

CATHY WURZER: A concert from the Minnesota Orchestra will spotlight rarely heard music by Black composers dubbed, The Listening Project. The performance is this Friday, October 7. It'll include works from composers, both contemporary like Hale Smith, and historic, like Margaret Bonds. Louise Toppin is here right now to share more about the project. She's a performer, scholar, and professor, and host of Friday's Performance. Louise, I'm so happy you're here thanks for joining us.

LOUISE TOPPIN: I appreciate being here.

CATHY WURZER: So I'm wondering, how were the composers and the songs selected?

LOUISE TOPPIN: So I founded a database, and I have a co-conductor, James Blachley, who helped. But we're also looking at composers who have been influential in the whole narrative of African American composition. From the historic, the first African American woman who's internationally recognized, Florence Price and her protege Margaret Bonds.

You have Hailstork, who is one of the most important symphonic composers today. And you have Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who brings in a perspective from Europe, and influences the work of early African American composers. So working together, it's really telling you quite a beautiful story about these composers who fought to have their works recognized, but were also activists in their own way.

CATHY WURZER: Let's talk a little bit about some of these composers. I know the show is going to open with a work from Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. I want to play some of his music here. This specifically is "Four African Dances," number three.

[MUSIC - SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR, "FOUR AFRICAN DANCES #3"]

Oh, that is beautiful. That is beautiful. Wasn't he a British composer?

LOUISE TOPPIN: He was. He was Afro-British. His father was British. His mother was African. So he grew up in England studying music, and became one of their most celebrated composers.

CATHY WURZER: And how would you characterize his music?

LOUISE TOPPIN: Oh, his music is lyrical. It's beautiful melodies. But he also was so important coming to the United States, he had an encounter with the Fisk Jubilee singers while he was in England. They toured there. And he learned about spirituals. And he began to really enjoy spiritual melodies. And then he also met Paul Laurence Dunbar, who visits in England, and the two of them become close friends. They actually wrote one opera together.

But more importantly, it allowed him to find a space to explore his blackness. And so he began to use things such as writing negro folk melodies, or African American, or African music with those titles at a time that people weren't really talking about or celebrating being a Black composer. And when he comes to the United States, he is the one that influences that early generation, including Burley, to say your music of spirituals, this is the music we should be celebrating.

CATHY WURZER: Another important figure, as I mentioned in the intro, and you also touched on her, is Margaret Bonds. For folks who don't know, she was one of the first Black composers to receive critical recognition in the United States, though. This is one of her most famous compositions for listening to, "Troubled Water."

[SOFT PIANO MUSIC PLAYING]

That has a little flavor of a spiritual, doesn't it?

LOUISE TOPPIN: It actually is. It's based on the spiritual weight in the water. And the piano piece that you just played is actually a part of a suite that, for many years, that movement was the only one that we knew existed. And then more recently, I found the other two movements. It's actually one about the bells and dry bones, are the three movements. And so it takes on a different connotation, if you realize these other two spirituals lead up to that spiritual. Instead of it's just the standalone spiritual virtuosic, though it is. It's a complete set that Margaret Bonds put together.

CATHY WURZER: And she had frequent collaborations with Langston Hughes. Now that is a powerful combination.

LOUISE TOPPIN: Absolutely. She found a Langston Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" when she was a grad student at Northwestern, and having a lot of trouble in her life because of segregation. And so she goes to the public library, which is the only place she could study. And she finds this poem that he had written many years earlier.

And she always said that poem is what got her through those difficult times. And then when she met him, so many years later, her mother Estella Bonds had a home that featured lots of famous artists and poets. And so she met Langston Hughes. They become fast friends and they collaborate on musical theater, on art song, on a myriad of works.

CATHY WURZER: By the way, if you're tuning in, we were talking about The Listening Project. This is going to be a performance this coming Friday, October 7, with the Minnesota orchestra, Louise Toppin, is with me right now. The program is going to conclude with Florence Price. We want to listen to a little of her most famous composition, which is "Symphony Number 1."

[MUSIC - FLORENCE PRICE, "SYMPHONY #1"]

Now, Miss Price was a pioneer, because, isn't she one of the first or the first Black woman to have her music played by a major symphony orchestra?

LOUISE TOPPIN: She was. And she was the first to have international recognition. Price goes on to have her work premiered by the Chicago Symphony. The tragedy in her life is that she tried to get other orchestras to perform the work in her lifetime and she was unsuccessful.

CATHY WURZER: My gosh. I know that some of these works have never been recorded. I'm wondering about the impact of recording them now.

LOUISE TOPPIN: Well, I think it's hugely important, and you asked me at the beginning why these pieces that was also a part of the criteria, was looking for works that have not been previously recorded. And in the case of all of these composers, they're well-documented and well-known composers. But when you look at the number of recordings that they have had, it's pretty small.

And if we have recorded them, it also makes it possible for other orchestras across the country and across the globe, can hear the sounds and can program-- people don't program repertoire if they can't hear it. This project is doing a huge service to the field by making these available in recorded form.

CATHY WURZER: So this next question of mine is an offshoot of what you just said. The Minnesota Orchestra says it's been working toward including more historically underrepresented composers of color. But as you know, the classical music world, pretty much, centers around white and European artists. What needs to happen for that to shift?

LOUISE TOPPIN: Well, for that to shift is part of what I just said, is having the recordings but also having scores available. So the publishing industry has to begin to catch up so that once they hear them, there's music available. But also we have to have a mind shift that programming does not mean we are taking away composers that we've known and loved. But it is making space for other American composers that we haven't heard from of all ethnicities.

CATHY WURZER: You sound like you're really excited about this effort.

LOUISE TOPPIN: Oh, I am so passionate. I've spent 32 years working on convincing people that there are more stories that are worth being told and being heard. I'm thrilled that my organization is partnering with the Minnesota Orchestra to do this work.

CATHY WURZER: Well, we look forward to the performance. Thank you so much for giving us a little taste of what to expect.

LOUISE TOPPIN: Thank you, appreciate it.

[SOFT PIANO MUSIC]

CATHY WURZER: Louise Toppin is a performer, and scholar, and host of the Minnesota Orchestra's performance this Friday. She's also the founder of the African Diaspora Music Project. Tickets for Friday's performance, by the way, are available at minnesotaorchestra.org. You can also listen live 8:00 PM on your classical Minnesota public radio, 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.