

“Once Upon a Time” and “Soul of Remembrance” from Five Movements in Color

Mary Watkins (1939–)

Written: 1993

Movements: Two

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Twelve minutes

For an interview in 2016 for the *Arts Work* blog, Mary Watkins was asked what her proudest moment has been. It was in Chicago in 2009 during a rehearsal of the second movement (*Soul of Remembrance*) of her *Five Movements in Color*. “The music wasn’t flashy, technically challenging, or anything like that,” she said. “It was serene, beautifully executed, and I let go of whatever it was I had been holding on to. It was the first time I really felt validated as a composer.”

Mary started taking piano lessons when she not even four years old. “From the very beginning I was admonished to confine my piano playing to the written notes on the page because it was of great importance that I be ‘literate,’” she says. “At some point . . . my teacher and mother knew I was playing by ear.” When she was fifteen, she entered a piano competition playing her own not-by-the-notes version of Schubert’s *Ave Maria*. She didn’t win, but her second place prize was a season ticket to the Pueblo Civic Symphony. That, along with some music classes she took at Pueblo Community College convinced her she wanted to be a composer. She eventually moved to Washington, D.C. and graduated from Howard University. She moved to Los Angeles and worked for Olivia Records Collective, a women-owned and operated enterprise. “I met other women who were aggressively involved in music,” she said. “So I began to see myself doing this and not feeling like a freak.” She formed her own jazz combo and recorded her own albums, *Something Moving* and *Winds of Change*. Since the 1980s she has focused on composing, completing many works for stage, film, dance and orchestras.

Mary Watkins wrote *Five Movements in Color* on commission from the Camellia Orchestra in Sacramento, California. Intended to be part of Black History Month, she called the work “a statement about the African-American experience.” She describes the first movement, *Once Upon a Time*, as beginning with “African drums, then the strings begin to tell a story that moves from peaceful to active to violent.” “A melody floats over a march,” in *Soul of Remembrance* (the second movement). “I saw my own people in their long march to fully express themselves as fully human” Watkins recalled. “It’s bittersweet and nostalgic, a song of sorrow and a song of hope.”

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Equality

Jonathan Bailey Holland (1974–)

Written: 2015

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Five minutes

In Maya Angelou's poem *Equality* (1990), there are several musical references. Near the beginning she wrote, "while my drums beat out the message/and the rhythms never change" and reprises it at the end. She also mentions "marching forward," "the tempo so compelling," and hearing "the blood throb through my veins." Interspersed around those verses is the repeating refrain "Equality, and I will be free."

When the Cincinnati Symphony asked Jonathan Bailey Holland to write a short piece based on Angelou's *Equality* he was starting with material that "is already music." He simply drew "on the persistent energy that is present in the poetry."

Jonathan Bailey Holland was born in Flint, Michigan, and attended the Interlochen Arts Academy. He went to the Curtis Institute of Music and received his Ph.D. from Harvard University. His teachers include Ned Rorem, Bernard Rands, Mario Davidovsky, Andrew Imbrie, and Yehudi Wyner. He is currently Chair of Composition, Theory, and History at Boston Conservatory at Berklee, and Faculty Chair of the Music Composition Low Residency MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

The Cincinnati Symphony commissioned Jonathan Holland's *Equality* for the *One City One Symphony* concert in 2015. The theme for that year's concert was "Freedom" and Holland's work was one of three commissions—all using poetry by Maya Angelou—for that concert. Providing comments for the premiere, Holland wrote:

Maya Angelou's words seem as fitting for the struggles she faced during her lifetime as they would have been for those that fought to end slavery some 100 years prior, and for those who are still fighting inequality today.

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Choral Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 80

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Written: 1808

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Twenty minutes

That must have been some concert on December 22, 1808. It was called an “Akademie,” and was basically a benefit concert that Beethoven was staging for himself. It was a bitterly cold day. The first half of the program featured the premiere of Beethoven’s *Sixth Symphony*. Then there was a concert aria, *Ah! perfido*, and the premiere of the “Gloria” from his *Mass in C Major*. And then *another* premiere, his *Piano Concerto No. 4*. After intermission, the audience heard the premiere of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* and then the “Sanctus” from the same *Mass in C Major*. Beethoven then sat down at the piano for an improvised solo. For a grand finale, there was one final premiere, his *Choral Fantasy*. Yikes! The audience certainly got their money’s worth. The concert lasted four hours. “There we sat, in the most bitter cold, from half past six until half past ten, and confirmed for ourselves the maxim that one may easily have too much of a good thing, still more of a powerful one,” one concertgoer wrote. “To judge all these pieces after one and only hearing, especially considering the language of Beethoven’s works . . . and that most of them are so grand and long, is downright impossible,” wrote another.

Beethoven’s *Choral Fantasy* is a curious work. Even though it features a solo piano accompanied by an orchestra, it’s not a concerto. It features a chorus, but it’s not a cantata or an oratorio. And it’s certainly not a symphony. It begins with the piano playing solo. (Beethoven actually improvised this at the concert and later notated it for publication. The improvised beginning would be a natural progression from the preceding part of the concert.) The orchestra then sneaks in and carries on a dialogue with the piano. The piano then presents the melody to Beethoven’s song *Gegenliebe* (*Mutual Love*) and a series of variations follow. Finally, the chorus enters singing “Graceful, charming and sweet is the sound/Of our life’s harmonies . . . Accept then, you beautiful souls/Joyously the gifts of high art. . . .”

The audience may have found it difficult to be so accepting. The *Choral Fantasy* was seriously under-rehearsed and “simply fell apart.” After stopping and restarting, it finally “went straight as a string.”

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Scenes from the Life of a Martyr

Undine Smith Moore (1904–1989)

Written: 1975–1980

Movements: Sixteen, grouped into four sections (confirm in your program please)

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Forty minutes (confirm in your program please)

Undine Smith Moore describes herself as “a teacher who composes, rather than a composer who teaches.” Others consider her the “Dean of Black Women Composers.” She started studying piano when she was seven, living in Petersburg, Virginia. “The lives of Black people in Petersburg were saturated with music of one kind or another,” Moore recalled. “A child could not fail to observe the unrivaled status that a leading singer at church enjoyed. Besides, there was a veritable fascination with piano study. . . . The favorite question asked to test advancement of children was . . . ‘You playing sheet music yet?’” She acknowledged the importance that sort of motivation played in her life: “To live in a society where one’s favorite art is highly regarded, highly valued, where one’s progress is a source of pride to the family and the entire community is enough to create in a child a fine sense of self-worth and a high level of aspiration.”

Moore received her undergraduate degree from Fisk University and then attended the Eastman School of Music and the Manhattan School of Music. She received her M.A. from Columbia University Teachers College. She was on the faculty at Virginia State University for forty-five years.

Undine Smith Moore started composing her *Scenes from a Life of a Martyr* in 1975 as a way to “write something for myself for this man [Martin Luther King].” She intended it to portray the private rather than the public life of Dr. King, as well as the “lives of ordinary men and women who struggle against the tragedies of human existence.” She assembled her own libretto using passages from the Bible, words and tunes from spirituals, and poems from “other times, places, and races.”

The Richmond Symphony was slated to give the premiere of the work, but scheduling difficulties meant that it was first performed in New Jersey and then New York before finally coming to Richmond in April of 1982. Writing about that performance for the *Times-Dispatch*, Dika Newlin said that it was “a monumental tribute. . . . The simplest of harmonic and melodic means produce an overwhelming effect. I wept—and so did many others.”

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