

America 250!

October 4, 2026, 4:00 P.M.

Concordia University Chapel of Our Lord

Montgomery Variations, dedicated to MLK

**Margaret Bonds
(1913-1972)**

**I. Decision II. Prayer Meeting III. March IV. Dawn in Dixie V. One Sunday in
the South VI. Lament VII. Benediction**

Folksongs for Orchestra

**George Walker
(1922-2018)**

**“Goin’ to Lay Down My Sword and Shield” (“Down by the Riverside”); “My
Lord, What a Mornin’”; “O, Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells”**

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Intermission

Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488

**W.A. Mozart
(1756-1791)**

**I. Allegro
II. Adagio
III. Allegra assai**

Kuang-Hao Huang, soloist

New England Triptych

**William Schuman
(1910-1992)**

“Be Glad Then, America”; “When Jesus Wept”; “Chester”

Maurice Boyer, conductor

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Illinois Arts Council and Oak Park Area Arts Council, in partnership with the Village of
Oak Park and Illinois Arts Council***

A lifelong advocate of social and racial justice, **Margaret Bonds** grew up in a relatively affluent family in Chicago in a community of Black artists and musicians. Though her parents divorced when she was young, they were both supportive of her obvious musical talent. As a 20-year-old pianist, Bonds became the first African American soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. As a composer, she wrote spiritual and jazz arrangements, songs for children, film music, popular songs, choral music, and musicals, as well as classical compositions, but her works failed to reach a wide audience. After decades of neglect, her music is being rediscovered almost half a century after her death.

Bonds studied performance and composition at Northwestern, where she encountered substantial racial prejudice. While there, she discovered the poetry of Langston Hughes, leading to a 40-year bond of artistic collaborations, mutual respect, and shared enthusiasms. In 1936, she began to set his poems to music, and they collaborated on numerous projects, the most successful of which was a Christmas cantata titled *The Ballad of the Brown King*. Hughes convinced her to move to New York, where he had moved, helping to launch the Harlem Renaissance. Disconsolate after his death, Bonds moved to California to work in Hollywood. When she died at 59, without a will, her husband and daughter gathered papers from her apartment. Many of her compositions were lost, and some even ended up next to a dumpster before they were rescued from oblivion. Now, because she has no survivors, no one knows who owns copyright to her music.

Considered a crowning work in her extraordinary career, Bonds' ***Montgomery Variations*** was composed as a tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., after her visit to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1963. Based on the spiritual "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me", *Montgomery Variations* is a set of freestyle ruminations on the spiritual theme, with Montgomery as a focal point of the Civil Rights Movement. There are seven movements (some of Bonds' own words are reproduced below):

I. *Decision*. Under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Negroes in Montgomery decided to boycott the bus company and to fight for their rights as citizens. After a pair of brief but dramatic timpani rolls, the melody of "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me" peals out powerfully in unison in the brass, accompanied by hammer blows from the rest of the orchestra. The strings and winds respond with a quieter commentary. Syncopated licks from the trumpets lead to a reprise of the brass melody, this time accompanied by flourishes in the winds. The movement ends with another hammer blow.

II. *Prayer Meeting*. Church members seized with religious fervor shout and dance, exhibiting their love of God and their faith in Deliverance by gesticulation, clapping, and beating their feet. A wind foursome plays variations on the theme's opening line. The emotional high point is a powerful full-orchestral tutti, whose sonority encompasses notes from the very lowest instruments—tuba, string bass, contrabassoon—to the highest (piccolo).

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.

IV. *Dawn in Dixie*. While the spiritual melody never appears in full here, the thematic material, as in other movements, is derived from it. The structure is simple. Thirty-six measures present the materials with reduced forces—most notably, the violins and violas are silent. Those measures are then repeated by the full orchestra. The opening sixteen measures—and therefore the first sixteen of the second half, too—are a passacaglia, an old musical form in which a repeating bass line, usually descending, repeats slowly over multiple measures, with melodic and harmonic development above it.

V. *One Sunday in the South*. Children are in Sunday School learning about Jesus, the Prince of Peace. The music evokes childlike innocence and play, employing several Baroque dance forms. The spiritual melody is heard in the solo trumpet, followed by a bourrée, a Renaissance/Baroque dance form. In the last repeated measure, the bass drum and cymbal enter very loudly; together they pound out one more bar of eight eighth notes. A bomb has exploded.

VI. *Lament*. Shaken by the cruelty of the Sunday School bombing. Negroes lean on Jesus to carry them through this crisis of grief and humiliation. This movement consists of three slow, heart-broken statements of the spiritual's theme, without interlude.

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 a new theme (with a resemblance to the spiritual melody, as always), played in the upper woodwinds. The original spiritual melody sneaks in softly in the cellos. Hammer blows from the strings and trumpets soon cut both themes off, unfinished. A song-like second theme, a “benediction” theme, derived from the spiritual melody, offers a heartfelt, affirming, and emotional climax to the piece.

By the time of his death in August 2018 at age 96, Pulitzer Prize-winning pianist and composer **George Walker** had enjoyed a trailblazing career that lasted over 80 years. Born into a family of pianists in Washington, D.C. in 1922, Walker began piano lessons at age five, gave his debut recital at 14 and was admitted to Oberlin Conservatory the same year. After studying piano and organ at Oberlin, Walker enrolled at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he studied piano with Rudolf Serkin and composition with Rosario Scalerò. The year 1945 brought a trio of “firsts” that broke barriers for generations of subsequent Black musicians: he was the first Black artist to give a recital at New York’s Town Hall, the first to solo with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the first to graduate from Curtis. Unfortunately, Walker’s performance career languished due to his race. With the encouragement of his father, Walker decided to turn his full attention to teaching composition. After completing a Ph.D. at the Eastman School, he was accepted as a Fulbright Scholar to study further with Nadia Boulanger in Fontainebleau, France. Once back in America, Walker held posts at several universities, including Rutgers University, where he retired as professor emeritus in 1992. In 1996, Walker was the first Black composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for music, for his composition *Lilacs*. All told, Walker wrote over 90 works during his lifetime and was working intently on new music at the time of his death.

Walker’s musical style is strongly rooted in western classical tradition, also drawing influence from jazz and African American spirituals. His ***Folksongs for Orchestra*** is an orchestral setting of four traditional spirituals: “Goin’ to Lay Down My Sword and Shield” (“Down by the Riverside”); “And They Crucified My Lord”; “My Lord, What a Mornin’”; “O, Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells”. Walker writes that his intention was to “to set these melodies in an interesting way, in a respectful orchestral manner. They are wonderful melodies. The four spirituals are quoted intact, which is an unusual procedure for me, because I am much more in the habit of using only snippets from various sources [of] pop tunes or folk songs. The focus is to frame these melodies in a miniaturistic fashion; they should be easy for the listener to identify.” The first, third, and fourth movements will be performed in today’s concert.

All 23 of **Mozart**’s mature piano concerti (the first four of the 27 numbered keyboard concerti are juvenilia) are justifiably deemed masterpieces, but **Piano Concerto No. 23 in A major** is generally considered to be one of his best. In these concertos, Mozart took full advantage

of recent improvements in instrument construction to catapult the form of the solo keyboard concerto to new heights of expressive possibilities. The sonority and tonal weight of the piano make for an equal partner to the orchestra, thus allowing Mozart (and others) to fully develop a sense of dramatic interplay between soloist and orchestra. In Piano Concerto No. 23, Mozart omitted trumpets and timpani and replaced oboes with clarinets, lending the work a lyrical yet dramatic quality. He chose the bright key of A major for the opening movement and finale, but the second movement is the only music Mozart ever wrote in the key of F# minor (the relative minor of A major).

The opening Allegro is tuneful and lyrical and of an intimate nature. The Adagio contains some of the most poignant and pensive music Mozart would ever compose. The wind writing here is particularly expressive, with pregnant pauses, an arching second theme that evokes a prolonged sigh, and a delicate interplay between the soloist and orchestra. In the final movement Mozart apparently decides that we've looked inward long enough, and it's time to enjoy a good romp. Themes race from one orchestral section to the other and a bass drone fuels our anticipation of a satisfying ending. The piano writing is almost a *moto perpetuo*, with rising and falling scales adding to the sense of jubilation.

William Schuman was an American composer and arts administrator. Born into a Jewish family in Manhattan, he played the violin and banjo as a child, but his overwhelming passion was baseball. In 1928 he entered New York University's School of Commerce to pursue a business degree but was more interested in writing popular songs with E. B. Marks Jr and Frank Loesser. On April 13, 1930, Schuman attended a Carnegie Hall concert of the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. He reportedly later said, "I was astounded at seeing the sea of stringed instruments, and everybody bowing together. The visual thing alone was astonishing. But the sound! I was overwhelmed. I had never heard anything like it. The very next day, I decided to become a composer." Schuman dropped out of school and quit his part-time job to study music at the Malkin Conservatory and privately with composer Roy Harris. Harris brought Schuman to the attention of the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who was to champion many of his works. In 1945, Schuman became president of the Juilliard School, founding the Juilliard String Quartet while there. He left in 1961 to succeed John D. Rockefeller III as president of Lincoln Center, a position he held until 1969. In 1971, Schuman was awarded The Edward MacDowell Medal by The MacDowell Colony for outstanding contributions to American culture, and he won a special Pulitzer Prize in 1985 and the National Medal of Arts in 1987.

William Billings (1746–1800), friend of Sam Adams and Paul Revere, is considered America's first composer. Despite a missing eye, a withered arm, a short leg, and an addiction to snuff, he wrote over 300 anthems, fuguing tunes, rounds, and hymns, many of which became popular during the Revolutionary era. It is from Billings that Schuman derived the melodic materials for his ***New England Triptych***, written in 1956. The beginning movement, "Be Glad Then, America," understandably popular with players of the timpani, draws its themes from Billings' anthem of that title and much of its texture from the block-chord style of church hymns. The exuberant, celebratory tone turns mournful in "When Jesus Wept", an expressive arch framed by dirge-like music for oboe, drum, and bassoon. The symmetrical shape mirrors Billings' original round, but Schuman employs triadic harmonies in relationships that would have puzzled the eighteenth-century composer. Billings' patriotic anthem "Chester", the text of which is "Let tyrants shake their iron rod/And Slav'ry clank her galling chains/We fear them not, we trust in God/New England's God for ever reigns", became a marching song for Patriot soldiers during the war. Schuman elevates the level of exuberance to make a triumphant ending.



Commended for his “perceptive pianism” (Audiophile) and “playing that is sensitive and wonderfully warm” (American Record Guide), Chicagoan **Kuang-Hao Huang** is a highly sought-after collaborative pianist whose performances have taken him throughout North America, Europe and Asia. He has performed in New York City’s Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Merkin Hall; in Washington, D.C.’s Kennedy Center; and at every major venue in the Chicago area, including the Harris Theatre and Symphony Center. He is often heard live on WFMT and has also performed on WQXR and on Medici.tv. Mr. Huang has recorded for Aucourant, Cedille, Innova and Naxos, including a CD of flute fantasies with flutist Mathieu Dufour and a premiere recording of early

songs by Alban Berg with mezzo-soprano Julia Bentley. His most recent recordings include Notorious RBG in Song with soprano Patrice Michaels and Songs from Chicago with baritone Thomas Hampson.

A strong advocate of new music, Mr. Huang is a core member of Fulcrum Point New Music Project and Picoso. He has premiered numerous works, including pieces by Mason Bates, Jacob Bancks, Kyong Mee Choi, Stacy Garrop, John Harbison, Daniel Kellogg and Shulamit Ran. Mr. Huang gave the world premiere performances of works by Louis Andriessen and Chen Yi at Weill Hall as part of Carnegie Hall’s Millennium Piano Book Project. He has appeared on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s MusicNOW series.

Mr. Huang is Associate Artistic Director for the International Music Foundation and is the driving force behind Make Music Chicago (makemusicchicago.org), a citywide celebration of music every June 21st. He also founded IMF’s Pianos in the Parks program, which partners with the Chicago Park District to give all Chicagoans access to outdoor pianos as well as free lessons.

Mr. Huang has degrees from the University of Wisconsin, Indiana University and Northwestern University. His principal teachers include Leonard Hokanson, Joseph Kalichstein, Howard Karp, Rita Sloan and Sylvia Wang. During his graduate studies, Mr. Huang was a recipient of the U.S. Department of Education’s Jacob K. Javits Fellowship. He was also a member of the New World Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas’s orchestral academy.

For a biography of conductor **Maurice Boyer**, please see your Program Book.