31 Black Choral Composers

that should be on your programs & playlists

(a non-comprehensive list)

#BlackChoralComposers
Vicente Lusitano (1520 - after 1561)
- Portuguese composer and theorist
- “The first Black published composer”
- rival of Nicola Vicentino (went on to influence Gesualdo)
- famous for winning a public debate with Vicentino regarding chromatic genera
- Vicentino then “published egregiously disingenuous descriptions of the proceedings with the aim of damaging Lusitano’s reputation” — a near success
- does not appear in Palisca’s iconic textbook A History of Western Music
- motet books and theory writing survive but only a couple modern editions
- Heu me Domine is chromatically daring but many of his works were more mild
- travelled to Italy and made a career there, converted to Protestantism in 1556

José Maurício Nunes Garcia (1767 - 1830)
- Brazilian classical composer born in Rio de Janeiro
- both parents were offspring of slave owner and slave
- prince John VI of Portugal appointed him Master of the Royal Chapel
- strongly influenced by Viennese composers — Mozart and Haydn
- composed the first opera in Brazil
- conducted the Brazilian premiere of Mozart’s Requiem
- 240 pieces survive today; at least 170 lost
- mostly sacred works, but some secular including operas

Harry T. Burleigh (1866 – 1949)
- American classical composer, arranger, and professional baritone
- instrumental in building what we know today as ‘American’ classical music
- introduced spirituals into the concert repertoire, arranging them in a classical form
- his grandfather, who had an “exceptionally melodious voice” was granted manumission from slavery mid 1830s, and taught Burleigh traditional spirituals
- received a scholarship to the prestigious National Conservatory of Music in New York, where he met the conservatory director Antonín Dvořák
- Dvořák enjoyed hearing him sing, and Burleigh allegedly taught/sang the Czech composer several spirituals, which he grew to love (and then scattered throughout his writing)
- began to compose and arrange in 1890’s and by 1910’s was famous as a composer
- hardly any vocal recitalist gave a concert in a major city without one of his arrangements
- original musical output range from 200 to 300 songs

Scott Joplin (1868 - 1917)
- American composer and instrumentalist known as “The King of Ragtime”
- wrote over 100 ragtime pieces but also ballet and opera
- crucial in the development of American jazz (ragtime -> stride -> big Band -> etc.)
- Maple Leaf Rag & The Entertainer are household tunes
- his opera Treemonisha was never premiered in his lifetime
- several arias but no unaccompanied ‘choral’ works — although, a few a cappella bits in his opera
- the popular barbershop sound is easily recognizable in his vocal/chorus writing
- posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1976 (Ned Rorem won main prize)
Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875 - 1912)
- English composer and conductor, grew up in Croydon
- father descended from African-American slaves, evacuated from American colonies
- studied composition as a teenager with Charles Villiers Stanford (fellow student, Ralph Vaughan Williams)
- professor at Crystal Palace School of Music, age 21
- met the Fisk Jubilee Singers in London, 1997
- helped hugely by Edward Elgar — recommendation to the Three Choirs Festival
- famous at 22 for his three cantatas on the epic poem, 'Song of Hiawatha' (Longfellow)
- Hiawatha's Wedding Feast conducted by Stanford at its 1898 premiere; exceeds popularity of Handel's Messiah
- composed chamber music, choral anthems, solo instrumental works, and more
- after passing, King George V personally grants annual £100 pension to his widow

R. Nathaniel Dett (1882 - 1943)
- Canadian-born composer, organist, pianist, choral director, and professor
- ancestors escape to the north (Canada) and settle in a ex-slave-founded town
- among the first Black composers with ASCAP when it is first organized
- takes African-American folk songs/spirituals and uses as the basis for 19th century Romantic choral and piano works
- inspired by Antonín Dvořák, who incorporated elements of American music
- first black student to complete a music degree at Oberlin
- Harvard awarded him Bowdoin Prize for his essay 'The Emancipation of Negro Music' 1920
- recorded Magnolia Suite for QRS piano rolls; first piano rolls by a Black pianist
- Magnolia was performed at the Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Club in 1914
- travelled to France in 1929, to study with Nadia Boulanger
- Canada's 'Nathaniel Dett Chorale' founded in 1998, named after him

Florence Price (1887 - 1953)
- American classical composer, pianist, organist and teacher
- the first African-American woman to have a composition played by a major orchestra
- graduated from high school at age 14, valedictorian of class and already published
- identified originally as Mexican composer to avoid African-American prejudice
- moved north to Chicago in the Great Migration to escape Jim Crow conditions
- worked as an organist for silent film screenings and composed radio ads under a pen name
- became Chicago roommates with (former student and pianist/composer) Margaret Bonds
- The Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered her Symphony in E minor, June 15, 1933
- utilized African-American melodies and rhythms in many of her works
- a huge collection of her manuscripts were found in an empty broken-down house on the outskirts of St. Anne, Illinois, 2009
- melodies are "blues-inspired, mixed with more traditional, European Romantic techniques"
- wrote several pieces for SSAA choir and piano, only a few unaccompanied works

Edward Margetson (1891 - 1962)
- born in St Kitts, West Indies
- moved to NYC in 1919 to take up the post as Minister of Music and organist at the Church of the Crucifixion
- attended Columbia University in New York where his compositions still feature
- organised the Schubert Society in 1927 — helped Black classical musicians find work during a time of intense prejudice
- 1938, gave the first performance of Bach St. Mathew Passion in NYC
- composed works for voice, piano, organ, violin, cello, string quartets, and was particularly successful for his choral writing
- several unaccompanied choral gems, but hardly any recordings

#BlackChoralComposers  Blake Morgan 2020
William Grant Still (1895 - 1978)
- referred to as the ‘Dean of African-American Composers’
- composer of nearly 200 works, 5 symphonies and 9 operas
- first American composer to have an opera produced by the New York City Opera
- first African-American composer to conduct a major orchestra
- Afro-American Symphony was the most widely performed symphony written by an American
- part of the Harlem Renaissance movement
- married pianist Verna Arvey in Tijuana because interracial marriage was illegal at the time
- worked as an arranger of pop music for NBC Broadcasts, and films 1930s
- composed Song of a City for the 1939 World’s Fair in NYC; could only attend on ‘Negro Day’
- composed 30+ choral works but most are thought to be lost
- And They Lynched Him on a Tree one of his more dramatic works, calls for two choruses: a white lynch mob and a black chorus of mourners

Duke Ellington (1899 - 1974)
- American composer, pianist, and band leader — wrote more than 1,000 compositions
- a pivotal figure in jazz, but preferred to think of his compositions as ‘beyond categorization’
- part of the cultural canon known as the ‘Great American Songbook’
- first African-American to appear on a U.S. coin
- nearly 30 years of collaboration with composer-arranger-pianist Billy Strayhorn
- scored several films but also composed stage musicals
- awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for music, 1999
- his band united both African-American and white audiences
- began to compose longer works in 1930s (Creole Rhapsody, Re-mingiscing in Tempo, etc.)
- Black, Brown and Beige debuted at Carnegie Hall, 1943; tells the story of slavery in U.S.
- Jump for Joy a full-length musical about African-American identity, 1941
- 1965, composed his first Sacred Concert for a Grace Cathedral (San Francisco) premiere; a blend of classical and jazz with some a cappella choral writing
- wrote two more Sacred Concerts — “the most important thing I have ever done”

William L. Dawson (1899 - 1991)
- American composer, multi-instrumentalist choir director, professor, and musicologist
- served as a professional trombonist in several orchestras
- raised in Alabama; his father was a former slave
- developed the internationally renowned Tuskegee Institute Choir; invited to sing at New York City’s Radio City Music Hall’s grand opening, 1932
- best known for his many orchestral and choral arrangements of spirituals
- Negro Folk Symphony premiered by Philadelphia Orchestra, 1932
- traveled through West Africa in 1950s and began to infuse that sound-world in his writing
- devoted most of his later years to leading workshops around the world
- his spirituals are still widely performed throughout the USA
- unique arranging voice; brings a more vigorous style of singing to spirituals
- crafted his choral spirituals with great care to ensure they wouldn’t be humorously sung

Undine Smith Moore (1904 - 1989)
- American composer and professor of music; the ‘Dean of Black Women Composers’
- trained as a classical pianist
- 1924, Juilliard granted her a scholarship to attend Fisk University (of Fisk Jubilee Singers fame) — the first granted at the historically Black college
- founder of the Black Music Center at Virginia State College, 1969
- traveled widely as a professor and lectured on Black composers
- delivered the keynote address at the first National Congress on Women in Music at NYU
- spiritual arrangements, solo art songs, instrumental chamber music, and multi-movement works for chorus, soloists, and instruments
- composed 100+ pieces between 1925 and 1987, but only 26 published in her lifetime
Margaret Bonds (1913 - 1972)
- American composer, pianist, and music editor
- close friends with poet Langston Hughes; several collaborations
- grew up in Chicago; her home was visited by many of the leading Black intellectuals of the era
- admitted to Juilliard; attempted to study with Nadia Boulanger, who upon looking at her work, assessed that she needed no further study and refused to teach her
- concert pianist, appearing at age 22 with Chicago Symphony, playing Price’s compositions
- formed the Margaret Bonds Chambers Society: a group of Black musicians dedicated to performing the music of Black composers
- 1954, *The Ballad of the Brown King* premiered in NYC; a text by Langston Hughes which tells the story of the Three Wise Men, focusing on Balthazar (the ‘Brown King’)
- later in life, became active in the theater, writing 2 ballets and several musical-theater works
- settled in LA in 1960s; wrote several choral arrangements for the Los Angeles Jubilee Singers

Ulysses Kay (1917 - 1995)
- American composer, mostly neoclassical in style
- nephew of New Orleans jazz trumpeter King Oliver, but Kay turned to classical
- enrolled at Eastman and then studied with Paul Hindemith at Yale in 1941
- awarded a Fulbright Scholarship, the Rome Prize, and a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship which allowed him to study and live in Rome from 1949 to 1953
- first ever cultural exchange between Soviet Union and U.S.; invited to Moscow to hear his piece performed at Tchaikovsky Hall, 1958
- appointed distinguished professor at City University of New York in 1968
- known for his symphonic and choral compositions, as well as his five operas; particularly his final *Frederick Douglass* but wrote film scores as well
- commissioned composer for ACDA’s first independent conference
- characterized by melodic lyricism and tonal orientation; later quartal harmony

George Walker (1922 - 2018)
- American composer, pianist, and organist
- first African-American to have won the Pulitzer Prize for Music; *Lilacs* 1996
- graduated at 18 from Oberlin College with the highest honors in his class
- one of the first Black graduates of the Curtis Institute; studied piano and composition with Rosario Scalero (teacher of Samuel Barber)
- 1950, Walker became the first Black instrumentalist to be signed by a major management, the National Concert Artists
- studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1957
- his piano technique is often reflected in his works — changing meters, syncopation, and bitonal writing

Betty Jackson King (1928 - 1994)
- American pianist, singer, educator, choral conductor, and composer
- grew up in Chicago and learned to sing with family in the ‘Jacksonian Trio’
- actively studied academic music her whole life, obtaining degrees in piano, composition, and voice from Westminster Choir College, and Peabody
- president of the National Association of Negro Musicians 1970 - 1984
- wrote cantatas, arrangements of spirituals, operas, a requiem, a ballet, an organ suite and various other chamber and choral compositions
- regardless of instrumentation, her music is often described as being ‘vocal’ in nature
- *Psalm 57* is considered by many to be a gem of the American choral repertoire, especially within historically Black colleges and universities

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Blake Morgan 2020
Wendell Whalum (1931 - 1987)
- American composer, organist, conductor, musicologist, arranger, lecturer, and minister
- Director of the Morehouse College Glee Club; earned international acclaim during his 34 years
- travelled around the world as a sought-after lecturer
- studied the origin and construction of the pipe organ in Bonn, Germany
- directed both the Morehouse Glee Club (TTBB) and (at times) the Spelman Chorus (SSAA)
- best-known for his scholarship in the area of hymnody, spirituals, and anthems
- chorus master for the world premiere of Scott Joplin's opera Treemonisha
- some compositions but mostly arrangements of spirituals still in publication
- percussionist Babatunde Olatunji wrote the Yoruba Christmas carol Betelehemi while studying at Moorehouse — he shared with Whalum who wrote the vocal parts
- Moorehouse Glee Club performed at several birthday parties and the funeral of Martin Luther King Jr (MLK was a former tenor in the group)

William Appling (1932 - 2008)
- American conductor, pianist, arranger and educator
- First Prize in Piano in the National Association of Negro Musicians
- first Foundation Fellowship Award for Choral Conducting
- choral Director of the Case Men's Glee Club; many of his arrangements are TTBB
- 1979, founded the William Appling Singers; the only professional group in the US to celebrate the 250th anniversary of William Billings, "America's first composer"
- Scott Joplin scholar; found a kinship with the composer, both personally and musically
- recorded the complete piano works of Joplin; the first African-American pianist to do so
- his We Shall Walk made famous by Chanticler, was a blend of Joe Jenning’s arranging and Appling’s TTBB and SATB version

J.S. Mzilikazi Khumalo (b. 1932)
- South African composer, conductor, and professor of African Languages
- played a major role in advancing Black choral music during and after apartheid
- wrote the first South African oratorio in an African language, UShaka
- first Black South African composer to write a full-length opera, Princess Magogo
- often blended traditional Zulu sounds and classical European elements in his writing
- at Nelson Mandela’s request, Khumalo helped choose the new national anthem for South Africa
- learned tonic sol-fa notation as a boy; he learned to read modern music in grade school
- his first composition was Mangificwa Ukufa — chosen for the first National Choral Festival of the African Teachers Association of South Africa (ATASA)
- rose from the ranks of ‘language tutor’ to Head Professor of African Languages
- passionate towards collecting traditional African music; arranged many of his favorites
- several a cappella vocal pieces, but difficult to find modern, notated editions

James B. Furman (1937 - 1989)
- American composer, professor, organist, and choral director
- wrote more than 50 works (mostly choral)
- arranger, pianist, and conductor of the Rolling Along Show, an Army touring group
- BBC choral conductor for Charles Ives documentary (1966)
- extensive research on the history of gospel music — donated to the Center for Black Music Research after he passed
- close friends with Martin Luther King, Jr; dedicated the symphonic oratorio I Have a Dream to him (the libretto is created from MLK’s writings)
- Hehehlooyuh for a cappella chorus still frequently performed

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Blake Morgan 2020
Robert A. Harris (b. 1938)
- American composer, conductor, and professor
- raised in Detroit Michigan, attended Wayne State, and Michigan State
- taught in Detroit public schools, later hired by Wayne State, then moved to Michigan State; become Director of Choral Activities 1970-77
- severed as Choral Panel co-chair for the National Endowment for the Arts
- specialized study on professional Black classical musicians living in early 1900s
- 1977-2012 professor of conducting and director of choirs at Northwestern University
- lectures internationally on African-American spirituals
- part of the History Makers Collections at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC
- 40+ commissions from churches, schools, and professional groups — most are choral

Julius Eastman (1940 - 1990)
- American minimalist composer, conductor, pianist, vocalist, dancer, and music theorist
- being both gay and Black, he faced intense prejudice his whole life
- provocative political intent within his pieces (and in their titles)
- grew up in Ithaca, NY, singing in boys choirs; studied piano and composition at Curtis Institute
- joined the prestigious 'Creative Associates' - centered around avant-garde classical music
- founding member of S.E.M. ensemble; composed at least 15 early works for the group
- taught composition/theory at SUNY Buffalo; left after a controversial risqué performance
- conducted the Brooklyn Philharmonia's CETA Orchestra, and began touring internationally
- a large portion of his scores were impounded by New York Sheriff's Office when he was evicted from his apartment in the early 1980s; became homeless
- he suffered cardiac arrest and died alone; no public notice was given for 8 months
- notational methods were loose and open to interpretation
- revival of his music has been a difficult task; dependent on people who worked with him

Adolphus Hailstork (b. 1941)
- American composer and music professor
- degrees in music composition including study under Nadia Boulanger
- currently a professor of music at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA
- has composed for solo instruments, chamber ensemble, chorus, wind ensemble, and orchestra, as well as writing 3 operas
- his works blend musical ideas from both the African American and European traditions
- Rise For Freedom an opera about the Underground Railroad; premiered in October 2007
- composed a choral ballet The Gift of The Magi for treble chorus and orchestra (2009)
- currently working on his Fourth Symphony, A Knee On a Neck (tribute to George Floyd)

Ysaïe Barnwell (b. 1946)
- American singer (female bass), composer, and author
- former member of the internationally renowned ensemble ‘Sweet Honey in the Rock’, an all-woman, African-American a capella group
- created a workshop called Building a Vocal Community: Singing in the African American Tradition
- been commissioned to create music for dance, choral, film, and stage productions
- several of her pieces from within the 'Sweet Honey in the Rock' discography are now scored in SATB choral settings
- commissioned as a composer for professional vocal ensembles such as 'Cantus'
David Hurd (b. 1950)
- American composer, organist, choral director, and educator
- previously Professor of Sacred Music at the General Theological Seminary, NYC
- currently Director of Music at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, NYC
- attended the Juilliard School, and Oberlin College
- 1977, received 1st prizes in both Organ Performance and Organ Improvisation from the International Congress of Organists; first person to win both in the same year
- 100+ choral and organ works in print; compositions recorded in both the U.S. and U.K.
- Gloria, Gloria commissioned by the Boys Choir of Harlem and premiered at Lincoln Center
- awarded the 2010 Distinguished Composer Award by the American Guild of Organists
- his works can be found in many hymnals, including the Episcopal Hymnal (1982)

Joseph Jennings (b. 1954)
- American composer, arranger, counter-tenor, and director
- former music director of professional men's group "Chanticleer"
- under his leadership, Chanticleer achieved international renown, releasing 23 critically acclaimed recordings of varying styles
- led Chanticleer to win several GRAMMY awards including Colors of Love, Magnificat and the double GRAMMY-Award winning Lamentations and Praises
- joined Chanticleer in 1983 as countertenor, but quickly became director
- original work An Old Black Woman, Homeless and Indistinct (for chorus and orchestra) commissioned by Plymouth Music Series and recorded by Vocalexcellence
- provided Chanticleer with some of its most popular repertoire, most notably spirituals, gospel music and jazz standards

Rosephanye Powell (b. 1962)
- American choral composer, singer, professor, and researcher
- well known for her sacred and secular works for mixed chorus, women's chorus, men's chorus, and children's voices
- a compositional voice "characterized by beautiful melodies, strong rhythmic emphasis, rich harmonies derived from African-American popular styles, and varied vocal textures including counterpoint"
- prior to composing, she dedicated her life to researching the interpretation of African-American spirituals
- published by NATS Journal and the ACDA Journal

Kevin Allen (b. 1964)
- developed a unique reputation as a composer of new church music for the Roman Rite
- fuses the polyphonic style of the Renaissance with the harmonic richness of the modern
- has written several part-books of 3-line polyphony, varying difficulty, which are meant to be transposed anywhere from the TTB to SSA ranges
- Director of Music at Saint John Cantius, Chicago
- lectures internationally on sacred music
- believes in "The New Polyphonic Age"
- also a composer of opera, chamber and orchestral music

#BlackChoralComposers  Blake Morgan 2020
Ken Burton (b. 1970)
- British choral/orchestral conductor, composer, performer, producer, TV presenter, and arranger
- known for his work on UK programmes, in particular BBC's Songs Of Praise
- choirmaster for the Oscar/Grammy winning Marvel film Black Panther
- parents relocated from West Indies to UK; Seventh-Day Adventists
- musical director, arranger, and collaborator with opera singer Bryn Terfel
- contracts choirs & records soundtrack choral parts (some of them his own arrangements) for Beyoncé, Christina Aguilera, will.i.am, Robbie Williams, etc
- works on arrangements with Andrew Lloyd Webber
- 2007, commissioned to write a double chorus piece for a BBC broadcast commemorating the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act
- presenter for the BBC Radio 3 programme The Choir

Bongani Magatyana (b. 1974)
- South African composer, singer, music director, and theatrical producer
- father was the choral conductor for the Old Apostolic Church in Cape Town
- taught to read/write 'tonic solfa' notation as a child
- many folk-inspired choral compositions
- his pieces are especially popular among South Africa's major choral competitions
- wrote the African-musical Songs of this Soil for Artscape Theatre, Cape Town
- worked with Cape Town Opera as both composer and director of his work Finding David
- teaches South African folk music workshops internationally
- composes in both the classical tradition (modern notation) and the Black South American folk tradition (taught by rote)
- to acquire scores, learning tracks, and/or teaching resources, contact Mollie Stone at Village Harmony – molliestone@uchicago.edu

Jason Max Ferdinand (b. 1977)
- American composer, arranger, and director of the Aeolians of Oakwood University (group that Take6 comes from, collaborations with Jacob Collier, etc)
- professor of theory, choral conducting, and orchestra leader
- raised in the Caribbean, the southernmost island country: Trinidad & Tobago
- leads the Aeolians in a repertoire which convincingly runs through Baroque ornamentation, rich romantic vibrato, clarion modern choral classics, and extended jazz sonorities
- directed the Aeolians as they accompanied the world acclaimed soprano, Kathleen Battle in her program, Underground Railroad: A Spiritual Journey
- presenter, adjudicator and guest conductor; former member of ACDA board
- won the coveted '2017 Choir of the World' award with the Aeolians as well as the first ever award for 'Most Outstanding Director'
- the Jason Max Ferdinand Choral Series is now in circulation by Walton Music

Marques L. A. Garrett (b. 1984)
A mammoth thank you to this brilliant composer, lecturer, and conductor Marques L.A. Garrett, who is a tremendous source of inspiration and encouragement for anyone studying this incredible repertoire. This man's commitment and knowledge towards teaching the world about these remarkable (too often forgotten) composers is off-the-charts, and if you have a desire to dive deeper, please take a look at his invaluable online resource 'Beyond Elijah Rock: The Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers' or get in contact with him directly.

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