the faces of the fallen, strike them that cannot strike again, believe the worst and work to prove it, hating the image which their Maker stamped on a brother's soul.

V.

I believe in the Prince of Peace. I believe that War is Murder. I believe that armies and navies are at bottom the tinsel and braggadocio of oppression and wrong, and I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength.

VI.

I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.

I believe in the Training of [little³⁷] Children, black even as white; the leading out of little souls into the green pastures and beside the still waters, not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth; lest we forget, and the sons of the fathers, like Esau, for mere meat barter their birthright in a mighty nation.

VII.

Finally, I believe in Patience—patience with the weakness of the Weak and the strength of the Strong, the prejudice of the Ignorant and the ignorance of the Blind; patience with the tardy triumph of Joy and the mad chastening of Sorrow;—Patience with God!

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Endnotes

¹ Basic information in this paragraph is from Johnson & Watson (2004)

² Walker-Hill (2007), p. 19

³ Du Bois (1903/1994), Part 1, para. 3

⁴ Bonds's feelings about her alma mater were decidedly complex. In remarks most likely prepared in 1968 or so for a gathering "to drum up support" for a Langston Hughes Memorial Library (perhaps this library: [Lincoln University (2022)]), she went quite a bit farther than in the passage quoted above, referring to "that cesspool of white supremacy, bigotry, prejudice, known as Northwestern University" (Bonds, 1968, p. 1, read in Cooper, 2022b, 18:34-18:42, by Dr. Candace Kerr Johnson). (She went on to write in that speech of the profound effect, given that environment, her discovery of Langston Hughes's poetry had had on her at that time.) On the other hand, when Northwestern awarded her its Distinguished Alumni Award in 1967, she wrote to the Chair of the Alumni Achievement Awards Committee that she was "ever grateful to [her] Alma Mater where she received the necessary ethical and scholastic background to enable [her] to pursue the development of [her] God-given talents" (as cited in Cooper, 2022a, para. 9).

Part of the striking contrast in attitudes shown in her two comments may, of course, be due simply to the marked differences in whom she is addressing, but to assume that she was simply putting into words what she believed her audiences wanted to hear feels way too glib. Certainly, as a Black, female composer in mid-century America, about as successful a one as there was then, Bonds had mastered the intricacies, undoubtedly excruciating at times, of verbal and social interaction with the (largely white) power structure of her day. But everything we know about her suggests that her inner integrity and sense of herself were not something she would ever bargain away. Musicologist John Michael Cooper conjectures that, in effect, the reference to the "ethical... background" she received at Northwestern may have been a back-handed compliment: that her life-long commitment to racial justice generally, and to the recognition and championing of black composers and musicians specifically, may have been strengthened precisely in response to *not* having experienced those commitments institutionally during her time there. (Cooper, 2022a, para. 9)

One may infer that Bonds, like countless African Americans before and after her, wrestled throughout her life with what DuBois called "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1903/1994, Part 1, para. 3). And one may infer, too, that this continual effort took its toll; perhaps her depressive episodes and excessive drinking (by many accounts) later in life, mentioned elsewhere, find partial cause there. In any event, despite, and perhaps even *because* of, these struggles, it appears that she, like other great souls before her, honed a capacity to hold ethical and psychological opposites in creative (and mutually interactive) tension, producing in that crucible something wonderfully new. In this case, this refers to her ability to simultaneously honestly appreciate and build on the scholastic and musical grounding she received at Northwestern, while at the same time, with equal honesty, using even her bitterest experiences there to strengthen her core convictions, and

to deepen and motivate her resolve to act on them—largely through the art that her training at that self-same institution gave her the foundational skills to make.

Thus, one might conjecture, could the inner, psychospiritual dynamics of the complex and contradictory legacy of her years at Northwestern have informed her work throughout her life. And thus, too, might the two, seemingly contradictory comments quoted at the beginning of this note be simultaneously and equally true (and heartfelt).

⁵ Margaret Bonds, interview with James Hatch, Los Angeles, 28 December 1971, (hereafter called Bonds interview) as cited in Walker-Hill (2007), p. 156

⁶ Bonds interview, as cited in Walker-Hill (2007), p. 149

⁷ Cooper (2020b), p. iii

⁸ Cooper (2020c), p. iii

⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/a-forgotten-voice-for-civil-rights-rises-in-song-at-georgetown/2017/11/10/c71f66ec-c341-11e7-a441-3a768c8586f1_story.html

¹⁰ Cooper (2023b)

¹¹ Cooper (2020c), p. iv, p. vii

¹² They were Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Carol Denise McNair (11). Four men, members of the local Ku Klux Klan, were eventually convicted of the crime.

¹³ Rorem, letter to Bonds, July 45, 1966; Bonds’s reply, July 7, 1966. Both as cited in Walker-Hill (2007), p. 153.

¹⁴ This text is in the public domain.

¹⁵ Edits in the quoted text are by John Michael Cooper in Cooper (2020c), p. vii (also Cooper [2020b], pp. vi-vii), from which the quotation is taken. Bracketed comments, as mentioned, are by the writer of these notes.

¹⁶ Cooper (2020c), p. v

¹⁷ Cooper (2023a)

¹⁸ In this case, compared with the spiritual theme, harmonies are altered in the second phrase, and the third phrase is shortened to six measures from the expected eight (a change that could easily be accommodated in the invisibly coexisting spiritual theme with little meaningful loss).

To give a clearer sense of how this paraphrase works overall, here the opening phrase of “Dawn in Dixie” is aligned as closely as possible, pitch-wise, with the opening phrase of the spiritual melody:



³³ In her autograph orchestral score, Bonds wrote the word "Credo" above the first movement, and "Darkwater" above the fifth. In the 1920 published edition of Du Bois's *Darkwater*, her apparent source for the text of his Credo, the book's title appears as a running head on all even-numbered pages, and articles 6-9, which provide the text for her movements 5-7, happen to appear on such a page. It seems that Bonds may have misinterpreted the running head as a separate title for this section of the Credo, and carried it over into her score.

³⁴ Walker-Hill (2007), p. 171

³⁵ Adapted from Walker-Hill (2007), p. 172

³⁶ The arch form of *Credo* is similar to that of Bach's *Mass in B Minor* overall, and more particularly, to that of the nine-movement "Credo" section within that great work. Bonds would almost certainly have been deeply familiar with this music, so it is quite possible that it served for her as a formal model, an inspiration, or both. (Although there is no discussion of it elsewhere in these notes, it may be worth mentioning here that *The Montgomery Variations*, too, is in arch form.)

³⁷ Word added by Bonds