

Las Cruces, New Mexico Chapter – American Guild of Organists



Virtual Recital – Spring 2021 – African-American Composers Program Notes

Mark Fax (1911-1974) was a native of Baltimore. He received music degrees from Syracuse University and the Eastman School of Music. He was on the faculty and later served as Dean of Fine Arts at Howard University. For many years, he was organist at Asbury United Methodist Church in Washington, DC. He wrote for piano, chorus, chamber ensemble, orchestra, opera, and organ. This Toccata was written in the late 1950s.

Laurel Benson Brown is a retired Lutheran Church Musician, living north of Deming. She earned a Bachelor of Music degree from Colorado State University and a Master of Sacred Music from Wittenberg University. She enjoys subbing, singing in the choir, accompanying, and learning the ukulele when COVID safe practices allow.

Adolphus Hailstork (b. 1941) was born in Rochester, NY and grew up in Albany, NY. He obtained a BA from Howard University, a master's degree from the Manhattan School of Music, and a doctorate in music composition from Michigan State University in 1971. He also studied with Nadia Boulanger. He is currently professor of music and Composer-in-Residence at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. He has composed works for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, orchestra, orchestra and chorus as well as three operas.

Stephen Helmreich studied organ at Valparaiso University under Philip Gehring. He was the organist at Peace Lutheran church in Las Cruces from 1990 to 2019. He retired from the Computing Research Laboratory at NMSU in 2009 and is certified as a Colleague of the American Guild of Organists.

Sharon J. Willis (b. 1949), born in Cleveland, OH, is an Associate Professor of Music and Liberal Arts Chair at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, GA. She received her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Georgia; Master of Music degree in Theory from Georgia State University; Master of Church Music in Choral Conducting from Scarritt Graduate School in Nashville, TN; and Bachelor of Arts degree from Clark College in the Atlanta University Center. A lyric soprano who is a composer of operatic works, choral music, vocal compositions, and organ, Willis wrote *Exodus Suite for Organ* as a memorial tribute to Harriet Tubman. Historians credit Tubman, born a slave around 1820, with making nineteen underground trips helping to free slaves. Thus, the passacaglia theme is stated

nineteen times in varying ways to represent the number of daring and courageous rescues made by Tubman.

Fela Sowande (1905-1987), born in Nigeria, was considered the father of modern Nigerian art music. He studied organ under Dr. T. K. Ekundayo Phillips and earned the Fellowship Diploma from the Royal College of Organists. At that time, he was also a bandleader, playing jazz and popular highlife music—all of which had considerable influence on his work. In 1934, Sowande went to London to study European classical and popular music. Eventually, he settled in the United States and became a U.S. citizen in 1977. His compositions reflect a strong Nigerian influence and also incorporate Western techniques.

Lynn Moorer is an organist, singer, radio show host (“All About Books” on KTAL-LP, 101.5 FM, Las Cruces), and attorney. She studied organ with Charles W. Tritt at Nebraska Wesleyan University and earned a Bachelor of Music degree in sacred music and applied voice from that institution.

Florence B. Price (1887-1953) was the first African-American woman in the U.S. to have a work performed by a major symphony orchestra. She was born in Little Rock, AR, where she performed her first recital at the age of four, had her first composition published at age 11, and graduated from high school at 14. At age 17, she entered the New England Conservatory of Music, graduating with honors and a double major three years later, in 1907. After moving to Chicago, IL in 1927, she took first place in the Rodman Wanamaker Competition in 1932 with her *Symphony in E minor* and it was premiered by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the 1933 Chicago Exposition. She also arranged songs for opera singer Marian Anderson and made a living playing organ for silent films and orchestrating music for radio station WGN in Chicago.

Monte Coleman, currently retired as a mathematician at the U.S. Army Ballistic Research Laboratory, now part of the Army Research Laboratory, is an itinerant organist and has served as a substitute and interim organist at various churches in the Las Cruces area.

Victor C. Johnson (b. 1978), a native of Dallas, TX, has taught at the Ft. Worth Academy of Fine Arts since 2003 and has served as Minister of Worship and Arts at Shiloh Baptist Church in Plano, TX since 2007. He has a degree in music education from the University of Texas at Arlington, with a concentration in organ. He regularly serves as a guest conductor, adjudicator, and clinician for music educators and students. He is a prolific composer and arranger, with over 400 choral works, vocal solo books, and keyboard collections currently in print.

Karen Billings, a resident of Las Cruces since 2007, was an engineer and mathematician with AT&T Bell Laboratories for 20 years. Earning degrees in Mathematics from Hendrix College (Conway, Arkansas) and Oklahoma State University, she studied organ while at Hendrix and continued her studies at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey. She is certified as a Colleague of the American Guild of Organists and regularly attends Peace Lutheran Church.