

While I Run This Race: Music of Hope, Dedication and Celebration

The Music of Doug McConnell

Langston's Lot

1. I've Known Rivers	4:06
2. Joy	1:48
3. Conservatory Student Speaks of Higher Instrumentation	2:43
4. Blues at Dawn	3:01
5. Song for Billie Holiday	5:01
6. Oppression	4:24
7. Daybreak in Alabama	2:50

Roderick George, tenor • Gail B. Levinsky, saxophone
Jackie Edwards-Henry, piano

Two Spirituals

8. Sojourner	3:50
9. Ride On, King Jesus!	4:37

Joan McConnell, organ

While I Run This Race

10. Theme: Bring me joy while I run this race	2:12
11. Stand by me while I run this race	3:18
12. Guide my thoughts while I run this race	3:48
13. Ease my doubt while I run this race	4:18
14. ...for I don't want to run this race in vain	5:10
15. I'm your child while I run this race	6:43

The Helios Trio

John Fadial, violin • Beth Vanderburgh, cello • Chi-Chen Wu, piano

Total Time: 58:21



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by Doug McConnell



INTRODUCTION

The works that you will hear on this recording share a common identity; each piece is inspired by aspects of our African-American culture, one that has greatly enriched the American musical scene. Over the years, I was attracted to these materials because they spoke to me as a composer. Truth was presented in a distinctive and expressive manner. Beauty was everywhere; I was inspired to serve these wonderful attributes through my own creative responses.

Langston Hughes' poetry is innately musical. His words beg to be set to music! The warmth and clarity found in his poems are undeniable. I hope that my song cycle will help introduce his work to new generations of followers and please those folks who are already familiar with his work. The river imagery on the cover of this CD is inspired by Hughes' own words, as seen in the first movement of *Langston's Lot*, "I've Known Rivers."

Spirituals bring meaningful texts and music together. My job was to take these source materials and create a world around them. The two organ pieces contrast elements of darkness (Sojourner) with triumph and joy (Ride On, King Jesus). The six responses (variations) in my piano trio on the spiritual Guide My Feet While I Run This Race display a wide variety of feelings and emotions with which people may identify.

I am grateful to the seven wonderful performers on this recording who made my musical dreams a reality. Thanks to Gail, Jackie and Roderick for the love and affection that you bestowed upon Langston's Lot; you have captured the many worlds expressed by these poems so wonderfully! Thanks to John, Beth and Chi-Chen for taking a very challenging work and finding the truth behind the musical gestures of While I Run This Race. This piece is a prayer, one that asks for God's guidance through good times and challenging circumstances. Your work realized those pleas so very well.

Finally, my love and gratitude to my wife Joan. She has performed so many of my organ works over the years, helping me to throw out the kinks and get the registrations right! This recording would not be complete without her active participation and the wonderful expressivity that she brings to her performances.

The "eighth performer" is my recording engineer, Mark Bunce. Over many months he has used his expertise and his magic to bring out the best in our performers. All of us are most grateful to him! Please enjoy this musical tribute to hope, dedication and celebration,

Sincerely,
Doug McConnell

LANGSTON'S LOT

Commissioned by Gail Levinsky and Jackie Edwards-Henry, Langston's Lot is a song cycle for tenor, alto saxophone and piano which celebrates the poetry of Langston Hughes (1902-1967). The selected texts reflect the poet's sincere love of life, his people and their cultural heritage. Lyric beauty and simplicity dominate the overall style of the poems, a quality which is reflected by the accessible nature of the musical accompaniment.

As a poet, Hughes was influenced by music, especially jazz, blues and gospel. Jazz and blues styles are reflected in this song cycle, combined with traditional classical musical forms and procedures. I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of a close friend, Kirk Bollinger, whose eclectic tastes in music and other forms of artistic expression would resonate with those of Hughes himself.

I. I've Known Rivers

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

II. Joy

I went to look for Joy,
Slim, dancing Joy,
Gay, laughing Joy,
Bright-eyed Joy—
And I found her
Driving the butcher's cart
In the arms of the butcher boy!
Such company, such company,
As keeps this young nymph, Joy!



Langston Hughes
Photo by Carl Van Vechten

III. Conservatory Student Struggles with Higher Instrumentation

The saxophone
Has a vulgar tone.
I wish it would
Let me alone.
The saxophone
Is ordinary.
More than that,
It's mercenary!

The saxophone's
An instrument
By which I wish
I'd never been
Sent!

IV. Blues at Dawn

I don't dare start thinking in the morning.
I don't dare start thinking in the morning.
If I thought thoughts in bed,
Them thoughts would bust my head -
So I don't dare start thinking in the morning.
I don't dare remember in the morning.
Don't dare remember in the morning.
If I recall the day before,
I wouldn't get up no more-
So I don't dare remember in the morning.

V. Song for Billie Holiday

What can purge my heart
Of the song
And the sadness?
What can purge my heart
But the song
Of the sadness?
What can purge my heart
Of the sadness
Of the song?
Do not speak of sorrow
With dust in her hair,
Or bits of dust in eyes
A chance wind blows there.
The sorrow that I speak of
Is dusted with despair.
Voice of muted trumpet,
Cold brass in warm air.
Bitter television blurred
By sound that shimmers -
Where?

VI. Oppression

Now dreams
Are not available
To the dreamers,
Nor songs
To the singers.
In some lands
Dark night
And cold steel
Prevail-
But the dream
Will come back,
And the song
Break
Its jail.

VII. Daybreak in Alabama

When I get to be a composer
I'm gonna write me some music about
Daybreak in Alabama
And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it
Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist
And falling out of heaven like soft dew.
I'm gonna put some tall trees in it
And the scent of pine needles
And the smell of red clay after rain
And long red necks
And poppy colored faces
And big brown arms
And the field daisy eyes
Of black and white black white black people
And I'm gonna put white hands
And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands in it
Touching everybody with kind fingers
And touching each other natural as dew
In that dawn of music when I
Get to be a composer
And write about daybreak
In Alabama.

Two Spirituals for Organ

Sojourner (I Want Jesus to Walk with Me): this hymn tune appears in three settings. The first is a simple and more objective setting, leading to a second presentation that incorporates a steady, walking rhythm. A short interlude follows, providing some reflection on the tune itself; it makes use of blues inflections as appropriate. This passage leads to a final, more triumphant setting of the tune. Overall, the setting is a somber one, as this hymn is often used during the season of Lent.

Ride on, King Jesus is one of the most familiar spirituals in the repertoire. Over the generations, this energetic song has appeared in various American hymnals, in addition to lively arrangements for choirs or solo voice. This setting for organ attempts to capture the magnificence of Christ the King by presenting the tune in several moods and guises. Confidence and celebration permeate the entire setting; sometimes, the mood is even a bit earthy. At other times, the presentation of the tune is allowed to be gentle and lyric, reflecting another side of the Savior's presence. Throughout the setting, the importance of Christ the King remains firm and strong.

While I Run this Race

Commissioned by the Helios Trio and the Wyoming Music Teachers Association, While I Run this Race is a programmatic theme and variations composition, based on the spiritual, Guide My Feet While I Run this Race.

Each stanza of the spiritual resembles a blues lyric; several repeating lines are followed by a final statement, as demonstrated by stanza one:

*Guide my feet while I run this race,
Guide my feet while I run this race,
Guide my feet while I run this race,
For I don't want to run this race in vain.*

The titles for each movement are borrowed from various stanzas of the spiritual for the most part.

After a brief statement of the tune itself, the piece presents a series of six reflections or variations. Each movement reflects on its title, using the spiritual's thematic material in a direct or indirect fashion. Movements four and five run together without a pause, but the other reflections stand as separate movements in the composition.

While I Run This Race is an eclectic work; expect to hear influences from the worlds of spirituals, jazz, and blues, with perhaps a touch of rock in selected places. Overall, I am a thoroughly classical composer in terms of technique and harmonic language, but our world features a wide selection of musical styles. This composition attempts to reflect portions of this wonderful diversity.

Langston's Lot

Tenor **Roderick George** made his Lincoln Center debut in Handel's *Messiah*, a work he performs regularly, with recent appearances including the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, North Carolina Baroque Orchestra, and El Paso Choral Society. Additional highlights include Hailstork's *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* with Nashville Symphony, Mozart's *Requiem* with Northwest Florida Symphony, *Carmina Burana* with Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic, Boulanger's *Faust et Hélène* with New York Repertory Orchestra, and Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* with Highland Park Chorale. Celebrated for his performances of Dett's *The Chariot Jubilee*, he has collaborated with ensembles nationwide, including a recording with the Oakwood University Aeolians. International credits include concerts across Russia with the Orpheus Radio Symphony Orchestra and Krasnoyarsk Philharmonic. He has sung leading roles in operas such as *La Traviata*, *Don Giovanni*, *La Bohème*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Lakmé*, and *Porgy and Bess*. A multifaceted artist, he has toured extensively with the American Spiritual Ensemble and Jason Max Ferdinand Singers, including a London Royal Albert Hall debut. Alabama based, he is also artist-in-residence at Bay View Music Festival. www.roderickgeorge.com

Dr. Gail B. Levinsky, Professor of Music, serves on the faculty of Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, PA. Her performance credits, commissions, and scholarship are varied and include performances nationally and internationally, as well as publications, recordings and texts. Her recent release, *Quiet Hearts: Music for Saxophone* (AMP Recordings), explores solo and chamber repertoire written by women and non-binary composers, and received a silver medal for an outstanding contemporary classical recording by the Global Music Awards in 2024. Moreover, her other publications comprise a revised edition of Rosemary Lang's *Beginning Studies in the Altissimo Range* (Ensemble Publications), and the saxophone chapters in "Teaching Woodwinds: A Guide for Students and Teachers" (Mountain Peak Music). Dr. Levinsky received her graduate degrees from Northwestern University under the tutelage of Fred Hemke. Dr. Levinsky performs on Selmer Paris saxophones and Vandoren mouthpieces, reeds, and ligatures.

Jackie Edwards-Henry, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Music, Mississippi State University and, currently, adjunct collaborative pianist and coordinator of adult group piano at Lipscomb University in Nashville. She remains active as a collaborative pianist, harpsichordist, church musician, group piano specialist and teacher of adults. As champions of new works for over thirty years, she and duo partner Gail Levinsky have performed premieres in the United States and abroad and have collaborated on four recordings: *Saxophone and Other Voices*, *The Tipping Point*, *Quiet Hearts* (2024), and *Matthew Quayle: Woodwind Chamber Music* (2024).





Helios Trio

The Helios Trio is a dynamic ensemble comprised of three unique artists—Chi-Chen Wu, John Fadial, and Beth Vanderburgh—with rich and diverse backgrounds, renowned for their probing and passionate interpretations of the great piano trio repertoire. Their Carnegie Hall debut in New York City was met with high praise: “*(Helios) presented a stunning program, gorgeously rendered.*” (New York Concert Review). In 2018, they were the sole U.S. ensemble invited to perform at the International Debussy Centennial Conference in Oviedo, Spain.

Committed to diversity in programming, Helios presented the 2022 New York premiere of *The Spirit and the Maiden* by Elena Kats-Chernin. All three members are passionate educators, dedicated to cultivating future audiences and leading outreach efforts that bring great music to rural communities and public schools. Their recent performance of Beethoven’s Triple Concerto with the Cheyenne Symphony was live-streamed to 4,500 students.

Recent international tours have taken the trio to France and Switzerland, where they continued to engage audiences with diverse and compelling programs.

Praised by Fanfare Magazine for her “astonishing” and “poetic piano playing” and “symphonic, expansive texture of breathless virtuosity” (Historical Keyboard Society), pianist **Chi-Chen Wu** has appeared as recitalist, chamber musician, and concerto soloist across North America, Europe and Asia. She has appeared at festivals such as Aspen, Monadnock, and the Boston Early Music Festival Fringe Series. Her performances have been broadcast on NPR and other major platforms. Artists and conductors with whom she has concertized include Augustin Hadelich, Zuill Bailey, Karl-Heinz Steffens, Jonathan McPhee, members of the Juilliard String Quartet, Takács String Quartet, and musicians from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Her award-winning recordings include Schumann’s *Fantasia and Carnaval* and the complete violin-piano sonatas on a Graf fortepiano, praised by the American Record Guide and named among New York’s Top 10 Classical Albums of 2015. Wu is Associate Professor of Piano and Keyboard Area Chair at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, School of Music.

At the age of eleven, violinist **John Fadial** performed as soloist for President Gerald Ford, and since has sustained a multifaceted international career as chamber musician, concertmaster, soloist and pedagogue, performing in multiple styles, from the Baroque to contemporary, earning critical acclaim: “*Sparkling Technique,*” (*L’Est Républicain*, France), “*Wow! Great Stuff,*” (*The Washington Post*), Fanfare states, “*Fadial moves effortlessly among the composer’s subtle moods, voicing sentiment, melancholy, wistfulness and joyful lyricism with utter naturalness...these could hardly be bettered*” (Brahms Sonatas, Centaur 2019). Fadial was a Grammy semifinalist for the disc *Where Does Love Go: Chamber Music of Mark Engebretsen* (Innova 2007) and collaborates regularly with leading musicians including Gerard Schwarz, Jennifer Higdon, and Libby Larsen. Visiting Guest Artist invitations have included Interlochen Arts Academy, the French National Conservatory of Nancy, France, and Beifan University in Yinchuan, China. Fadial has been honored by the Southern Poverty Law Center for his contributions to Social Justice.

Cellist **Beth Vanderburgh** maintains a vigorous performing, teaching and recording career. She was top prizewinner of the Washington Society for Arts and Letters Cello Competition, as well as the Baltimore Chamber Awards. The Strad Magazine (London) praised her recent recording of the music of August Nölck as “*Lyrical and technically accomplished...eloquent and persuasive*” and the Classical Voice of North Carolina describes her playing as “*Impeccable musicianship, rhythmic precision, technical expertise, and expansive, passionate musicianship. Gorgeous music, exquisitely performed, and I do not believe I have overdone the superlatives.*” Vanderburgh’s recent recordings include discs of string sextets with the Stanislas Sextet, the Chamber Music of Gwyneth Walker for the Centaur Label, and Chamber Music of Jennifer Higdon (in collaboration with the Pulitzer prizewinning composer) for Albany. She is Professor of Cello at the University of Wyoming and Principal Cellist of the Cheyenne Symphony.





Joan and Doug McConnell

Joan McConnell has been a church organist and recitalist for almost fifty years, encountering a variety of organs, congregations, and adventures along the way. As an adjunct faculty member, she taught Music Theory, Aural Training and Applied Organ at Heidelberg University in Tiffin, Ohio and worked as a cataloger in the campus library. Retired from teaching, she is currently a Library Customer Advisor in the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library system. Joan continues to present organ recitals and enjoys her work as a substitute organist for congregations in the greater Cincinnati/Kentucky area.

Her degrees include the Master of Music in organ performance (University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music) and the Bachelor of Music in Church Music (Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio and *Berliner Kirchenmusikschule*, Germany). She has studied with Trudy Faber, Richard Benedum, David Mulbury, Donald Busarow, and Karl Hochreither. In addition to these music studies, she earned a Master of Arts degree in Theological Studies from the University of Notre Dame.

Dr. Doug McConnell is Professor Emeritus of Composition and Music for the School of Music and Theater at Heidelberg University. Dr. McConnell has enjoyed an active career as a composer, teacher and administrator. His compositions have been performed throughout the U.S. and internationally.

Doug has written for a variety of performing mediums. In addition to an extensive choral catalog, he has composed several major song cycles/collections, including his *Langston's Lot* projects, two major works for voice, alto saxophone and piano, based on the poetry of Langston Hughes. His instrumental works include two piano trios, and assorted chamber/solo works for flute, guitar, oboe, trumpet, organ and piano. Dr. McConnell has also composed for the theater; his work here includes incidental music/sound design for a variety of stage productions, as well as *Lily*, an opera for children and their families, based on a story by Walter Wangerin Jr.

drdougmusic.com.

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Mark Bunce

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Sojourner and Ride On, King Jesus recorded at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Cincinnati, OH

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