

# About the Music.

***Troubled Water***, by the African-American composer **Margaret Bonds**, is based on the spiritual *Wade in the Water*, one of many coded songs used by Harriet Tubman to help the enslaved escape. As the slave masters and their dogs approach, the slaves are told to get off the trail into the water so dogs are unable to follow a scent trail.

In this masterfully done composition, Bonds presents increasingly complex variations of the refrain of the spiritual *Wade in the Water*. Central to the composition is the phrase, “God’s a gonna trouble the water,” the last line of the refrain as well as of each verse.

I created this arrangement as part of a series dedicated to Black composers, a project that also includes Brazilian artist Baden Powell’s Afro-Sambas created with poet Vinicius de Moraes.

— **Bruno Lima**  
[www.brunolimasm.com](http://www.brunolimasm.com)

*Margaret Bonds was an American composer, pianist, and teacher, known today for her arrangements of African-American spirituals and collaborations with Langston Hughes. She was the first Black woman to perform with the all-white, all-male Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the first woman to win three awards from ASCAP. Bonds received Bachelor and Master of Music degrees in piano and composition from Northwestern University before studying composition at Juilliard. She won the Wanamaker Foundation Prize in 1932 for her art song Sea Ghost.*

*Composer Michi Wiancko commissioned **Jessie Montgomery** to write the original version of **Rhapsody No. 2** for solo violin. Also a violinist, Wiancko premiered the piece in 2020. Montgomery wrote of that version, “*Rhapsody No. 2 is the second of a set of six intended solo violin works, each dedicated to a different contemporary violinist and inspired by a historical composer. This virtuosic piece is inspired, in part, by Béla Bartók.*”*

It’s been a joy to reimagine and orchestrate Jessie Montgomery’s *Rhapsody No. 2*, originally a solo violin piece that I had the honor of commissioning and recording for my solo album, *Planetary Candidate*. Reimagining a piece that I’m already intimately acquainted with has been gratifying, and this short and brilliant work expanded into a larger instrumentation with ease. One of my aims with this work was to have the orchestra explore various forms of relationship to the soloist, ranging from a respectful accompanist point of view to an egalitarian we-are-all-in-this-together vibe, to a more dramatic musical coup, to one lonely and vulnerable moment where our soloist stands alone. From an arranger’s perspective, the colors and expressive multiplicity readily available via the source material of Montgomery’s original work are limitless, and the Zen-like presentness that she unapologetically weaves in with serious gotta-practice-five-hours-a-day virtuosity is nothing short of breathtaking.

— **Michi Wiancko**  
[www.michiwiancko.com](http://www.michiwiancko.com)

*Jessie Montgomery, a Grammy-winning composer, violinist, and educator, served three years as Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Mead Composer-in-Residence and was named Performance Today's 2025 Classical Woman of the Year. A founding member of PUBLIQuartet and former member of the Catalyst Quartet, she has been awarded a Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and Sphinx Virtuosi Composer-in-Residence, the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, and Musical America's 2023 Composer of the Year. She serves on the Composition and Music Technology faculty at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music.*

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***Appalachian Spring*** has an iconic stature. The work most emblematic of **Aaron Copland's** name, it inspired more admiration than any of his other music. Some of this fame is probably due to its intertwined history with Martha Graham, the famous 20th-century modern dancer. When the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation at the Library of Congress commissioned a dance work from Graham in 1942 as an eightieth birthday tribute to Coolidge, who had made a tremendous impact on contemporary American music, Graham turned to Copland for the ballet's music and based the ballet on her memories of her grandmother.

In 1944, Copland finished a score entitled *Ballet for Martha*, which subsequently became the work's subtitle. Graham found the title she wanted in a poem, "The Dance," from Hart Crane's *The Bridge*. Graham said

she chose the title solely because she liked its sound. Copland commented, "Over and over, people come up to me after seeing the ballet on stage and say, 'Mr. Copland, when I see that ballet and when I hear your music, I can just see the Appalachians and I just feel spring.' Well, I'm willing if they are!"

*Appalachian Spring* premiered in Washington on October 30, 1944. It became one of Graham's most durable ballets and among the best-loved of American works. "*Appalachian Spring* would never have existed without her special personality," Copland said. "The music was created for her and it reflects the unique quality of a human being."

The ballet's notes describe "a pioneer celebration, in spring, around a newly built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills, in the early part of the [19th] century. The bride to be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, that their new domestic partnership invites.... At the end, the couple are left, quiet and strong, in their new house." In an interview published in 1975, Graham added, "It is essentially the coming of a new life. It has to do with growing things. Spring is the loveliest and saddest time of year."

Copland consciously chose a populist style to create an American musical language that spoke directly to an American audience. With his immediate and simple music, Copland displayed his consummate skill and subtlety. "*Appalachian Spring* is generally thought to be folk-inspired," he said, "but the Shaker tune 'Tis the Gift to be Simple' is the only folk material actually quoted in the piece.

Rhythms and melodies that suggest a certain ambiance, and the use of specific folk themes, are, after all, not the same thing; nevertheless, the score displays an absorption in the vernacular.” Pollock, Copland’s biographer, wrote that “it often gives the impression of folk music.”

*Appalachian Spring* divides into two parts that “seemingly portray peace and war.” In May 1945, Copland arranged the orchestral suite from the ballet, cutting pieces here and there, and highlighting the work’s “more idyllic side.” It requires a relatively small orchestra, but larger than the one he used for the original ballet; the larger group added new color and brilliance to the work. Copland later commented that “the suite for symphony orchestra ... was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1945 and took on a life of its own. Actually, it had a lot to do with bringing my name before a wider public.”

— Susan Halpern

***rhapsody on being giant-proof*** is dedicated to anyone who feels as overwhelmed as i often do by the weight and scale of what’s happening globally in 2025. trying to wrap my head around the enormity of the issues can feel impossible and almost always leaves me empty handed. so, i kept coming back to the theme of finding solace in the small, tangible joys of life — the moments right in front of us. it’s my own personal reminder that even when the world feels overwhelmingly large and increasingly robotic and scary, our capacity for finding beauty in the

minute details can be our greatest strength, and a way to push back in our own very personal and sometimes very small ways. this piece is a love letter to my great city of new york and to my real and chosen family, whom i cherish deeply and without whom i’d be lost.

— **Christina Courtin**  
*See biography on page 7.*

The sexy clarinet glissando that opens **George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*** introduced a new sound into American symphonic music. The *Rhapsody*, which turns 100 this year, is now so beloved, and symphonic jazz is now so commonplace, that we forget how controversial and novel the piece was at the time. Gershwin managed to bring down the wrath of two kinds of purists — the disciples of The True Jazz, who criticized Gershwin for trying to codify an improvisatory form, and conservative music critics who, as Edward Jablonski puts it, excoriated him for introducing “all that bawdy-house music into the sacred precincts of Carnegie Hall.”

Audiences, who are often way ahead of the critics, loved the *Rhapsody* from the beginning, and Gershwin made handsome money from the piece, especially when the residuals began to roll in. At various points in his career, Gershwin enjoyed the admiration of European composers, including Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Ravel. (When Gershwin asked Ravel for composition lessons, Ravel drolly replied, “Why be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?”)

Gershwin didn't know he was writing *Rhapsody in Blue* until he read about it in the paper. The *New York Tribune* proclaimed that Gershwin was composing a jazz concerto for an "Experiment in Modern Music" organized by the popular Paul Whiteman dance band. Although he had not agreed to anything of the kind (though he vaguely recalled speaking with Whiteman about a concerto), Gershwin decided to compose the work anyway, despite having basically a month to write it. He banged the piece out on an upright piano in his Upper West Side apartment on Amsterdam Avenue, where he lived with his parents, brothers, and sister. We thus have Paul Whiteman — sneaky but smart — to thank for a game-changing masterpiece.

"I tried to express our manner of living," Gershwin said of the *Rhapsody*, "the tempo of our modern life with its speed and chaos and vitality." Europeans who were drawn to jazz made similar statements, seeing jazz as a marker of modern living. When he wrote his jazz opera *Jonny spielt auf* in 1925, the year after Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, Ernst Krenek proclaimed jazz to be not just the music of Black America but "the note of the times." Kurt Weill went further, stating that "the rhythm of our time is jazz, the Americanization of the entire way we live."

The first performance of the *Rhapsody*, in February 1924, rocketed Gershwin to international fame. Rachmaninoff, Stokowski, Ernest Bloch, and Fritz Kreisler were in the audience, which gave the work a loud

ovation. Gershwin had not had time to put the piano part on paper, so he played it from memory, improvising parts on the spot. He went on to perform it at Carnegie Hall and in five other cities. Following the success of the *Rhapsody*, Gershwin wrote more symphonic jazz pieces, such as the Concerto in F and *An American in Paris* while continuing to turn out Broadway shows, Hollywood movies, and songs, often in collaboration with his brother Ira; his career culminated in the revolutionary opera *Porgy and Bess* before his tragic death of a brain tumor at age thirty-eight.

Unlike the Concerto in F, which largely follows classical structures, *Rhapsody in Blue* is not a proper concerto but, as Gershwin put it, "a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America — of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness." The opening piano cadenza, a "kaleidoscope" in itself, announces the main tune and other motifs, rising to a crescendo before the orchestra charges in with the main melody. Another exuberant theme follows with combined piano and orchestra, and a second piano cadenza leads to the famous, wistful slow melody, first sung by strings, rising and falling back on itself with melancholy ecstasy before it is taken over by the pianist, who then speeds into a brilliant toccata-like section. A frenetic fragmentation of the slow theme builds to a swaggering coda, grandly restating the opening theme before sweeping breathlessly upward.

— Jack Sullivan  
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