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HOMAGE

Chamber Music from the
African Continent & Diaspora



CASTLE OF OUR SKINS & SAMANTHA EGE

LORELT



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Chamber Music from the African Continent & Diaspora CASTLE OF OUR SKINS & SAMANTHA EGE

BONGANI NDODANA-BREEN Safika

- | | | |
|---|--------------|------|
| 1 | Movement I | 3:42 |
| 2 | Movement II | 4:48 |
| 3 | Movement III | 3:58 |

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|------|
| 4 | ZENOBIA POWELL PERRY Homage | 4:22 |
|---|-----------------------------|------|

UNDINE SMITH MOORE Soweto

- | | | |
|---|--------------|------|
| 5 | Movement I | 1:44 |
| 6 | Movement II | 5:19 |
| 7 | Movement III | 3:09 |

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 8 | SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR Moorish Dance, op. 55 | 11:10 |
|---|---|-------|

FREDERIC C. TILLIS Spiritual Fantasy

- | | | |
|----|--|------|
| 9 | I. Nobody Knows the Trouble I See | 6:25 |
| 10 | II. Wade in the Water | 4:48 |
| 11 | III. Crucifixion - He Never Said a Mumblin' Word | 4:29 |
| 12 | IV. I'm A-Rollin' | 7:34 |

Total 61:30

Executive Producer: Odaline de la Martinez

Safika and Soweto

Recorded 6th May 2022

The Warehouse

Producer, Engineer, Editor: Adaq Khan

Spiritual Fantasy

Recorded 7th May 2022

Ensemble Room, Music Faculty, University of Oxford

Producer, Engineer, Editor: Adaq Khan

All piano pieces

Recorded 15th August 2022

PATS Studio One, University of Surrey

Producer: Odaline de la Martinez

Engineer, Editor: Adaq Khan

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Foreword by Dr Bongani Ndodana-Breen

Homage is a long-awaited collaboration that marks a historic moment in chamber music in many important ways. It is an illuminating and rare curation of composers from Africa and the Diaspora, performed with a great deal of care and passion by Dr Samantha Ege and Boston's Castle of our Skins. Over the past few years, Samantha and Castle of our Skins' founders Ashleigh Gordon and composer Anthony R. Green have been notable champions of diversity and inclusion in classical music, exploring Black repertoire long neglected or forgotten by the musical establishment.

Growing up in apartheid South Africa where Black voices were silenced (often violently), one of the many gems in this album for me is Undine Smith Moore's *Soweto*, a very moving testament to transatlantic solidarity within the global Black community. There are other composers in this album who were civil rights activists in their own ways as the oppression and marginalization of Black people is a reality of our histories on both sides of the Atlantic. *Homage* narrates many facets of the Black experience: the resilience in our music, history articulated by Black creativity, and the extraordinary power of art in affirming our shared humanity.



Bongani Ndodana-Breen, 2022

Programme Notes by Dr Samantha Ege

Bongani Ndodana-Breen (b. 1975) is a South African composer from the Xhosa ethnic group. Although his formative years were shaped under apartheid, his musical gifts were nurtured early on. He studied piano, French horn, viola, composition, and orchestration. He even enjoyed premiere performances of his works under the school orchestra and chapel choir. Ndodana-Breen has since emerged as one of the most important composers in post-liberation South Africa, defying that which the agents of apartheid sought to preclude: the harmonious union of African and Western traditions. *Winnie: The Opera* (2011), based on the life of Winnie Mandela, forms one of Ndodana-Breen's most significant compositions and inspires the subject of a chapter in *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* by Naomi André.

Safika: Three Tales of African Migration for piano quintet (2011) depicts Black South Africans' dispossession, migration, and translocation – "Safika" means "we arrived" in Xhosa and Zulu. "Safika I" opens with a dispirited descending *tutti* theme. The quintet then splinters into relentlessly rhythmic lines. The influence of African cyclic music is reinforced in a middle section that channels interlocking *mbira* patterns. "Safika II" begins with a call and response between wandering strings in the higher registers and a descending melody in the piano based on Xhosa modes. Violin passages comprising parallel 4ths and 5ths (and inspired by *timbila* and *amadinda* xylophone music) signal the second half of "Safika II." *Barsawa* dance steps and polyrhythmic layers that evoke African communal singing characterise this dramatic section. "Safika III" starts with solo cello. Its *glissandi* dips mirror the falling tones of Zulu syllables. The subsequent cello and piano unison pattern echoes the drumming in traditional Zulu war dances. Interlocking patterns abound thereafter. Ndodana-Breen says, "By quoting and paraphrasing aspects of African music and dance, *Safika* alludes to memories of lives left behind, the people, the songs, the dances, and the connection to the land."

Zenobia Powell Perry (1908–2004) honed her craft under some of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. Born in Boley, Oklahoma, Perry pursued the serious study of classical music, which led to her attending private classes through the 1920s and 30s with the famed Black Renaissance, Afro-Canadian composer Robert Nathaniel Dett. Dett taught Perry the piano and encouraged her to write original music. His influence was profound and set her on her compositional path. She later studied with the French modernist Darius Milhaud, as well as William L. Dawson, one of the great composers of the Harlem Renaissance. One of Perry’s milestone works is the opera *Tawawa House* (1985), which is inspired by a real-life setting in Wilberforce, Ohio, and pays tribute to the journeys of the enslaved.

Homage (1990) honours Dawson’s 90th birthday. The main theme derives from one of his favourite spirituals – “I Been ’Buked and I Been Scorned” – which opens the piece. A countermelody is introduced as the tempo picks up. The textures thicken; blue notes flavour the emerging harmonies. The main melody then ventures into new directions, indicating a largely through-composed form. Along with its textural build, *Homage* increases in emotional intensity; the relatively consonant and *cantabile* opening gives way to more dissonant and fragmented ideas. Perry’s chromaticism extends to traces of polytonality and splashes of whole-tone colour, which hint at the French influence in her training. The music’s climax is marked by a call and response between *sforzando* chords and a hocket across the hands in the inner voice; the rising and falling contour of the chord progression and interlocking melodies generate a sense of deep yearning. However, the mood soon mellows. There is also a reprise of an earlier blues inflected passage, as if to show that the music has not strayed too far from home. Though a short piece, *Homage* brims with diverse inspirations, making it a fitting tribute to a composer who, himself, seamlessly interwove African American and European sound worlds.

Undine Smith Moore (1904–1989) was born in Jarratt, Virginia. As the progeny of working-class parents and enslaved grandparents, she grew up under Jim Crow laws, fully aware of the discriminations around her and the hardships her ancestors endured. Her experiences generated great empathy for the international plight of Black people under similarly oppressive systems. Through music and the unconditional support of her parents, Moore found her sense of place in the world as a music educator, activist, and composer. Nicknamed the “Dean of Black Women Composers,” she used her craft to articulate her connections to the Continent and Diaspora. *Before I'd Be a Slave* (1953) for solo piano is one of her best-known pieces and reflects her predilection for dissonance and emotional intensity.

Soweto for piano trio (1987) reacts to the horrors of apartheid. Moore recalled hearing “Soweto” resound in her mind as a rhythmic motif amid overtones of conflict. “I felt I did not choose the word. The word chose me,” she remarked. As a Black woman born in the Jim Crow South, Moore’s language does not encompass indigenous South African idioms. Her reaction is more visceral than narrational, more emotive than appropriate. The first movement opens chaotically with an angular piano line that clashes against the cello’s walking bass. An ever-active violin line adds to its raucous energy. The second movement begins with a quasi-*cadenza* on the violin, followed by a cello fragment built on the “So-we-to” rhythmic motif, which defines the subsequent piano part. In Moore’s words, the piano is “bold, aggressive, angry, fast, accented,” while the violin and cello offer contrasting moments of pensive lyricism. The third movement – a heart-rending lament – was added after *Soweto*’s 1987 premiere. Slow paced, melodically driven, harmonically grounded, and homophonically textured, it unfolds like a hymn. It references the Black spirituality of Moore’s Southern upbringing and that of her South African brothers and sisters. If the first two movements are about rage and chaos, the third is about remembrance and catharsis.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912) was the son of a Sierra Leonean father and English mother, and the face of a changing Britain. Coleridge-Taylor was born in Holborn, raised in Croydon, and exhibited a prodigious musical talent early on. He studied at the Royal College of Music, counting Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams among his classmates. While his style invoked Brahms and Grieg and led the American press to praise him as an “African Mahler,” Coleridge-Taylor’s voice simultaneously held a prescient multiculturalism. Many of his works embraced African continental and diasporic cultures, such as *African Dances* (1904) for violin and *24 Negro Melodies* (1905) for solo piano, all of which inspired generations of African-descended classical practitioners to come.

Moorish Dance, op. 55 (1904) references a term that developed derogatory connotations in relation to people from North Africa, i.e., “Moor.” However, *Moorish Dance* restores pride and power with its grandiloquent style and expressive gestures. It begins with a suspenseful *piano* opening in E minor that bursts into a *forte* flourish. A highly syncopated main theme then enters. Its rhythms imitate the horses that medieval Moors rode on. The brisk tempo makes it easy to imagine the fabrics of the Moors’ attire billowing in the wind. The E minor section closes with a descending arabesque pattern that leads to the key of A minor. The main theme starts up in the new key and later moves to the keys of B minor, E minor (again), and F sharp minor. Intervening sections – such as the G major moment, where a lyrical melody sits atop lush harmonies, and the *largamente* moment, where dense, heavily accented chords in both hands move together, guided by the Aeolian mode on C sharp – affirm its rondo form. *Moorish Dance* differs hugely from works by composers like Claude Debussy, for example, who simply parodied African diasporic cultures. Several years ahead of “Golliwog’s Cakewalk,” here is one of England’s greatest composers paying homage to the diversity and antiquity of Africa with his *Moorish Dance*.

Frederick C. Tillis (1930–2020) was as at home writing for symphony orchestras as he was jazz ensembles. Born in Galveston, Texas, his earliest musical inspiration came from the piano playing and singing of his mother. He grew to be a proficient jazz trumpeter who, by the age of 12, played in professional jazz circuits. Saxophone eventually became his instrument of choice and composition soon followed as another area in which he excelled. His influences ranged from Bach to the Second Viennese School and the Russian Five. Tillis' most performed works come from the *Spiritual Fantasy* suite (the first of which was written in 1980). The suite exemplifies his kaleidoscopic musical training and features pieces for solo instruments, chamber ensemble, choir, and orchestra.

Spiritual Fantasy no. 12 for string quartet (1988), to quote Tillis, “pays tribute to the essence of the musical expressions of pathos and triumph over worldly obstacles encountered by a people who found hope and strength through faith in God.” I. “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See” opens with dissonant *arco* violin and viola lines against the more tonally grounded (i.e., G minor) *pizzicato* double-stop cello. The Spiritual theme enters in C minor, but the harmonic tension never truly abates. Blues influences abound, such as in the middle section where the cello plays a walking bass under pendular melodies, extended harmonies, and swung rhythms. II. “Wade in the Water” begins with a *spiccato*, accented double-stop pattern. Violin 1 sings the Spiritual’s first line. In call-and-response fashion, the cello answers. Brimming with irregular time signatures and galvanising passages, this movement captures the urgency of those who fled the South, up the Mississippi River towards freedom. III. “Crucifixion – He Never Said a Mumblin’ Word” is a solemn movement in which the viola takes centre stage. *Cantabile* melodies soar over slow-moving harmonies throughout. IV. “I’m A-Rollin’” is about resiliently rolling through an unfriendly world; thus, the movement begins energetically. The earlier Spiritual themes also return, making for a high-octane finale.



Dr Samantha Ege is a musicologist and pianist. Her research and repertoire tightly entwined and largely concern 20th-century composers of African descent and women in music. She has published extensively in these areas. As a concert artist, she made her London debut at the London Festival of American Music in September 2021 and her Barbican debut soon after in November that year. Samantha has since proved a sought-after recitalist and concerto soloist with engagements across the UK, Ireland, US, and Canada. This collaboration with Castle of our Skins represents her first significant project as a chamber musician.



Castle of our Skins is a Boston-based concert and educational series dedicated to celebrating Black artistry through music. From classrooms to concert halls, Castle of our Skins invites explorations into Black heritage and culture, spotlighting both unsung and celebrated figures of the past and present. Violist Ashleigh Gordon and composer Anthony R. Green founded Castle of our Skins in 2013 to address the lack of equity in composer representation on concert stages and the omission of important stories and figures in Black history. Almost a decade on, the organization still shines as a beacon for diversity in the arts.



Gabriela Díaz began her musical training aged five, studying piano with her mother then violin with her father. A childhood cancer survivor, Gabriela supports cancer research and treatment through music. She won an Albert Schweitzer Foundation grant to organise chamber music concerts in cancer units across Boston hospitals. Gabriela teaches at Wellesley College and is co-artistic director of the chamber music and outreach organization Winsor Music. Her recording of Lou Harrison’s Suite for Violin and American Gamelan was highlighted in the New York Times’ “5 Minutes That Will Make You Love Classical Music.”



Matthew Vera is known for his versatility as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral leader. Matthew is first violinist of the Izarra String Quartet, a Boston-based ensemble exploring fresh interpretations of the classic repertoire with a keen focus on amplifying compositional voices of the LGBTQIA + BIPOC communities. Matthew is a violinist with Castle of our Skins and has also been heard with Radius Ensemble, Juventas New Music Ensemble, and Monadnock Music. Matthew has shared the stage with The Boston Philharmonic, The Albany Symphony, The Portland Symphony, The Rhode Island Philharmonic, The Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and Teatro Nuovo.



Ashleigh Gordon has been described as a “charismatic and captivating” violist. She has recorded with Switzerland’s Ensemble Proton and Germany’s Ensemble Modern; performed with the Grammy-winning BMOP and Grammy-nominated A Far Cry string ensemble; and appeared at the prestigious BBC Proms Festival and Carnegie Hall with the Chineke! and Gateways Music Festival Orchestras respectively. She is the Artistic and Executive Director of Castle of our Skins, a Boston-based concert and educational series devoted to celebrating Black Artistry through music. In recognition of her work, she was nominated for the 2020 “Americans for the Arts Johnson Fellowship for Artists Transforming Communities.”



Francesca McNeeley began her journey as a cellist in her native Haiti, aged four. Today she enjoys an eclectic career in Boston as a soloist, chamber musician, contemporary music specialist, and orchestral player. She plays regularly with Castle of Our Skins, the Celebrity Series of Boston, A Far Cry, and the Boston Symphony & Boston Pops Orchestras. She is a graduate of Princeton University, Rice University, and the New England Conservatory. Her mentors include Tom Kraines, Darrett Adkins, Norman Fischer, Yeesun Kim, and Astrid Schween. Francesca is dedicated to community engagement through teaching and mentoring and is compelled by the story-telling power of classical music.

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Photograph of Dr Bongani Ndodana-Breen by Anna Morris.



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