

# When the Song of the Angels Is Stilled

Words by Howard Thurman  
Music by Elizabeth Alexander

## Program Notes

Howard Thurman's compassionate writing, "The Work of Christmas" has been one of my favorite readings for as long as I can remember, but it took me a while to find a musical voice for his words. My initial attempts wove together threads from spirituals, folk music and classical music, but the results inevitably paled in comparison to the strength of Thurman's vision.

I had almost decided to abandon the setting altogether, when one day in a yoga class I found myself thinking about a South African song I had conducted a few years earlier. In that song, as in much of African vocal music, the voices did not move in counterpoint to one another, but instead moved upwards and downwards in parallel motion, creating a powerful, unified band of sound. That, I thought, is music with its sleeves rolled up!

I must confess that for the rest of the yoga class I did not empty my mind as my teacher repeatedly suggested. Instead, I blissfully began to weave this new thread into the most powerful line of Thurman's writing: "To make music in the heart." - E. A.

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**Howard Thurman** (1900-1981) spent most of his life engaged in the work of Christmas. He was born and raised in Daytona, Florida, where he was raised by his grandmother, a former slave. In his early professional life, he was professor of religion and director of religious life at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, and later was dean of Howard University. In 1944 he moved to San Francisco to co-found the first integrated, multi-cultural church in the United States, The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples.

Thurman was strongly influenced by Rufus Jones, the Quaker leader of the pacifist, interracial Fellowship of Reconciliation, with whom he studied. In 1936 Thurman led the first black delegation to Southern Asia, where he was profoundly affected by his meeting with Mohandas Gandhi. Thurman's 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, inspired nonviolent civil rights movements in the United States and throughout the world.