

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Conspirare Celebrates Black History Month with Choral Performances of W. E. B. Du Bois's "Credo"

Works by Composers Margaret Bonds and Benedict Sheehan Evoke the Spirit of Justice

AUSTIN, Texas (January 26, 2022). Conspirare, the GRAMMY® Award-winning choir known for expanding the boundaries of choral performance, will perform two different concerts celebrating Black History Month on February 15, 18, and 19 at St. Martin's Lutheran Church in Austin.

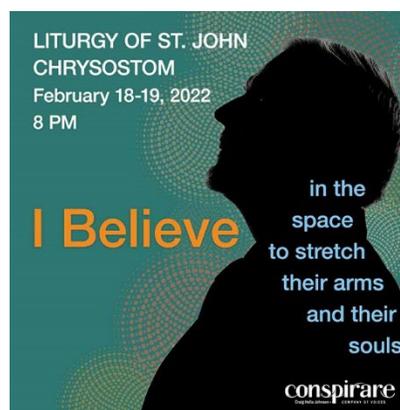
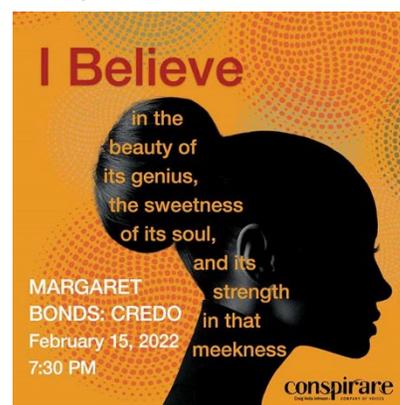
- **Tuesday, February 15th, 7:30 pm Central** – Choral and piano works of American composer **Margaret Bonds** (1913-1972) will be spotlighted featuring pianist **Anton Nel**. The program's central work is Bonds's setting of Du Bois's "Credo," the first performance of her choral *magnum opus* in more than fifty years. *This performance will also be livestreamed from conspirare.org* [Margaret Bonds Event info & Tickets](#)
- **Friday, February 18th, and Saturday February 19th at 8 pm Central** – Contemporary American composer Benedict Sheehan's *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* will have its Southwestern premiere. His setting of Du Bois's "Credo," a new addition, will be premiered. The *Liturgy* is inspired by the great Orthodox choral works of Rachmaninov and others. *The Saturday performance will be livestreamed from conspirare.org* [St. John Liturgy Event Info & Tickets](#)

About the Concerts

Comprised of soloists from around the country, Conspirare is recognized the world over for artistic quality, creative programming, and commissioning new works—all of which audience members will enjoy in these concerts.

"The two repertoires we're presenting are vastly different," explains artistic director Craig Hella Johnson, "but their pairing is intentional. Both programs share strands of spirit and intention as well as a common text—the prose poem 'Credo' written by W. E. B. Du Bois. This will be an extraordinary and important week for all of us--Conspirare artists and our cherished listeners."

Tuesday's Bonds' concert will feature [Nicole Joseph](#) (soprano), who last performed in Austin as part of Conspirare Christmas in 2019. Joseph is a soloist on Conspirare's *Sing Freedom* and Grammy-winning *The Sacred Spirit of Russia* albums. [Marques Jerrell Ruff](#) (bass-baritone) will make his Conspirare debut performing the bass solo in Bonds's *Credo* on Tuesday and reciting the Du Bois "Credo" to Sheehan's choral underlay on Friday and Saturday.



About Composer Margaret Bonds

Born on the South side of segregated Chicago, Margaret Bonds was a superb and powerful pianist and composer who often collaborated with her friend, poet Langston Hughes. Together, they created choral works and popular songs that celebrated the Black experience. When she died in 1972, her papers were scattered and lost. In 2016, a huge trove of her papers, including the unpublished manuscript for *Credo*, were rescued from beside a trash dumpster!

Conspirare's program will sample Bonds's creative imagination and highlight her fluency in synthesizing Black vernacular musical styles with traditionally white classical ones. Listeners will hear the influence of African American spirituals (called by Du Bois "sorrow songs"), African dance, and gospel. The finishing work will be Bonds's choral setting of "Credo," a hypnotic and spiritual text that paints a vision of a racially just world. Bonds's *Credo* premiered with the composer at the piano in 1967. Nearly lost forever, the work was published in 2020 and will be performed for the first time in its original piano-vocal version since the composer's death. Conspirare is grateful to John Michael Cooper, Professor of Music at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, whose scholarship and advocacy made it possible for Conspirare to perform *Credo*.

When the poet's widow, Shirley Graham Du Bois, heard Bonds' *Credo* performed, she described it as "a work of art that is eternal—that will live as long as people love each other and really believe in brotherhood."

About Benedict Sheehan's *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*

Contemporary American composer Benedict Sheehan's concert-length work *Liturgy* is based on the Russian-origin Orthodox Church musical tradition while subtly pushing beyond it. In the Eastern Orthodox church tradition, the consecration of bread and wine in the eucharistic (communion) service is, the composer feels, "a moment of mysterious contact between heaven and earth."

"*Liturgy* is fundamentally a place of welcome," Sheehan adds. "One of my goals is to offer anyone who wants it a taste of that beauty that has no boundaries." Based in the sound-world of Russian Orthodox sacred music, *Liturgy* also offers listeners echoes of Greek Byzantine chant, Georgian polyphony, American folk music, Sacred Harp singing, contemporary Minimalism, film scores, and classical Western choral music.

Sheehan's "Credo" is a new work for chorus and narrator which Conspirare will premiere. Craig Hella Johnson introduced the Du Bois text to Sheehan who has placed in the middle of his *Liturgy* "as a symbol of faith, hope, and love." "My goal here," says Sheehan, "is not to replace the Church's own statement of faith, but to assert that, for my own part, I *also* believe in the human person, and especially those who are downtrodden, suffering, and oppressed."

About W. E. B. Du Bois's "Credo"

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was an author, sociologist, and activist who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and devoted his life to fighting global inequality, including not only racial equality, but also gender equality and freedom from imperialist and colonialist oppression.

When Du Bois wrote "Credo" in 1904 it was one of the first social justice manifestos by a Black American put into print. The poetic text, known for its repeating assertion "I believe . . .," expresses his vision of equality for Black people in America—a vision that has not yet been fully realized. An excerpt reads:

I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and

ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in the kingdom of beauty and love. (from "Credo" by W. E. B. Du Bois)

About Conspirare's Health Precautions

Conspirare protects the health of our audiences and singers by employing a health consultant and on-site medical professional to ensure rigorous health protocols to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

About Our Sponsors

Conspirare's Season Underwriter is H-E-B. The Conspirare Christmas performance sponsor is Per Stirling. Conspirare Season Sponsors include Dialog, Blackfeather Vintage Works, Tejemos Foundation, Texas Commission on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, Hella Circle and Legacy of Sound 2. KMFA Is Conspirare's Media Sponsor and Gusto/Flavor is this season's Hospitality sponsor.

ATTENTION MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES

To arrange interviews, access high-resolution images please contact Ann McNair at 512-476-5775 or amcnair@conspirare.org.

[Conspirare Press Kit](#) (images for download, info pdf)

About Conspirare

Conspirare is a professional choral organization under the leadership of Craig Hella Johnson. Inspired by the power of music to change lives, this ensemble engages singers from around the world who join voices to deliver world-class, extraordinary live musical experiences and recordings. Their discography includes 13 commercial albums and 20 self-produced live albums. Johnson and Conspirare are nominated for a 2022 GRAMMY® for Best Choral Performance for *The Singing Guitar* and were awarded a 2014 Grammy® for Best Choral Performance for *The Sacred Spirit of Russia*. Conspirare was awarded the Texas Medal of Arts in 2019. Based in Austin, Texas, they perform an annual concert series and tour in the United States and abroad.

About Craig Hella Johnson

Craig Hella Johnson is the founding artistic director and conductor of Conspirare and music director of Cincinnati's Vocal Arts Ensemble. Known for crafting thought-provoking musical journeys that create deep connections between performers and listeners, Johnson is in frequent demand as a guest conductor of choral and orchestral works. Johnson joined the faculty at Texas State as Artist in Residence in fall 2016. He is a published composer and arranger, guest conductor and educator. Johnson's first concert-length composition *Considering Matthew Shepard* was premiered and recorded by Conspirare for a 2016 CD release. Johnson's accomplishments have been recognized with numerous awards and honors. Notably among them, he and Conspirare won a 2014 Grammy® for Best Choral Performance, Chorus America awarded him the Michael Korn Founders Award for Development of the Professional Choral Art in 2015, the Texas State Legislature named him 2013 Texas State Musician and in 2021 the Matthew Shepard Foundation recognized him with the Dennis Dougherty Award for Community Leadership.

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