

## Sunday, June 21, 2026: Music Notes

In recognition of Juneteenth, much of the music for services this Sunday highlights Black excellence in music, featuring a number of compositions by Black composers and several traditional spirituals in instrumental arrangements or as hymns sung by the congregation.

### 10 a.m. service, Holy Eucharist: Rite Two

The organ prelude is an arrangement of the spiritual “Go down, Moses” by **William Farley Smith** (1941-1997), who was a prominent New York City-based Black composer, organist, and United Methodist minister. The influence of the blues is not hard to discern in Smith’s arrangement.

*McKee*, the tune of Hymn 529, In Christ there is no east or west, grew out of the older spiritual “The angels changed my name.” Celebrated Black American composer and songwriter **Harry T. Burleigh** (1866-1949), adapted and arranged the spiritual for a text by John Oxenham; the hymn emphasizes the message of Christian unity and the “great fellowship of love... whate’er your race may be.”

Pianist, music educator, and Pulitzer Prize-nominated composer **Undine Smith Moore** (1904-1989) is sometimes called the “Dean of Black Women Composers.” A Virginia native, Moore served on the faculty of Virginia State College (now Virginia State University) and Virginia Union University, among other institutions. Though a pianist by training, Moore’s greatest compositional love was writing vocal and choral music such as her setting of the spiritual “We shall walk through the valley in peace,” the text of which is based on Psalm 23.

**David Hurd** (b. 1950) was Professor of Sacred Music and Director of Chapel Music at the General Theological Seminary, New York City, for 39 years, and is presently Director of Music at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Times Square, New York City (where one of his predecessors is our own Robert McCormick). “Taste and see” sets the eighth verse of Psalm 34. Hurd casts the text “Taste and see that the Lord is good” as an antiphon (or refrain), which bookends contrasting music for “Happy are they who trust in him.”

Sometimes referred to as the “Black National Anthem,” Hymn 599, Lift every voice and sing, was written at the turn of the 20th century by brothers James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson. The former was a prominent academic, civil rights activist, and literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, serving as both the first Black professor at New York University and executive secretary of the NAACP. James Weldon Johnson’s text reflects on the wide sweep of U.S. history, solemnly acknowledging the “weary years” and “silent tears” of the “dark past,” but also expressing a message of extraordinary resilience and profound hope for the future.

The organ voluntary at the end of the service is based on the aforementioned hymn tune *McKee*: it was originally improvised in real time, during the pandemic, by Robert McCormick; in order to be published, it was later transcribed (written down or notated) from a recording by Bryan Dunnewald, a former assistant musician under Robert’s direction, who now is President & Tonal Director of Schoenstein & Co., one of our country’s preeminent pipe organ builders.

### 5:30 p.m. service, Celtic Evensong and Communion

The spiritual “Let us break bread together” traces its roots to coastal South Carolina. Early written records of the hymn, dating from the 1920s, are linked to the Penn School on St. Helena Island, the first school for formerly enslaved West Africans in the South. Hymnologist Carl Daw has suggested that the text’s imagery of receiving Communion “on our knees” and “with my face to the rising sun” could point towards

historical, liturgical practices of the Episcopal Church. Daw notes that, “[M]any colonial churches had one or more windows on the east wall. These were originally all clear glass, though some examples, such as those at St. Philip’s Church and St. Michael’s Church in Charleston, South Carolina, are now filled with stained glass, or the east window is now blocked by later renovations, as at Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia. So the experience of receiving Communion on one’s knees would often involve facing such a bright window.”

**Harry T. Burleigh** enjoyed a close professional relationship with Czech composer Antonín Dvořák during the latter’s three-year stay in the United States and integrally influenced the composition of Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”). “Through moanin’ pines” is the first movement of Burleigh’s *From the Southland*, a suite of short pieces inspired by the American South; the work draws influence from Black music and culture and stands as an example of the uniquely “American” musical sound that Burleigh helped to pioneer.

Often deemed the “Dean of Afro-American composers,” Oberlin Conservatory graduate **William Grant Still** (1895-1978) was an important musical and cultural luminary of the Harlem Renaissance. Still’s musical suite *Three Visions* was originally written for his wife and musical collaborator, the pianist Verna Arvey. The work’s second movement, *Summerland*, depicts a vision of the heavenly afterlife. Still’s daughter, Judith Anne Still, explains: “The three segments of the suite... tell the story of the human soul after death: the body expires, and the soul goes on to an apocalyptic judgment. If it is seen that the past life has been a good one, the soul may enter ‘heaven,’ or ‘Summerland.’”

A native of Arkansas, **Florence Price** (1887-1953) studied at the New England Conservatory, graduating with a Bachelor of Music in organ and piano at age 19. Based in Chicago for most of her career, Price was a trailblazer in music composition; her Symphony in E minor – premiered by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra – was the first work by a Black woman to be performed by a major orchestra. In recent years, Price’s music has enjoyed a well-deserved and overdue resurgence in interest. Her setting of the spiritual “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” was originally written for solo piano, but has been arranged for oboe and piano in tonight’s service.

A student of Charles Villiers Stanford, Black English composer **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (1875-1912) enjoyed a successful career as a conductor; undertaking several U.S. concert tours at the turn of the century, he was nicknamed the “African Mahler” in New York musical circles. Coleridge-Taylor’s setting of the spiritual “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” comes from his collection *24 Negro Melodies*, which includes arrangements of African folk tunes as well as American spirituals. In Coleridge-Taylor’s foreword to the published score, he writes, “What Brahms has done for the Hungarian folk music, Dvořák for the Bohemian, and Grieg for the Norwegian, I have tried to do for these Negro melodies.”

Black Canadian-American composer and keyboardist **Robert Nathaniel Dett** (1882-1943) was a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music. *Cinnamon Grove*, written in 1928, was one of Dett’s later works for piano; the suite’s meditative second movement draws upon verses from Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (“Song offering”):

When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break  
with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.

The text of Hymn 676, There is a balm in Gilead, is one of many spirituals in which the chorus is based on a specific scriptural passage. It responds to a question asked in Jeremiah 8:22 (“Is there no balm in Gilead?”) and answered by a command in Jeremiah 46:11 (“Go up to Gilead, and take balm!”). The singers

represent those who have benefited from the balm (salvation) through having been made whole (finding the strength to endure slavery).

Composer and social justice activist **Margaret Bonds** (1913-1972) was among the first Black woman composers to be nationally recognized for her work. A student of Florence Price, Bonds was also a highly accomplished pianist, becoming the first Black soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at age 20. Bonds arranged a number of spirituals for solo piano and voice and piano, including “This little light of mine,” a notable tune that took on new life in the 1960s as a well-known and beloved anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. As Freedom Singer Rutha Mae Harris [explained to NPR](#), singing the song’s joyful words and music gave her and her fellow activists comfort and courage in the face of danger, steadying their nerves: “Music was an anchor. It kept us from being afraid... It played a very important role in the movement.”

Notes by Robert McCormick, Director of Music, and Diana Chou, Associate Director of Music



**St. Stephen's**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA