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## *Continental Harmony* Premiere in Alexandria, LA New Composition Celebrates Legacy of Arna Bontemps and opening of Coughlin-Saunders Performing Arts Center

September 29, 2004  
For Immediate Release



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**Visit on the web:** [www.talktothemusic.com](http://www.talktothemusic.com)

[www.arnabontempsmuseum.com](http://www.arnabontempsmuseum.com)

[www.louisiana-arts.org](http://www.louisiana-arts.org)

and [www.rapidesymphony.org](http://www.rapidesymphony.org)

Photo by Tia Owens-Powers for The Alexandria Daily Town Talk

St. PAUL, Minn., September 29, 2004—Composer William C. Banfield's original composition entitled "Hope: Symphony 9" will be premiered by the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, the Louisiana College Chorale, The Talk to the Music Community Chorus, and special musical guests in Alexandria's new Coughlin-Saunders Performing Arts Center Saturday, October 16 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, October 17 at 2:30 p.m. Admission is \$20.00 for adults and \$10.00 for children and seniors. Area music students and their teachers are invited to attend an open rehearsal in the morning of October 16. The Arna Bontemps African American Museum, the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, and the Arts Council of Central Louisiana are collaborating partners in this commissioning project as part of *Continental Harmony*, the national community-based composer residency program of American Composers Forum, St. Paul, Minn. For tickets and information, contact the Arts Council of Central Louisiana at 318-767-2600, [www.louisiana-arts.org](http://www.louisiana-arts.org); the Rapides Symphony Orchestra at 318-442-9709, [www.rapidesymphony.org](http://www.rapidesymphony.org); or the Arna Bontemps Museum at 318-473-4692, [www.arnabontempsmuseum.com](http://www.arnabontempsmuseum.com); or visit the organizations' umbrella website at [www.talktothemusic.com](http://www.talktothemusic.com).

This premiere is part of the event *Talk to the Music: A Festival of Community*, October 10–17, presented by a partnership of local arts and cultural organizations in celebration of the African American experience. The centerpiece of the festival is the Arna Bontemps Museum's 2004 Symposium and Celebration of Arna Bontemps, October 13-17. Bontemps, a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, poet, novelist, historian, anthologist, and librarian, was born in Alexandria. Dr. Banfield's new 30-35 minute symphony is built around the text of a Bontemps' poem first published 80 years ago titled "Hope." Throughout his

(more)

residency in Alexandria and Pineville, Dr. Banfield learned about the area and met with many community leaders to find inspiration for this piece. He worked with young people who played early versions of the composition, and he also composed at the piano in the Arna Bontemps Museum, in the room where Bontemps was born.

Banfield said “Hope: Symphony 9” is: “constructed around the ideas, poetry, writings and reminiscences of Arna Bontemps. The work attempts to evoke in us a note, resonating chord, a sense of destiny, active engagement in the betterment of this world, something the poet's life exemplified. Built around 10 movements that are titled after poetry fragments, themes from Bontemps works, it is a symphony of ideas, instruments, and voices. Like Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, using Goethe's universal themes of the noble dignity of man's aspiration to reach a mature spiritual faith, Bontemps' words serve to direct this symphony towards these higher ideas. Having hope, reveries from childhood, keeping the dreams of our ancestors, celebrating family, friendships, places, and our culture, these are the central themes in the symphony as well as themes in Bontemps' works. The style of this symphony is lyrical, poetic, jazzy, symphonic, bluesy, and modern. In other words, it is a 21st century American symphony. I was totally immersed in the idea of living with hope and actively engaging in hope-full work, despite the current chaotic culture we find ourselves working through. Bontemps reminds us in so many words, that just as the roar rises on the sea, just beyond that ripple that seemingly for the moment causes disruption, there, there comes our hope.”

Friday, October 15, the Symposium will present a panel discussion featuring composers Dr. T.J. Anderson, the Austin Fletcher Professor Emeritus of Music at Tufts University, and Dr. Banfield. They will discuss the use of African American literature as the basis for classical music compositions and operas. Ifa Bayeza will join the panel to discuss the intertwining of music and literature in the Harlem Renaissance.

Gwendolyn Y. Elmore, President of the Arna Bontemps Foundation said, “The Arna Bontemps Symposium and Celebration with the premiere performance of ‘Hope: Symphony 9’ is a celebration of a cultural and educational renaissance. In his autobiographical essay ‘Why I Returned,’ Bontemps wrote of the changes he had seen in his lifetime. He chronicles these changes in three acts. Act three, according to Bontemps, would perhaps be the most spectacular, the most dramatic and personify a kind of awakening and regeneration. This Symposium and Celebration speaks to an awakening and regeneration, a spirit of community.”

The October 16 and 17 performances of “Hope: Symphony 9” will be presented in the Coughlin-Saunders Performing Arts Center, a 615-seat theater opened in August 2004, one block away from the Arna Bontemps Museum in the downtown Alexandria cultural district. The premiere is the first performance of the Rapides Symphony Orchestra in the new theater, and the first performance of the Rapides Symphony under the baton of its new Music Director and Principal Conductor, Maestro Joshua Zona. He said, “It is

very exciting for the Rapides Symphony to premiere such a wonderful work. With the community chorus, Louisiana College Chorale, and the Rapides Symphony, our community is truly coming together in song.”

Ellene Owens, Manager of the Rapides Symphony Orchestra stated, “Dr. Banfield comes with impeccable credentials. And he is a very energetic, creative, sincere artist who has enveloped himself in our community and all of its variations. I was lucky enough to accompany him on several adventures during his visits to our community and observed how he completely adapted to every situation. He was as comfortable leading the Louisiana College Chorale through a sight-reading expedition of the ‘Hope’ piece as he was with band students from Peabody & Pineville High Schools. He worked through the mechanics of the upcoming performance with newly hired conductor Josh Zona, and embraced the joyful sounds of Zion Hill Baptist Church. In interviews, Dr. Banfield conducted his sessions with the media at the piano excitedly speaking about how he was incorporating the many facets of this community into this work, all the while punctuating each point with music. We are fortunate to have chosen Dr. Banfield and look forward to the world premiere of this wonderful piece.”

The symposium will conclude Monday morning with a performance of the piece for students from throughout Rapides Parish at the Peabody Magnet High School auditorium in Alexandria. Following the performance, Dr. Banfield will talk to the students about his inspirations in writing the piece. While that final performance will officially conclude the 2004 Arna Bontemps Symposium and Celebration and the *Talk to the Music Festival*, it is only the beginning. A reduced version of the piece for small choir and piano will be ported to the parishes of Louisiana, to schools, and to special needs audiences, including a performance for people served by Evergreen Ministries. The community will use the Banfield commission as the first step in a multi-year plan for further commissions as the Alexandria, Louisiana area becomes an increasingly active center for musical culture (in 2005 a five day international piano competition will take place in Alexandria).

Byron Marshall, Community Development Coordinator for the Arts Council of Central Louisiana, said, “I’m speaking for the Executive Director of the Arts Council, Randy Bernhard, and our very involved Board President and Vice President, Jacque Caplan and Edward Larvardain III, in pointing out that the world premiere of Bill Banfield’s “Hope” Symphony, which beautifully summons the vision of Arna Bontemps, together with the “Southern Journeys” exhibit and the impressive array of guests, speakers, and events in the Arna Bontemps Symposium and Celebration means that October in Alexandria, Louisiana should be of great value to anyone interested in Bontemps and the African American experience. This is a time to come together, and for everyone to celebrate our African American heritage.”

An up-to-the-minute list of the many cultural and creative events during the week long festival, as well as contact information for visitors, is provided at <http://www.talktothemusic.com>.

The *Talk to the Music* concerts and events are partly funded by the State Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, the Louisiana Division of the Arts, and the cities of Alexandria and Pineville, as well as by local foundations, corporations, the Alexandria Town Talk, Turning Point Solutions Group, Frances Johanson Designs, the generosity of individual donors, businesses, churches, and social organizations, and by the American Composers Forum's Continental Harmony Award to the three partners: the Arna Bontemps African American Museum, the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, and the Arts Council of Central Louisiana. The Arna Bontemps Symposium and Celebration is partly funded through the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Louisiana Division of the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation and ACT 1 Appropriation. This project is supported by the Alexandria Mayoral Commission for Cultural Affairs (MCCA) and the Rapides Foundation.

*Continental Harmony* has been recognized as a model of local community artistic initiative. The initiative has been launched by the American Composers Forum in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts as a way of bringing composers and communities together for the creation of original musical works reflecting the unique history, culture and spirit of each community. Each host site identifies a theme, an occasion, and local performers for a musical work that will be meaningful to its citizens. With the assistance of American Composers Forum, the community group then selects the composer best able to write the music and carry out the residency.

During the inaugural round of the program in the year 2000, American Composers Forum discovered that *Continental Harmony* projects bring people together, heighten community feeling and sense of place, and encourage the formation of collaborations among groups. At the same time the artistic resources of the area are often strengthened and validated. As a result of this inaugural round, Twin Cities Public Television created an award-winning documentary and website. For more information, visit [www.continentalharmony.org](http://www.continentalharmony.org)

*Continental Harmony is a leadership initiative of the American Composers Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional funding provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and Marshall Field's Project Imagine with support from the Target Foundation.*

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