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Hello, and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast that helps you discover the stories behind classical music, one composer at a time. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're joining me today.

In our last episode, we explored the Harlem Renaissance—a time when music, poetry, art, and dance were bursting out of one neighborhood in New York City and shaping American culture. Today, we're zooming in on one composer and pianist who stood right inside that creative world. Her name is Margaret Bonds.

She wrote music inspired by spirituals, jazz, and classical traditions... she worked closely with one of America's most famous poets... and she used her music to speak up for fairness, dignity, and hope.

Let's meet her.

Margaret Bonds was born in 1913 in Chicago, Illinois. Her mother, Estella Bonds, was a musician and teacher who helped organize concerts for Black performers at a time when many stages were closed to them. Their home became a gathering place for artists, singers, and writers—almost like a tiny cultural center right in their living room.

Margaret began studying piano when she was very young, and it quickly became clear that she was extremely talented. She gave her first public performance with a major orchestra while she was still a teenager—an incredible achievement! Growing up in a house full of musicians and artists meant that Margaret didn't just practice scales... she absorbed ideas, stories, and musical traditions from the people around her.

Margaret Bonds studied music seriously, training as both a pianist and a composer. She later attended Northwestern University, where she continued developing her skills in composition and performance. She learned how to write music in classical forms—like sonatas and

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songs—but she was also drawn to the rhythms and melodies of jazz and the deep emotional power of African American spirituals. Instead of choosing just one style, she began weaving all of them together. For example, the piece you're listening to now, called "Troubled Water" weaves melodies from the spiritual "Wade in the Water" and the hymn "Amazing Grace" but follows a classical sonata form.

In the 1930s, Margaret Bonds moved to New York City, where she became part of the Harlem artistic world we talked about in our last episode. She met poets, painters, singers, and musicians—and one friendship in particular would change her life.

That was her friendship with Langston Hughes. Hughes was one of the most famous poets of the Harlem Renaissance, known for writing about everyday life, dreams, and struggles in clear, powerful language.

Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes became close collaborators. Hughes would write poems... and Bonds would turn them into songs. Together, they created art songs that brought poetry to life through music.

Some of their most famous collaborations include song cycles, groups of songs that are meant to be performed together as a set, in a specific order. Three Dream Portraits is a song cycle they wrote together. Let's listen to the third song of the cycle, which is based on Langston Hughes famous poem, "I, Too."

The Ballad of the Brown King, which tells the Christmas story from the perspective of Balthazar, one of the Three Kings, is another of their most famous collaborations. Bonds had a special gift for capturing the mood of Hughes's poetry. If a poem was playful, her music sparkled. If a poem was thoughtful or sad, her harmonies became gentle and serious. It was a true partnership—two artists inspiring each other. When you listen to one of these songs, notice how the piano part doesn't just accompany the singer... it helps tell the story.

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As the Civil Rights Movement gained strength in the 1950s and 1960s, Margaret Bonds wrote music that reflected the struggles and hopes of the time. She believed music could be a voice for justice. Some of her works celebrated Black history and spiritual strength, while others called for equality and freedom.

Her cantata *Montgomery Variations*, which you're listening to now, was inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a major event in the fight for civil rights.

She also wrote powerful arrangements of spirituals, turning traditional songs into concert pieces that could be performed on big stages.

Margaret Bonds continued composing, performing, and teaching for decades. She helped open doors for younger Black musicians and worked to make sure their music would be heard. She died in 1972 at the age of 59.

Although her name was not as widely known for many years after her death, musicians today are rediscovering her music and performing it more and more often. Her songs and piano pieces now appear on recital programs, concert stages, and recordings around the world.

Margaret Bonds left behind a powerful legacy: music that connects poetry and sound... tradition and innovation... and personal stories with the larger history of America.

Be sure to check out my curated playlist of music by Margaret Bonds in the show notes at [buskidsdopiano.com/podcast/171](https://www.buskidsdopiano.com/podcast/171). Thanks for listening to **Busy Kids Love Music** and I'll see you next time as we continue exploring composers who changed music history. Bye for now!