SINGIN' THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL:

An Evolutionary History and Performance Practice Guide

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Abstract

African American spirituals and arrangements of spirituals are some of North America's great contributions to the choral repertory. Choral musicians and soloists from around the world perform this music to varying degrees of success every day. This paper serves as an account of the process that brought enslaved Africans to North America and details their religious conversion from cosmology-based faith to Christianity. A major portion of this paper is dedicated to performance practice topics such as spiritual categorization, technical approaches to performance, as well as defining and addressing contemporary concerns of cultural appropriation and appreciation. Musicians who are seeking to further develop their contextual knowledge of spirituals, and those who wish to integrate stylistic elements in order to present a more authoritative performance will be interested in the content of this dissertation.

Résumé

Les *spirituals* afro-américains et les arrangements de *spirituals* sont parmi les plus grandes contributions de l'Amérique du Nord au répertoire choral. Des choristes et des solistes du monde entier interprètent cette musique avec plus ou moins de succès chaque jour. Cette dissertation rend compte du processus qui a amené les Africains asservis en Amérique du Nord et détaille leur conversion religieuse de la foi basée sur la cosmologie au christianisme. Une grande partie de ce document est consacré aux sujets de pratique de la performance tels que la catégorisation des *spirituals*, les approches techniques de la performance, ainsi qu'à la définition et à la résolution des préoccupations contemporaines d'appropriation et d'appréciation culturelles. Les musiciens qui cherchent à développer davantage leur connaissance contextuelle des *spirituals* et ceux qui souhaitent intégrer des éléments stylistiques afin de présenter une performance plus autoritaire seront intéressés par le contenu de cette dissertation.

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The African American spiritual is an American cultural phenomenon that was wrought by the suffering of African peoples who were brought to North America by means of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The spiritual is a musical tradition conceived during the era of slavery, that bears contributions from at least three separate continents—namely, Africa, Europe, and North America. The influence of the spiritual can be felt in many genres such as blues, jazz, rock, and soul, and the music is performed in churches, theatres, and concert halls, as well as in various forms of popular culture.

Context

In the past 20 years there has been renewed interest in the performance of African American spirituals, as well as a desire to perform this music from an informed standpoint. There is an opportunity for musicians to discover performance practices that will aid them in their interpretation of this music, such as technique and contextual knowledge. Besides these points, the central question that I will address in the following chapters is: how do people of all backgrounds become more comfortable singing the spiritual? The question arises from experiences that I have had working with people who do not come from Afro-diasporic cultures. Non-blacks who have not had experience with the performance of spirituals sometimes comment on their discomfort singing this genre because of its relation to slavery, one of the biggest blights on our shared history. However, I would suggest that everyone should and can feel comfortable singing spirituals—especially the early concert spirituals of the 20th century that were written in a Western European style. Like anything, the only way to improve a skill is to practice. Additionally, listening to different interpretations critically is important. The more interpretations of spirituals that one hears, the easier that it will be to define what constitutes a convincing performance. While I believe that everyone has the potential to sing spirituals convincingly, it

should be noted that as with all musical styles, formal training, and natural ability play a part as well. Although the spiritual is related to other Western musical forms—such as art songs, hymns, and other liturgical music—the learning approach and performance practices can be quite different. Consequently, spirituals can seem like an intimidating genre, and certain groups may feel more comfortable learning and performing them than others, depending on their socio-cultural background and their experience with the repertoire. This may result from different learning traditions, as individual cultures may approach music pedagogy differently. In the West the tendency was for this "written"...music to become elitist and for a passive audience to be "confronted" with a performance, in Africa the cultural priorities and values demanded a communal musical form in which there was no real separation between "performer" and "audience": a participatory experience for everyone involved.[1] In addition, and perhaps more importantly, because of the historical violence associated with slavery—slavery being one of the spiritual's unfortunate catalysts—many performers feel that they have no right to sing this music, unless they are Black or have Afro-diasporic heritage. While this is the view of some, most authorities on the spiritual would argue that this music is so special and so deserving of widespread interpretation that limiting its performance to those with African heritage would be a disservice to the genre.

Problem

In the choral repertoire, there exists a wide array of spirituals, or arrangements in the *style* of spirituals. However, there is no clear and defined manner to performing the material. While some would argue that the best way to perform a spiritual is simply to soften all [t] consonants and

[1] Marimba Ani, *Yurungu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994), 213.

change “the” to “de”, there exist many technical aspects of performing this genre effectively. Much the same as advancements have been made in early European music scholarship, there is still room in the African American spiritual tradition to expand our general understanding of its performance practices.

In order to codify this study and to aid in the comprehension of African American spiritual performance practices, there were 4 central questions that I aimed to answer:

1. How did the spiritual—a musical genre conceived by enslaved Africans brought to North America—evolve to become an incredibly rich, and uniquely American genre sung across the world?
2. What are the most distinctive musical features of the spiritual? Are these features universal within the genre, or are they defined by specific musical styles?
3. What formal musical language can be used to make the understanding of the spiritual accessible to those unfamiliar with the genre?
4. How can people who perform spirituals avoid cultural faux pas.

On a more basic level, the most important thing to consider in approaching the spiritual is its historical context. When one understands the history of this music, where it came from, how it evolved, and why there is both celebration and sadness in the music, then all of the musical nuances to be found in diction, feel, rhythm, and blend may become more clear. Historical context alone will not make you an authority in performing the spiritual, but it will certainly aid your cultural understanding, and ultimately positively affect the way that the music is interpreted.

Approach

An in-depth examination of literature and sound recordings related to the African American spiritual was conducted to better understand the origin and evolution of the genre. Treatises from the 17th through to 21st centuries were examined in order to highlight African American spiritual performance practices in solo song and in choral settings. Additionally, I have endeavoured to clarify conventions for individuals seeking to avoid problems surrounding cultural appropriation. Special attention was given to the exploration of books, interviews, journals, articles and websites by African American spiritual authorities on the origin, social evolution, and current performance practices of the spiritual. The comprehensive study of the African American spiritual provided a substantial amount of material pertaining to the development of the genre, its use during the slavery and postbellum eras, as well as its modern function throughout North America, and internationally.

The musical and religious customs of 17th century Africa, the enslaved peoples' musical culture in British America, and the development of the concert spiritual in the United States, by way of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the composers of the Harlem Renaissance, will all be explored before considering African American spiritual performance practices. This is to outline a reliable and comprehensive chronology, which will provide necessary historical context about spiritual ideologies. It is my hope that through helping to clarify this line of research, the spiritual will gain further acknowledgement as a genre deserving of skilled, technical, and insightful interpretation.

CHAPTER 1: RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

It is well known that Africans travelling to North America by way of the Middle Passage lost a great deal of their customs and traditions. However, on a much deeper and rudimentary level there is a great deal of African "character" that survived due to the inextricable connection between the Africans and the extraordinary culture that they knew in their homeland.[2] The enslaved Africans held on to, and handed down, historic concepts that exist even today: "(1) the fundamental nature of musical experience; (2) specific approaches to musical form, patterns of continuity, and syntax; and (3) performance practices, the processes involved in actively making music.[4]

Studies about the Atlantic Slave Trade have pointed out that the vast majority of enslaved Africans were taken from sub-Saharan Africa, primarily from the Guinea Coast or West Sudan and Congo Basin regions. The African American music that we are familiar with today has the most direct connection to these regions. Several historic elements contributed to Africa's influence on African American music. The most critical piece was the display of African dance and music culture that was often encouraged on the slave ships. Slavers maintained that their human consignments were more apt to survive the gruesome journey through the Middle Passage if they were encouraged to sing and dance aboard the ships.[5] This was not typically a welcomed occasion by the enslaved peoples.

> The serious men from Futa…did not take any part in a type of frivolous entertainment they would have refused at home and that in their

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[2] David Dalby. "The African Element in American English," in *Rappin' and Stylin' Out*, ed. Thomas Kochman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 173.

[4] Sheila S. Walker *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 156.

[5] Walker, *African Roots*, 157.

> deplorable position they viewed with much indignation. But [the sailors] resolved to make even the most reluctant dance, without considering that their repugnance had its origin in education and religion. After roughing them up, and maltreating them, they beat them up.[6]

However, through this communal practice, Africans from different tribes had the opportunity to learn each other's music and dance culture, and in turn every time a new shipment of captives arrived, they brought with them new artistic practices to the New World. The African Americans were therefore always being introduced to new Africans who brought with them current proficiency in African culture.

The African concept of music as a fundamental part of cultural and religious expression was one that echoed throughout the entire continent. "Although there [were] important differences between musical practices of various sub-Saharan African people, a basic conception that music is an essential, obligatory aspect of life [was] commonly held."[7] Music, being so entwined with all facets of human life, had a very centralized role in African culture. This importance is made clear through music's connection with the African view of the universe. "The Gods will not descend without song" is an expression that is still widely used throughout West African cultures. "It is extremely significant because this phrase embodies a fundamental conception concerning the role of music in sub-Saharan African cultures."[8] In many sub-Saharan cultures, there exists a three-tiered model of cosmic power and authority. Musicologist Sheila S. Walker explains that at the top of this hierarchical model is:

> The supreme being or supreme force, the omnipotent, omniscient, begetter of all things and ultimate source of all force. This supreme deity

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[6] Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas, 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 67.

[7] Ibid, 158.

[8] Ibid.

> is called various names by various cultures—Onyame, the shining one, or Odomankoma, the boundless one, by the Akan people of Ghana, or Olodumare by the Yoruba of Nigeria, or the dualistic male-female deity Mawu-Lisa, by the Fon people of Benin. This supreme force is generally uninterested in the day-to-day affairs of humans and, having created the world, maintains a distance from it.[9]

After the first tier is the second tier or middle level, which consists of deities. This tier represents various forces of nature, and in contrast to the upper tier is concerned with humanity's day-to-day activities, constantly interacting with us. Humankind is the third level of the cosmos. Like other mythologies, all the second-tier deities have specific domains over which they exercise their authority. Humankind, therefore, must beseech and please the deities in order to achieve its goals. "The central most important act that occurs during this process is the communion between a devotee of a deity and that deity—a process that is generally known in scholarly literature, if not by most practitioners, as 'possession.'"[10] This point of possession occurs at the climactic moment during a musical performance wherein the singer, dancer, or drummer is most intense: when the performer becomes completely absorbed and entirely connected to the music.

During this moment of climax, it is believed that the deity moves into the body of the performer devotee, possessing them, and the performer then takes on the character of that deity. The process of possession gives the possessed person greater power and strength. "Of critical importance is the fact that the deities will not descend to possess the devotees unless implored."[11] Deities are implored to enter the body of the performer by means of playing music that is specifically associated with each deity.

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

This tiered system was one that traveled with the enslaved Africans to many parts of the world. In certain places, where this portion of African culture was allowed to thrive, one can still find traces of the tiered system. Throughout the Caribbean and South American regions, enslaved people held on to fragments of their African culture; however, in British America, the circumstances were entirely different. The slavery system in the United States, especially the constant campaign to rid the enslaved people of their African traditions once they landed, meant that holding on to the vestiges of their former faith was nearly impossible. The slave owners even went as far as outlawing the use of drums and other artifacts necessary to connect with their deities. What the enslaved people were able to retain were the general concepts and values of their traditions, without the particular tenets of religious cosmology.

> In attempting to understand the various levels of meaning that occur in the experience of African American music, it is important to take cognizance of the critical role of music in African cultures, including in "possession," or, in general terms, in transcending normal states of consciousness. It is important because this process, which is so critical in African cosmological terms, also shapes the African American musical experience. Although devoid of the specificity associated with African culture, the underlying concept of music as "ritual" is extremely important in many African American musical genres. The notion that music is a vehicle for the inducement of an altered state of consciousness is very important to its understanding. It is, if you will, an important "extra-musical text" to be read when experiencing performances of certain African American music genres.[12]

Some argue that the need for ritual contributed to the adoption of Christianity by enslaved Africans in colonial America. The Methodist and Baptist faiths were the most successful at luring Africans into the Christian faith.[13] Walker goes on to suggest that this was:

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[12] Walker, *African Roots*, 159.

[13] LeRoy Moore, Jr., "The Spiritual: Soul of Black Religion," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (Dec 1971), 79.

> [I]n large measure, because the religious practices of the then evangelical movements of John and Charles Wesley openly embraced ecstatic expressions of religious fervor. Consequently, "speaking in tongues," fainting, moving with the "shakes," uncontrollably going into trance-like states were all practices in which white Methodist and Baptist religious celebrants engaged. In other words, religious behavior of eighteenth-century evangelical Methodists and Baptists was very consistent with religious behavior of eighteenth-century West Africans, although the religious ideology was not. This congruence of religious behavior was…fertile ground for cultural syncretism to occur.[14]

The Africans' adoption of Christianity as their faith in this New World changed the traditional view of the cosmos that they once had into something entirely different. They were forced to reinterpret their traditional African concepts of religion to conform with the reality that they were now faced with. Their African concepts of the world were retained but were altered to fit a new religion with European and American practices. So, while the Africans in colonial America no longer used specific music to call upon specific deities, the concept of music as an extremely important part of faith remained. Additionally, the idea of "possession" was carried over into the new faith by means of members being possessed by the Christian Holy Ghost. Walker explains, "the idea of possession and the role of the music in inducing possession was retained, though the specific nature of the possession was new."[15]

In addition to entering a new religious framework, the enslaved Africans' musical ethos evolved as well. While African folk culture still permeated the Africans' spirit, a new genre of music had been born from the intersection of their cosmology-based faith with that of Christianity. From this convergence was born the African American spiritual, and in this new

[14] Ibid.

[15] Walker, *African Roots*, 160.

genre African melodies and rhythms joined with European harmonic structure, language, and theology.

The construction of early spirituals was largely improvised and "workshopped". In his book *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, American writer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) notes that at certain gatherings, there would be opportunities for enslaved peoples to make music. There would be one leader, the "maker of songs", who would be the "caller" or improviser, and that person would improvise text around a known melody that was appropriate to the occasion. Johnson also indicates that memorization of the leading line could be difficult because there were so many known melodies, and familiar texts. However, it was the leader's responsibility to know them, since the congregation was solely responsible for "answering" the lead line. He writes:

> […]the accomplished leader must know them all, because the congregation sings only the refrains and repeats; every ear in the church is fixed upon him, and if he becomes mixed in his lines or forgets them, the responsibility falls directly on his shoulders. For example, most of these hymns are constructed to be sung in the following manner:
>
> Leader – "Swing low, sweet chariot."
> Congregation – "Coming for to carry me home."
> Leader – "Swing low, sweet chariot."
> Congregation – "Coming for to carry me home."
> Leader – "I look over yonder, what do I see?"
> Congregation – "Coming for to carry me home."
> Leader – "Two little angels coming after me"
> Congregation – "Coming for to carry me home."[16]

This relationship between the "caller" or improviser and the ensemble's "answer" is known as call-and-response and is a ubiquitous antiphonal form of musical interaction found in Negro spirituals. In modern performances of spirituals, the melodies are harmonized in nearly every

[16] James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, eds. Stanley Applebaum, and Philip Smith (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1995), 84.

arrangement, but this is a relatively recent trend. One can imagine the leader singing the spiritual above, "swing low, sweet chariot", and being answered in a strident three or four-part harmony response, "coming for to carry me home." However, in the era of slavery, and for a time after, most spirituals were sung in unison. This is evidenced by the numerous books of transcribed slave songs, especially *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), which demonstrates that the transcribers found very little harmony in the examples that were sung for them. Even today, African call-and-response practices are largely devoid of harmony. There are, however, moments of rhythmic polyphony wherein a few members of the response group will begin slightly ahead of the main ensemble, causing a moment of "catch-up", and through this, one might perceive a momentary harmonic effect. Moreover, the formally untrained, communal nature of this type of singing may lead to a momentary harmonic effect due to inaccurate pitch-matching at the onset of a response. Still, many slave songs were sung by an improvisational leader and responded to in unison.

In the preface to *Slave Songs of the United States* there is a passage that gives credence to the general improvisatory nature of the spiritual:

> I asked one of these blacks—one of the most intelligent of them [Prince Rivers, Sergeant 1st Reg. S. C. V.]—where they got these songs. 'Dey make 'em, sah.' 'How do they make them?' After a pause, evidently casting about for an explanation, he said: 'I'll tell you, it's dis way. My master call me up, and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it, and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise-meeting dat night dey sing about it. Some's very good singers and know how; and dey work it in—work it in, you know, till they get it right; and dat's de way.'[17]

Throughout the 17th century, British settlers arriving in North America brought with them uncompromising religious conviction. One of the objectives of the colonists was to "prove that

[17] Allen, William Francis, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xvii.

God's plan for His churches could be successfully realized in the American wilderness."[18] This motivation led to an evangelical atmosphere wherein Christianity greatly influenced the mode in which enslavers engaged with the enslaved. When the colonists began to transport enslaved people into British America, they indoctrinated them with Christian ideology. The enslaved people began to draw upon literature from the bible, as well as anecdotal occurrences from their daily lives, and these stories formed the basis for the spiritual's intimations. To make the music even more dramatic, some spirituals interpolate stories from the Old Testament into the New Testament, and vice versa. Because of this, "Job, Jesus, Judas, and Joshua may be found in the same song, along with the...train that carries the sanctified." [19] Though the songs may not respect a chronological biblical order, they do present an isolated, dramatic biblical moment that can be reduced into a digestible account. Given that most of the enslaved peoples had little English literacy, the spiritual provided an opportunity for these people to reference and relate to some of the stories and messages in the Bible. Thus, they were once again able to combine elements from their mother culture oral tradition with elements of a Western European written tradition.

The African American spiritual genre, therefore, represented a continued legacy of liturgical music within the African diaspora. They offered musical ritual, and in turn they functioned as "affective forces to induce altered states of consciousness."[20] This included other spiritual facets such as camp meetings – a Christian religious service wherein people without regular preachers would travel to a specific location to sing, dance, and enjoy fellowship with

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[18] "America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century, Part 1 - Religion and the Founding of the American Republic," Library of Congress, accessed on August 1, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html.

[19] Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music* (London: Jazz Book Club edition, 1966), 38.

[20] Walker, *African Roots*, 160

others – as well as 'ring shouts', an indigenous dance form from West Africa wherein dancers move in a quickening counterclockwise circle, while singing in a call-and-response fashion to the deities.

CHAPTER 2: EVOLUTION OF THE SPIRITUAL

Composers, singers, and social movements played important roles in bringing the spiritual from its humble beginnings in the plough fields to its present-day function as concert hall repertoire. The following chapter focuses on The Fisk Jubilee Singers, a singing troupe formed in the mid-1870s that introduced the spiritual to audiences outside of the Black community. They also reframed the application of spirituals from monophonic work songs sung by enslaved peoples to engaging music performed for audiences, using harmony and unique rhythmic effects. Lastly, I will discuss The Harlem Renaissance, and three composers who were instrumental in further developing the genre by arranging the spiritual using modern musical language.

2.1 The Fisk Jubilee Singers

No study of the African American spiritual would be complete without reference to the Fisk Jubilee Singers. A vocal ensemble from the late 19th century, they helped to move the spiritual from a song sung solely by enslaved Africans to a musical art form that has a global presence. They are important to the modern perception of spirituals, because before the Fisk Singers introduced spirituals to the world, the general concept of Black music was propagated by White performers in blackface singing minstrel music, a comedic caricature of what White Americans

of the age thought Black music to be. Minstrelsy was so popular during the postbellum era that few outside of the slave community had a sense of what real negro music was.[21]

On January 1, 1863, United States President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which stated that slave ownership would soon be illegal. Shortly thereafter, following the end of the American Civil War (1861–1865), more than 4 million men and women found themselves part of a system that had given them their freedom, but had very little regard for their wellbeing. The newly emancipated people went about the task of building new identities for themselves; one of the ways that they sought to do this was by seeking formal Western education. Up to that point there had been several laws created throughout the country to prevent the education of Black people, such as this excerpt from the Virginia Revised Code of 1819:

> That all meetings or assemblages of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting-house or houses, &c., in the night; or at any school or schools for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an unlawful assembly; and any justice of a county, &c., wherein such assemblage shall be, either from his own knowledge or the information of others, of such unlawful assemblage, &c., may issue his warrant, directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblages, &c., may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such slaves, and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes.

When laws were later revised, after the introduction of the 13th and 14th amendments—the first of which abolished slavery, while the second allowed for recently freed men and women to

[21] Gabriel Milner, "The Tenor of Belonging: The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Popular Cultures of Postbellum Citizenship," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15, no. 4 (2016), 399.

become American citizens—many Blacks sought a place to gain practice in reading, writing, science, trade studies, and the fine arts. A Protestant abolitionist organization called the American Missionary Association (AMA), which had been in operation since 1846, began taking steps to build a new school for Blacks. The AMA had an enormous impact on the development of the negro public school system in the South during the 19th century. In fact, from 1861 to 1893 the AMA spent $11,610,000 on educational initiatives for Blacks, twice as much as the federally run Freedman's Bureau.[22] In 1865, with an investment from the AMA of $12,000—as well as $4000 from the Freedman's Bureau—an expansive plot of land was purchased for $16,000. The property was formerly a Union Army Hospital. Of course, the school still needed buildings. Thus, a large undisclosed donation was made by Union General Clinton B. Fisk (1828–1890) to build upon the plot. The General became the namesake of the institution, and the school opened a year later, on January 9, 1866.[23] By February of the same year, the student population had reached 500.[24] It should be noted that during this time, the United States had not yet legislated publicly funded education for Blacks.

George L. White (1858–1916), an abolitionist employee at the Freedman's Bureau, was brought in by Fisk University to volunteer as a writing and music teacher. He divided his time between the Bureau and the school, and donated his lunch break every day in order to give half-hour music lessons to the Fisk students. White began introducing the students to various forms of

[22] Richard Bryant Drake, "The American Missionary Association and the Southern Negro, 1861-1888," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1957), 198.

[23] G. W. Hubbard, *A History of the Colored Schools, of Nashville, Tennessee* (Nashville, Tennesse: Wheeler, Marshall & Bruce, Printers and Stationers, 1874), 21-22.

[24] Sandra J. Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginnings of an American Tradition," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2001), 53-54.

classical music, and when the students proved to be apt at the interpretation of these pieces, he set out to showcase his vocal students via public performance.[25] By the spring of 1871, White had formed a small choir of nine voices, which consisted of his best music students. He began to discuss, with other faculty, the prospect of taking the choir on tour, in order to raise money for Fisk University. The university had fallen into disrepair due to the insurmountable costs of running a boarding school and the lack of public funding. White, who also served as the school's treasurer, made many efforts to curb school spending and expenses, but ultimately the school found itself on the brink of closure due to decay.

> The Peabody Fund had contributed scholarship money and the Freedmen's Bureau had assisted with construction and building repairs, but operational funds were sadly lacking. White could no longer pay local debts for food and fuel…Some of the more promising students left. The old hospital barracks, designed as temporary buildings, were falling apart. Ella Sheppard later recalled the dilapidated condition of the ladies' dormitory, originally the site of the army hospital's morgue. "The wind whistled around and groaned so fearfully that we trembled in horror in our beds, thinking the sounds were the cries of losts [sic] spirits of the soldiers who had died in them," she wrote. Keeping the old buildings repaired was quickly becoming one of the institution's heaviest expenses.[26]

White had exhausted all known resources to bring money to the school. However, he and the students had already experienced a small amount of financial success, locally. A fundraising tour, on a larger scale, seemed like a worthwhile venture. Navigating much reluctance from the likes of the AMA, General Fisk, members of the Fisk faculty, and the choristers of the Fisk Jubilee Singers themselves, White managed to commence a tour in the Fall of 1871. The singers

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[25] Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 61.

[26] Toni Passmore Anderson, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers: Performing Ambassadors for the Survival of an American Treasure, 1871-1878," (Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 1997), 66.

had no winter attire for the tour that would take them to the Northern states. Consequently, faculty members at Fisk divided their own clothing between the singers. "Fisk instructors realized that all their hopes for the survival of their institution rested with the small group of [nine]."[27] On October 6, 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers set out on their journey with food enough for one week. White took all the money in Fisk's coffers, save for one dollar, and contributed money from his own pocket, as well as borrowing whatever he could, in order to finance the first leg of the tour. [29]

As the singers began their tour, White acted as their musical director, business manager, stage manager, tour manager, treasurer, and tailor. The troupe toured for some time in conditions that were less than ideal, facing racism, a lack of proper clothing, and small audiences and revenues. It wasn't until December 1871, when they arrived in New York City, that their fortunes began to shift. A member of the AMA contacted Reverend Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887), a prominent Christian speaker, to tell him about the singers' impending performance. Beecher invited the choir to sing as part of one of his regular church services and there they received an overwhelmingly positive reception, which generated a great deal of interest in the concerts to come.[30] Newspapers found new interest in the troupe and audience numbers, donations, and revenues started to soar. As the choir began to perform more, the students in the ensemble began to realize that the classical works that they had been eager to share with

[27] Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 76

[29] Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 113.

[30] Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 95.

audiences—to demonstrate their elevated musical abilities—were received well, but not as well as their Negro spiritual performances.

However, the Fisk Singers were not originally interested in singing slave songs. The students were more concerned about demonstrating their considerable vocal abilities through popular tunes, sacred anthems, and patriotic songs. The ensemble had been singing the occasional spiritual mingled in with their regular programming, but up until their time in New York had not made the genre their major vehicle. Maggie Porter (1853–1942), one of the singers, noted that they viewed spirituals as an association with the horrific days of slavery that their parents and forefathers had endured. When White suggested that they think about performing more of the spirituals, the singers were opposed to the idea. It took a considerable amount of coaxing by White for them to bend to the concept. A handwritten note, penned by an unnamed chorister, reads:

> It was our own expectation at that time to sing the more difficult music-composed by educated & talented artists, and our practice consisted chiefly in rehearsing these pieces. It was not common for us to spend much time singing slaves song [sic]—the tendencies of the freedmen being to leave them behind in the grave of slavery—indeed some seemed almost to regard them as signs of their former disgrace & to shun them as one would the prison clothes of the days of his incarceration. We did not realize how precious they would be held by those who had prayed for us, and with us till we were delivered from slavery, & how these were the genuine jewels we brought from our bondage. It was our fear that the colored people would be grieved to have us expose the ignorance & weakness incident to the days of their degradation - not know [sic] that our songs would be regarded as born of God - and sweet & touching as angels lifes [sic] might sing.[31]

Ella Sheppard (1851–1915), one of the singers in the ensemble, noted that whereas the Fisk Jubilee Singers began the tour with a program of nineteen musical numbers, including two or

[31] Ibid, 85.

three spirituals, by the time that they reached New York the proportions of repertoire had been inverted. The choir still sang around twenty musical numbers, but the majority were now spirituals.[32]

This new relationship with the spiritual earned the Fisk Jubilee Singers their fame. Not only did they revive the spiritual, they also gave the genre a new identity by the way that they sang the music. No longer was this music sung with the rough timbre associated with untrained voices from plantation fields. Instead, they sang this music with cultivated musical skill, lyricism, and in tight classical-style harmony. Much of their music was arranged in four-part harmony by the singers and their director White, while Theodore F. Seward (1835–1902) — editor of the *New York Musical Gazette*, who toured with the ensemble from 1871–1872—was responsible for transcribing the scores for future publication. While the majority of people who came in contact with the Fisk Jubilee Singers were enthralled with their performances, some felt as though the new style in which they sang the slave songs was too removed from what the music sounded like in the fields; it lacked authenticity. In the preface to the first edition of *Jubilee Songs*, Seward writes:

> One criticism has been made on the singing of the Jubilee Band, which deserves notice. It has been frequently said... "This music is too good. It is too refined. There is too nice a balancing of the parts, and too much delicate shading to be a genuine representation of slave-music…It cannot be thought strange that the musical feeling which is so prolific in original melodies should soon find its way to the enjoyment of harmony in the singing of various parts. The Jubilee Singers, no doubt, represent the highest average of culture among the colored people, but the singing of these songs is all their own, and the quickness with which they have received impressions and adopted improvements from the cultivated

[32] Ibid, 100.

> music they have heard, only affords an additional illustration of the high capabilities of the race.[33]

Between 1871 and 1878, the Fisk Jubilee Singers not only saved their school by earning over $150,000—the equivalent of approximately $3.9M in 2020—they also made a hugely significant impact on the performance of Negro spirituals. The 25 singers who passed through the ensemble during those 7 years also benefited via wealthy patrons who offered financial support for their education, as well as their performing careers. After the choir parted company in 1878, many of the singers became outspoken activists surrounding the race issue in the United States, speaking out for justice, racial understanding, and equality. Many of the publications of the choir's vocal arrangements are still available today, the most prevalent being the 1872 compilation of around 60 Fisk arrangements notated by Seward, Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University.

2.2 The Harlem Renaissance

In 1865, as the Reconstruction Era began, Black people in the United States found themselves in a new social position wherein they were now technically free due to the passing and implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment. Still, they had to find their place in a society where most citizens had just recently been forced to stop thinking of them as property, and rather as men and women with civil rights and freedoms. The institution of the Thirteenth Amendment did not mean that Blacks in the United States were immediately considered equal to their White counterparts. Instead, many Blacks found themselves in the crosshairs of a newly catalyzed White supremacy, which was quickly, lawfully, and brutally reinstated in the New South where

[33] Theodore F. Seward, ed., *Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University* (New York: Biglow & Main, 1872), 3.

the vast majority of African Americans resided.[34] Many African Americans began to move toward the free states of the North starting around 1890.[35] This movement is referred to as the Great Migration.

Disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, White supremacy groups, and hate crimes in the rural South began to push many African Americans to consider a new life in the North of the country. "Forty acres and a mule," a phrase that was echoed throughout the South after the Civil War, decreed that the newly freed African Americans would be given redistributed land, especially land that had been seized by the North during the war, as indemnification for slavery.[36] By 1890, this promise had not been realized, and many Blacks instead worked as sharecroppers—tenant farmers who give a part of each crop as rent—and were finding themselves more in debt.[37] This was compounded in the same year by a boll weevil epidemic that caused many of their cotton crops to fail.[38] All these issues amassed to push the African Americans in the South to seek better lives. At the same time, the North was finding great prosperity. The economy was doing well, industrial jobs were plentiful, and business owners were looking for opportunities to employ

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[34] "A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed July 15, 2020, https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance.

[35] Daniel Weaver, "Robert Nathaniel Dett and the Music of the Harlem Renaissance," (Master of Arts diss., State University of New York, 2013), 57.

[36] Sarah McCammon, "The Story Behind 40 Acres and a Mule: Code Switch: NPR," National Public Radio, January 12, 2015, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/01/12/376781165/the-story-behind-40-acres-and-a-mule.

[37] National Museum, "A New African American Identity".

[38] History.com, "Great Migration," Last modified May 16, 2019, https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration.

cheap labourers. Still, the North was not a paradise for Blacks either. While the outcome of the Civil War had brought freedom for enslaved people, there was an air of prejudice in the North as well, and many White people feared that Blacks would take their jobs. The main complaint of the time was that Blacks were lowering wages for everyone as they came in great numbers to seek work, affecting the market.[40]

Many of the African Americans who had moved from the South discovered that they had shared history and experience, even if they did not come from the exact same region. They were also able to bond through their new circumstances in the North. Many of the migrants who came up for better opportunities found that they were being segregated and moved to ghettos, out of the sight line of White Northerners. The largest ghetto at the time was Harlem in New York City. In this ghetto, writers, actors, artists, and musicians all united, celebrating the traditions that had been passed down to them from the era of American slavery, and at the same time they created new art and traditions. This caused a surge of cultural pride, and African American culture was regenerated in what is referred to as the New Negro Movement, or more commonly the Harlem Renaissance Movement.

2.3 James Weldon Johnson and the Reemergence of the Spiritual

> It is a rare and intriguing moment when a people decided that they are the instruments of history-making and race-building. It is common enough to think of oneself as part of some grand design. But to presume to be an actor and creator in the special occurrence of a people's birth (or rebirth) requires a singular self-consciousness. In the opening decades of the Great Depression, black intellectuals in Harlem had just such a self-concept.[42]

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[40] "The Harlem Renaissance," US History, accessed July 13, 2020. https://www.ushistory.org/us/46e.asp.

[42] Huggins, Nathan Irving, and Arnold Rampersad, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

The youth of the Harlem Renaissance, especially the young writers, artists, and musicians, began to transform the way that Black music was created and consumed. Writers such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963), Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943) and James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) began to call on artists to develop a new cultural aesthetic that could be considered their own. They challenged Black artists to draw inspiration from "folk" traditions that had existed during the slavery era.[43]

In *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, James Weldon Johnson's preface is in the form of an essay. In its time, this essay was one of the most profound writings on the importance of preserving and developing the spiritual. In his 50-page preface he summarizes the history, development, and importance of the spirituals. His remarks on the reproduction of Negro dialect had not previously been discussed in as much detail, as evidenced in this 1926 review of the book by W.H. Brewer in the Journal of Negro History:

> The authors of this valuable work have brought out a collection of 61 choice Negro songs, entitled Spirituals. These are presented with music arranged for solo voice but with piano accompaniments. The book, then, places before the public in this useful form a number of beautiful harmonies about which the public has long desired to know more. The author is justified in referring to the development of this music as a miracle. It is undoubtedly one of the wonders of history that a people like those brought from Africa to the Western Hemisphere and broken into drudgery scarcely easier than that of the burdens imposed upon beasts, could under the circumstances make such a lasting contribution to one of the greatest arts of man. It is a tribute to the inventive capacity of the Negro that in this ordeal of thralldom he could learn how to develop the best in him and thus give the world a new meaning of artistic beauty and religious enthusiasm.
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> The purpose of the book is to elevate the Negro spirituals among the entertainment-seeking people who fail to appreciate their significance. In other words, it is to remove these beautiful songs from the atmosphere of the vaudeville or theatrical stage, to eliminate the ragtime or minstrel

[43] Lawrence Schenbeck, "Representing America, Instructing Europe: The Hampton Choir Tours Europe" *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (Spring – Fall 2005): 11.

> element therefrom, that they may be "clothed in their primitive dignity." If this book can do no more than to emphasize the importance of changing the attitude toward Negro music it is an effort well worthwhile and deserving of the highest commendation.[44]

The writing of spirituals also developed during this time. Previously, spirituals had been a form of music largely learned by rote. Up to this point formal education for Black people had not been easily accessible. As the civil rights and freedoms of the Black populace began to increase, academic institutions in the United States found themselves with more applicants of colour. In addition, Black universities were beginning to gain popularity, and programs such as those at Hampton Institute in Virginia, and Tuskegee University in Alabama were gaining esteem. In the early 20th century, Black musicians were finding their voices as trained academics in composition and performance.

2.4 Burleigh, Dawson, Dett, and Spiritual Arrangements

Several prominent figures are regarded as having elevated the spiritual from music sung by enslaved people to a genre that is celebrated worldwide on the concert stage. Arrangers of the spiritual such as Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949), Roland Hayes (1887–1977), Hall Johnson (1888–1970), William L. Dawson (1889–1990), and Robert Nathaniel Dett were all instrumental in inspiring the development of the spiritual. Here, I will discuss the contribution of three specific figures—Burleigh, Dawson, and Dett—each of whom helped to develop the spiritual in unique ways. Burleigh is considered the father of the *solo* concert spiritual, having a strong connection to art song as a baritone himself. Dawson is known for his contribution to Black education, as well as choral, chamber, and orchestral works, each written with Negro folksong influences. Dett is remembered for his vocal and piano works, as well as his focus on Negro

[44] *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 1 (1926): 221

education, especially through his essays, which serve as a significant resource for those interested in the reformation of the spiritual at the turn of the 20th century.

Harry T. Burleigh was one of the major figures that took the spiritual to new heights during the Harlem Renaissance. Burleigh was instrumental in developing the American art song and over his lifetime penned more than 200 vocal works. He was the first Black composer and arranger to gain admiration from both Blacks and Whites for his art songs. His arrangements and adaptations of Negro spirituals were equally lauded.

In 1892, at the age of twenty-six, Burleigh earned a scholarship to the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. During his time at the Conservatory, he became friends with Antonín Dvorák (1841–1904) who was the director of the Conservatory at the time. Burleigh sang the spirituals that he had been taught by his grandfather for Dvorák, and Dvorák in turn encouraged Burleigh to find a way to implant these melodies into his own compositions. Some musicologists theorize that Dvorák's use of a variation on the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" in the first movement of his ninth symphony may have been due to his association with Burleigh. [45]

The spiritual also gained more popularity for use in concert recitals and performances. Singers such as Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson (1897–1993), and Paul Robeson (1898–1976) brought the spiritual to a heightened place in American culture. Roland Hayes often used Burleigh's art songs and spirituals in his performances both in the United States and abroad. In 1923, after returning from a European tour, he sang recitals in New York and Boston, and the

[45] "H. T. Burleigh (1866–1949) | Library of Congress," Library of Congress, accessed July 13, 2020. https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035730.

White press praised him for providing "a revelation of the power of spirituals" and hailed Hayes as "one of the finest singers of the time."[46]

> Before 1917 Burleigh's art songs and the few plantation songs he published were in more frequent use by white singers than black. The number of black artists who used Burleigh's compositions and arrangements increased after 1917. From 1921 through 1925 the *Age* magazine listed recital programs nearly every week. In these years almost all recitals followed the pattern set by Burleigh's early recitals and those of Oscar Seagle and Roland Hayes: several groups of European and American art songs and operatic arias, often arranged in chronological order, with at least one group of spirituals. Most singers included at least one Burleigh arrangement, and often the entire group of spirituals were Burleigh's arrangements. By 1925 arrangements by Roland Hayes, Lawrence Brown, J. Rosamond Johnson, Major N. Clark Smith, and Gerald Tyler appeared more frequently, with an occasional arrangement by a white composer such as Harvey B. Gaul or William Arms Fisher.[47]

In the 1940s, at the end of his life, Burleigh's art songs were not as popular as they once were. This may have been due to the conservative and simplistic nature of his writing, coupled with the development of novel American art songs, as well as the introduction of broadcast entertainment to America. Still, his spirituals continued to gain recognition as great works of American art. Snyder continues, "He had helped to ensure that 'this great free fountain of pure melody' would continue to flow, that the spirituals, with their message of 'hope,' of 'faith in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man' would continue to be sung." [48] As James Weldon Johnson writes in the

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[46] "Hayes, Negro Tenor, Delights a Throng; Sings Old Songs of His People and German and French at His First Recital Here," *The New York Times*, December 1, 1923, section S, 3.

[47] Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music: Program of Spirituals," *New York Age* (Nov. 21, 1925): 7.

[48] HTB to the NAACP, November 10, 1922, Burleigh Family Papers.

preface to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals,* Burleigh "was the pioneer in making arrangements for the Spirituals that widened their appeal [49]

William L. Dawson was an African American composer, choral conductor, and academic renowned for his chamber, orchestral, and choral works, but is specifically remembered for his approach to Negro spirituals. Dawson consistently interpolated African American folk music into all the musical forms that he wrote and arranged.[50] In 1930, he was invited back to his alma mater, the Tuskegee Institute, where he was offered a professorship and the opportunity to develop their School of Music. There, Dawson formed the Tuskegee Institute Choir, which, over time, became an internationally celebrated ensemble. The Tuskegee Choir toured throughout North America and was invited to sing at the inaugural performances in New York City's Radio Music Hall in 1932. Inspired by his own education, Dawson became one of the United States' most prominent music educators, teaching music courses and acting as a clinician in workshops and festivals. His devotion to the educational development of Black youth was greatly admired, and after resigning from Tuskegee in 1955, he spent the rest of his life touring and sharing his knowledge with young musicians throughout the world.

Dawson's arrangements of African American spirituals became a staple in American choral music. Songs such as "I've Been 'Buked," "Ain'-a That Good News," and "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel" are regularly studied and performed even today. He was instrumental in the development of the concert spiritual, and through his leadership of the Tuskegee Choir from

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[49] Johnson, J. Rosamond, and James Weldon Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals: Including the Book of American Negro Spirituals and the Second Book of Negro Spirituals,* ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Da Capo Paperback, 1977), 48.

[50] William Robert McMillan, "The Choral Music of William Dawson," (Doctor of Arts diss., University of Northern Colorado, 1991), 129.

1931–1955, gave new life to the genre. Dawson's arrangements are most celebrated for their use of complex and syncopated rhythm, as well as his harmonic language, which employed chromatic harmonies characteristic of art music such as borrowed chords, augmented triads, and augmented sixth chords. McMillan describes some other complex elements of Dawson's arrangements, including detailed articulation markings that are more characteristic of classical music than vernacular music:

> There is a rhythmic drive and vitality that is unique to Dawson. He could alter a pre-existing melody by adding an extra syncopation that gave the music more force and vigor than the original. The result would be a phrase with multiple syncopations but still balanced and undistorted. The articulation markings used by Dawson are unique in that no other black arranger gives such precise indications. Dawson gave specific markings, accenting important words and syncopations. He was also clear about small crescendos and decrescendos over one or two notes. Other arrangers would indicate an occasional accent and Hairston gave some of the crescendo-decrescendo indications, but none with the consistency of Dawson. One could speculate, after hearing black choirs sing spirituals, that Dawson was notating some of these choirs' performance practices. He also varied the harmonic structure in his strophic settings, whereas other composers of the time such as Harry Burleigh, and Hall Johnson were less prone to variation.[51]

Dawson remains one of the most relevant figures of American folk music. His contributions to the development of African American spirituals and symphonic works, as well as his pedagogical efforts, are too many to count. Though the Tuskegee School of Music no longer exists, his legacy at the Institute lives on through the Tuskegee Choir and their continued performance and dissemination of his musical works.

Canadian Robert Nathaniel Dett contributed to the interpretation and preservation of the African American spiritual through his academic writing and teachings, compositions and arrangements of the spiritual, and performance of spirituals on the concert stage. His musical

[51] McMillan, "Dawson," 129.

arrangements and essays w served to uplift the spiritual to a revered place much the same as European art music. Furthermore, his conducting of the Hampton Choir at the Hampton Institute changed the trajectory of that institution's music program.

Dett offered three reasons why he believed at the time that more was not being done by cultural authorities in the United States to ensure the survival of the spiritual. The first reason was that he felt that there was a "general indifference" from Americans toward spirituals. He admonished his fellow Americans by suggesting that they have a "contempt for things of native origin, and a slavish admiration on the part of American composers, critics, and, to some extent, publishers, for European ideals in music and art."[52] Suggesting that admiration of European musical ideals prevents American composers from creating a distinctively American national style, he goes on to write:

> Only through the appreciation shown worthy Negro efforts by this great nation of which he constitutes only a fractional part, will the Negro be able to raise his musical art up to those rare and worthy high places which have previously been occupied by the masterpieces created by the other peoples of the world.[53]

Second, Dett suggested that there was a lack of literary works of importance on topics about or relevant to the Black community, and therefore not a lot of inspiration for great musical works within the genre. Third, he surmised that the inability for most Negroes to attain academic training in composition could also be to blame.[54]

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[52] R. Nathaniel Dett, "Negro Music of the Present," in *Negro Music* (Bowdoin Literary Prize thesis, Harvard University, 1920), 7.

[53] R. Nathaniel Dett, "Development of Negro Religious Music," in *Negro Music* (Bowdoin Literary Prize thesis, Harvard University, 1920), 13-14.

[54] Ibid.

In his essay, Dett writes that he feels that there is yet another problem plaguing the advancement of the spiritual: that Blacks were disinclined to sing or listen to a musical genre that reminded them of a painful time in Black history. The shame for some was so intense that whole Black churches refused to sing the music. The churches felt as though the music harkened back to a time of humiliation for Blacks and that it had no place in a formal service. To some extent Dett seemed to agree with this perspective. He suggested that the solution may not be to distance oneself from this portion of folk heritage, but instead to transform the music into something more geared toward formal service:

> It occurred to this writer that if a form of song were evolved which contained all the acceptable characteristics of Negro folk music and yet would compare favorably in poetic sentiment and musical expression with the best class of church music, it would save to the Negro and his music all the peculiar idioms, and as a work of art would summon to its interpretation the best of his intellectual and emotional efforts. These principles being fundamental, the appeal would be as great to white people as to the colored people while at the same time such composition would constitute the development of a natural resource.[55]

In 1913, Dett joined the music faculty at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, and was put in charge of the college's choral ensemble, the Hampton Choir, a group that had existed since 1872.[56] The choir had toured extensively since then and had a reputation for "excellence in performance and preservation of the spirituals."[57] Upon Dett's arrival at Hampton, he immediately set to work revamping the school's musical program, and less than four months after his start, the Hampton Singers presented a program at Carnegie Hall, something which

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[55] Dett, "Development of Negro Religious Music," 5.

[56] Anne Key Simpson, *Follow Me : The Life and Music of R. Nathaniel Dett* (Metuchen (N.J.): Scarecrow, 1993), 36.

[57] Simpson, 38.

would become an annual tradition. [58] Throughout his life, Dett made a concentrated effort to elevate the antebellum spiritual, creating an atmosphere of reverence in his largely sacred choral works. Dett considered the spiritual to be the contrast to the blackface minstrelsy that pervaded entertainment in the early twentieth century. As Lawrence Schenbeck (b.1948) writes, "To Dett, the worst damage done by minstrelsy had come when Black religious songs were treated as material for comedy."[59] Dett himself "felt that these White men were making fun, not only of our color and of our songs, but also of our religion."[60] Still, Dett felt that in their plain form, spirituals could no longer be used as elevated church music, partly because they had now been exploited for entertainment, and partly because the texts of some spirituals were so far removed from present situations and sentiments that they would sound almost absurd. In considering what he wanted to do with the Hampton choir, Dett felt that the Fisk Jubilee Singers were the example to match.[61] The Fisk Jubilee Singers had presented a new image of the spiritual to the world:

> By the severe discipline to which the Jubilee Singers have been subjected… they have been educated out of the peculiarities of the Negro dialect, and they do not attempt to imitate the peculiar pronunciation of their race. They have also received considerable musical instruction, and have become familiar with much of our best sacred and classical music, and this has modified their manner of execution. [62]

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[58] Ibid, 42.

[59] Schenbeck, "Representing America," 17.

[60] Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 118.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Irving Sablosky, *What They Heard: Music in America, 1852-1881, from the Pages of Dwight's Journal of Music* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 283-284.

Dett, in his attempts to create an uplifted version of the spiritual and spiritual performance, found a great deal of pushback from critics throughout America. Because minstrelsy had for so long been the perceivable music of Black America, to see a choir performing in gowns and suits, with a blended tone, unaffected dialect, and stage etiquette similar to White ensembles was too much for some. One New York critic wrote, "they demonstrate, perhaps, the best method for a chorus of colored singers to follow for the sake of technical proficiency but interpretation more racial in quality would have been welcome.[63]" Another writes:

> I think Dr. Dett is a wonderful musician and composer but I really doubt whether Hampton wishes to create the impression that it is a place where students are taught classical music… There are undoubtedly musical geniuses in the colored race as in any other... [but they should be trained] in some musical conservatory where training in music of a high order is the main purpose of the institution. [64]

Dett found himself engaged in a complicated set of cultural and institutional rhetoric. He wanted to instruct his students and develop their musical skills and tastes. Having been trained largely in the European tradition, Dett felt that by singing the choral music of masters such as Bach (1685–1750), Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), and Schumann (1810–1856) his students would gain technical skill, and as these classical pieces were performed in tandem with spirituals, it would be instrumental in ensuring that audiences near and far would recognize the inherent value of the genre. By uplifting them in this way he could ensure that the spiritual would live on as a "distinct contribution to American art and civilization."[65]

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[63] Ibid, 119.

[64] Ibid, 156.

[65] Ibid, 128.

During his nearly 20 years at the college he transformed the spiritual genre and demonstrated its value to the world. Through his sincere interest in the genre, R. Nathaniel Dett quickly became a champion of the African American spiritual as a writer, composer and performer. His contributions to the genre are clear in his works both literary and musically. Dett's love and appreciation for the spiritual and what it represented in America and American Black culture motivated him to develop the genre, preserving its roots and building it into a heightened art form recognized in performance repertoire today.

The Spirituals of the 17th through early 20th centuries were not sung in the same style as the ones that we are familiar with today. As with all things, tastes changed, and art changed with it. Arrangers such as R. Nathaniel Dett, William Dawson, Moses Hogan (1957–2003), Roland Carter (b. 1942), and more recently arrangers such as Marques Garrett (b. 1984), Colin Lett (n.d.), Brandon Waddles (b.1988), and Stacey V. Gibbs (b. 1962) have reimagined what the Spiritual could sound like, adding polyphony, counterpoint, altered harmonies, and virtuosic melodic lines. The spiritual continues to be a musical genre that is both accessible and beloved. It is one of the few original American musical art forms with ties to Canadian history and culture. It was created as a result of bondage, and through its transformation over time has become a folk music that all can appreciate.

CHAPTER 3 – PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

The African American spiritual is a multifaceted genre that can be divided into several categories and styles. There are three main categories of spirituals that interpreters use to identify musical parameters such as texture, tempo, and rhythm: namely, call-and-response spirituals, slow and melodic spirituals, and fast and rhythmic spirituals. Other categories are used to identify the

social functions of the spirituals, such as work songs, and field hollers. Below I offer a breakdown of what the three broad categories entail, and musical titles as examples. Regarding technical performance practice, singers can sometimes be led to perform spirituals in an unintentionally caricatured manner by relying solely on the notated direction of composer-arrangers, or their own uncontextualized intuition when performing spirituals. When approaching the spiritual, it is important to be well-versed in the performance practice of the genre and to be informed on its origin and history. This chapter aims to provide some practical guidance on the performance of common spirituals.

3.1 Categorizing Spirituals, Tempos, and Rhythms

It is useful to know which type of spiritual one is singing in order to offer the best interpretation. The three broad categories which are most used are:

1. Call-and-response.

In the call-and-response category are spirituals that use antiphony between one leader and a chorus of singers that respond to the leader's call with a short phrase or word. Often in call-and-response, the leader's line changes from phrase to phrase, but the choral response stays largely the same. Two examples of call-and-response spirituals are "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," wherein the responses repeat the refrain "Comin' for to carry me home," and "I'm Buildin' Me a Home," wherein the responses repeat the calls, as follows:

Leader – I'm buildin' me a home
Chorus – I'm buildin' me a home
Leader – This earthly hour
Chorus – This earthly hour
Leader – Is gonna soon decay
Chorus – Is gonna soon decay
Leader – An' my soul's gotta have somewhere to stay
Chorus – An' my soul's gotta have somewhere to stay

Common performance issues within this category may include finding a suitable dynamic balance between the soloist and the ensemble, as the latter can at times overwhelm the former. One solution may be to choose a soloist whose voice is robust enough to be heard over the ensemble, especially if the two parts are overlapping. When performing a piece that has antiphonal parts that do not overlap, a singer with a lighter sound may be sufficient or desirable, as they will not have to project over the ensemble's singing. One might also choose to have the chorus sing at a quieter dynamic, though this can sometimes lead to issues in tuning, breath support, and tempo, depending on the experience of the choristers. This solution may not be appropriate depending on the energy and affect prescribed by the arranger. Alternatively, the soloist could use a microphone, though the spiritual is more commonly an acoustic tradition. Another common concern is the mismatching of dialect pronunciation. If the soloist sings "I'm buildin' me a home, an' ma soul's gotta have somewhere to stay", the ensemble should answer with the same dialect. If the answer instead is "I'm building me a home, and my soul's got to have somewhere to stay", not only does this ignore the attentive relationship between soloist and chorus, but it introduces an entirely different dialect, which is both ineffective, and likely distracting to listeners.

2. Slow and melodic.

"Deep River", "Steal Away", and "Fix Me, Jesus" are examples of this second category of spiritual. These are songs that have slow, sustained, long-phrase melodies, and often deal with the subjects of hope, pain, and loss. One common performance issue in this category is the loss of breath support. Sustained, long-phrase melodies require an intentional and planned use of breath in order to avoid dropping energy at the end of the phrase. Upright and relaxed posture,

full, non-airy vocal tone, as well as a general awareness of where the phrase begins and ends will help to ensure that the sound is sustained. Another concern in this category is that of content. The slow and melodic category tends to have the most material related to the suffering of enslaved people. As few people who sing spirituals in the 21st century will have direct experience with such subject matter, it is important for singers to find ways to relate to the text in a meaningful way. While you may have never been a slave, there are many examples of suffering in our lives and in the lives of others that one can call upon in performance. Perhaps you've lost a dear family member in a manner that seems entirely unfair or unexpected. Maybe you've been through or are currently experiencing a personal hardship. Or maybe, hopefully, you have a wonderful life, but are simultaneously aware and empathetic to the many difficulties that people with less advantages face daily. These and other perspectives may be useful in finding the emotional state that best exemplifies the slow and melodic category, especially those songs that are melancholic in nature. Remember, these are not just songs made up from fictional narratives, they are the product of historic suffering.

3. Fast and rhythmic.

The final category, fast and rhythmic, includes songs that use a lot of syncopation, segmented melodies and often convey biblical stories. Examples include "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho", "Witness", and "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel". Within this category, the performance issues include rhythm and affect. The rhythms found in the fast and rhythmic category tend to be the most complex of the three headings. Syncopated notes and rests, as well as swung rhythms are used to highlight the exciting, dramatic, and at times playful narratives created by the enslaved people. It is especially important to ensure that the rhythms are executed accurately in this category, because when singing as part of an ensemble the misaligning of consonants will become a

problem when the rhythms stray. Additionally, the rhythms are often used in support of word painting and will be less effective if not realized in the way that the arranger has prescribed. The same applies to soloists, especially in scenarios where there is accompaniment that is supporting the singer through the use of matched rhythm. The emotional affect of this style of spiritual can become caricatured if the singers do not understand the context of the piece at hand. Choreography can be equally distracting in that it adds an unnecessary layer of spectacle. Let the music speak for itself. If the arrangement is good, then a well-crafted, informed, and technically superior rendition will be more than enough to entertain your audience. Aside from these categories, it is possible to classify the spiritual even further, based on the genre's social functions. Work songs, jubilees, sorrow songs, cumulative songs, field hollers, and coded spirituals, are spiritual types that outline what type of song is being sung, and what type of general affect and specific musical nuances should be employed when using them. However, a song may belong to more than one spiritual type. As an example, "Children, Go Where I Send Thee" is by definition a cumulative spiritual, and at the same time it can be considered a coded spiritual because of its function as a song that quietly taught those who were uneducated how to count. In the broader categorization, it is simply a fast and rhythmic spiritual. The problem with the broad list is that it is not specific enough to help interpreters with the nuances associated with its social role. Below are seven categories of songs that outline specific functions within the spiritual.

3.1.1 Work Songs

Work songs are a category of spirituals that are mostly in unison, refer to work or tasks, and include call-and-response. Work songs typically have a moderate tempo, with an underpinning of forward energy, to accompany the collective tempo of many people picking up a tool, striking an

object, rebounding and then striking the object again in unison. Work songs move at a moderate tempo in order to allow time for the physical movement and the song to align. When singing this form of the spiritual, there is a certain weight to the sound; it's guttural and robust, at times composers may even include a written instruction to grunt, to indicate the "work" quality. Tempo and breath control must work in tandem in order to establish a common rhythm that in the era of slavery would have been indicated by the striking of the object—though the work song could be used for other tasks such as sawing or sorting. These practical aspects are all important considerations in the performance of this style of spiritual. Examples of this type of spiritual are: "No More Auction Block for Me", "Hew Roun' the Tree", and "Roll, Jordan, Roll".

3.1.2 Field Hollers

The field holler is a form that is both a part of, and adjacent to, spirituals. They were created in the southern cornfields and cotton fields of the United States, presumably in the late 18th century. In this style, workers would relieve the monotony of their day by hollering across fields. Field hollers are wistful short melodies with few words, sung by field workers. A plantation worker might hear the field holler of another worker in a neighbouring field and would in turn reply with his own holler. There were different hollers for different occasions, such as mealtimes, or quitting time. When slavery was abolished, they continued to be sung by field workers, prisoners, and other laborers in the southern United States. Field hollers differ from work songs in that they are solos rather than an ensemble call-and-response. They are also devoid of strict rhythm, and employ an emotional, drawn-out style of singing. Additionally, unlike work songs, the purpose of field hollers was not to keep a working rhythm, but instead to express the feelings of the workers. Field hollers had a substantial impact on the development of gospel and blues music.

3.1.3 Sorrow Songs

Sorrow songs speak to the burden of certain biblical figures, or those of the enslaved. In some literature, sorrow songs are referenced not as a specific form of the spiritual, but rather as a synonym to the spiritual genre as a whole. However, I identify this form as a specific form under the umbrella of slow and melodic songs because not all spirituals are based on sorrowful themes. A sorrow song is easy to identify because it moves at a slower tempo and doesn't have the impetus that a work song does. The text may be largely melancholic and center around the topic of weariness or having suffered loss, or it may simply be a slow spiritual with a narrative. The form intimates that however oppressed and cast down the enslaved people were, they still express faith, assured that Jesus would remedy their predicament. The theology of these spirituals "is probably derived from personal experiences of religion that were common to enslaved people. Jesus was a personal deliverer, both physically and spiritually, who understood the struggle of the enslaved and was able to offer the final triumph over adversity: eternal life in Heaven".[66] Examples of this type of spiritual are: "Lord, How Come Me Here?", "Deep River", and "Steal Away". As mentioned in my performance notes about slow and melodic spirituals, it is important to find a way to connect to the textual content of this material in order to intimate a believable and empathetic performance.

3.1.4 Jubilees

Jubilees encapsulate much of the "fast and rhythmic" category of spirituals. They celebrate the prospect of good things to come and may glorify stories from the bible where the most unlikely character triumphs, or they may entail stories of reaching heaven. Jubilees may be songs of

[66] "History of Hymns 'Fix Me, Jesus'" Disciple Ministries, accessed January 17, 2020, https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-fix-me-jesus.

general good news, or they may include all of the above. These spirituals are generally faster than other spirituals and have a cheerful quality. The term "jubilee" is Hebrew in origin, and is a reference to the last year of a 49-year cycle wherein Hebrew slaves and prisoners were emancipated and granted land. Examples of this type of spiritual are: "Ride Up in the Chariot", "This Little Light of Mine", or "Little David, Play on Your Harp". Jubilees fall within the category of fast and rhythmic spirituals. Again, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking of these songs as merely catchy tunes. All spirituals have historic background, so it is important that performers find the contextual meaning of the lyrics and melody. For example, what is the importance of letting light shine in "This Little Light of Mine"? Is the light literal, as in a candle lighting the way, or is it metaphorical as in the "light" inside of you? If you take it to mean the former, perhaps this will affect the brightness of your vowel shape or vocal tone. If it's the latter, then the bold, unapologetic nature of this piece may be made even more jubilant than if you just sing the song as a familiar spiritual.

3.1.5 Coded Spirituals

Coded spirituals quietly educated the enslaved about escape opportunities, using code words that aligned with the lexicon of the Underground Railroad. There are many examples of this type in the musical canon, such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd,"—which was a code instructing the escapees to use the Big Dipper asterism as a navigational tool—"Wade in the Water,"—a code warning runaways of the threat of scent dogs and offering a way to avoid them—or "Steal Away," whose code I describe below. The lyrics of these songs all have coded language embedded, but the lyrics seem harmless if you're not listening for the code. For example, the lyrics to "Steal Away":

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home.
I ain't got long to stay here

This reads as a sorrow song that deals with the prospect of imminent death. However, if one looks at these lyrics through a coded lens, one might translate this text to mean:

Steal away home (move quietly to freedom)
I ain't got long to stay here (the time is upon us to leave).

In the lexicon of the Underground Railroad, home and heaven were code words for freedom. [67]

3.1.6 Cumulative Spirituals

The cumulative spiritual is one that helped to educate enslaved people by teaching them to count. "Freedom and learning to read, write and count were the things most fervently desired by enslaved people. Any overt action toward freedom was almost always punishable by death. Equally dangerous to slave owners was the acquisition of reading, writing and counting skills" by those who were enslaved, because literacy threatened their dependence on masters.[68] The most well-known cumulative spiritual is "Children, Go Where I Send Thee". This song uses figures from both the Old and New Testaments. "The immediate purpose of this song was to learn the number system forward and backward. The code of this song, hidden under apparent 'joy,' may well be that knowledge leads to freedom."[69]

[67] Ibid.

[68] "Children, Go Where I Send Thee" Alliance Music Publications Inc, accessed on January 2, 2020, http://www.alliancemusic.com/product.cfm?iProductID=431.

[69] Ibid.

3.1.7 Concert Spirituals

From these subcategories emerged another genre known as the concert spiritual. These spirituals left the arena of fields and chain gangs, and moved into the concert hall through the work of 20th century composers, arrangers, and performers who all wanted to see the spiritual that had formerly been sung by enslaved peoples evolve into a genre that would be appreciated by all. Most spirituals that are sung by soloists and choral ensembles today fit in this category, as the monophonic or homorhythmic spirituals of the era of slavery are typically not performed outside of academic circles presently.

It is important to note that the lines between these spiritual subcategories can sometimes be blurred. A work song can be both a coded spiritual and a concert spiritual. This subcategorization of spirituals exists only to provide a sense of what performance practice each form requires. As described above, different spiritual sub-categories are based on the different functions and emotions that enslaved people engaged in on a daily basis. Given these differentiations, spirituals must be sung in tempos that are in line with their function and affect. It is useful to consider what body movement would be associated with the type of spiritual being performed.

> This can be demonstrated by "Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child," which is a lament. Its tempo should be as a gentle rocking… a contrast to this is "Great day, the righteous marching" which should lead the conductor to use a march-like tempo in performance. Another example is "Ain't no grave can hold my body down, when the bright trumpet sounds I'll be getting up walking 'round." Tempos for these marches should reflect the shuffle-step of the African-American church tradition: the foot slides along the floor and creates the drama that is associated with the sound of large marching units. Such a march is not, by any means, like that of a drum and bugle corps.[70]

[70] Marvin V. Curtis and Lee V. Cloud. "The African-American Spiritual: Traditions and Performance Practices," *Choral Journal* (November 1991): 20.

Knowing which type a spiritual is helps to clarify which musical choices would be most appropriate when performing a specific piece.

3.1.8 Rhythm

Musicologists have noted that the predominant feature of African music, that which sets it apart from other musical cultures, is an emphasis on intricate rhythms. In this respect, "African music is unquestionably the world's most complex music."[71] As musicologist Harold Courlander (1908–1996) writes, "It is a commonplace that Negro church music…not only 'swings' but also [has] much more sophisticated elements of off-beats, retarded beats, and anticipated beats than does European-American folk music in general."[72] In a study of the African influence on the music of the Americas, Richard Alan Waterman (1914–1971) provided five basic features of African music that separate it from European music.

1. The "metronome sense", which is a way of grasping complicated rhythms.
2. The dominance of percussion within musical forms.
3. The use of polymeters.
4. The offbeat phrasing of melodic accents.
5. Overlapping call-and- response patterns.[73]

According to Waterman, all Black American music uses these five patterns, with the exception of polymeters. Polymeters, though often absent in African American music, may be implied through the use of accents that suggest a different beat grouping than the main meter.

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[71] Richard Alan Waterman "African Influences on the Music of the Americas" in *Acculturation of the Americas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 211

[72] Courlander, *Negro Folk Music*, 29.

[73] Waterman, "African Influences," 211.

Marvin V. Curtis (b.1951) and Lee V. Cloud (n.d.) suggest that handclapping is a perfectly acceptable way of adding rhythmic drama to a spiritual — provided that the clapping happens on beats two and four, as this accentuates the natural backbeat and syncopation found in this and other Black musics. However, they warn that in the African tradition finger snapping should be avoided unless performing secular music, much the same as finger snapping has little place in other genres of pre-20th century sacred music. Performers should also pay particular attention to the way that rhythm is treated in spirituals, and be aware of whether eighth notes, for example, should be sung straight or swung. James Weldon Johnson writes:

> The "swing" of the spiritual is an altogether subtle and elusive thing. It is subtle and elusive because it is in perfect union with the religious ecstasy that manifests itself in the swaying bodies of a whole congregation, swaying as if responding to the baton of some extremely sensitive conductor…it is often tantalizing and even exciting to watch a minute fraction of a beat balancing for a slight instant…drop back into its proper compartment… In addition, there are the curious turns and twists and quavers and the intentional striking of certain notes just a shade off key, with which the Negro loves to embellish his song.[74]

Musicologist Randye Jones (b. 1958) notes that spiritual rhythms should not be swung unless the spiritual is being performed in a jazz style. She adds, "By 'swing' I am referring to the jazz practice of altering straight eighth notes to a more dotted rhythm or long-short triplet feel."[75] Curtis and Cloud go on to note that the subtle spiritual swing and the harder, more rhythmic jazz swing are separate. "It is a feeling, not a notation, and in order to feel it, one must be aware of the history of the music — of the time and of the struggle…editions that use the words "in a

[74] Johnson and Johnson, "American Spirituals," 30.

[75] Jones, "Spirituals," 248.

jazzy style" are misleading…Just as spirituals should not be confused with jazz styles, they should also not be confused with gospel styles."[76]

3.1.9 Movement

When performing spirituals, it's important that the performer "feels" the music within their body. Put differently, the singer should not be viscous, but instead should breathe and engage in some level of gentle physical movement with the music.

> Another common performance practice…is the incorporation of body motion as an integral part of the music-making process. In sub-Saharan cultures, body motion and music are viewed as interrelated components of the same process…These movements are not extraneous gestures, but are actions necessary to produce a desired effect in the musical performance; they are an intrinsic part of the music process…A similar situation occurs in the work songs… when the physical action of work produces a sound [a grunt] that becomes an integral part of the music…The approach to African and African American music assumes that body motion will be an integral part of the musical experience.[77]

Choral conductors may notice their ensemble beginning to put this music into their bodies—that the music is providing an impulse to move. Much the same as African traditions allow for communal music making, communal movement and dance are also parts of the tradition. Choreography is not necessary, and indeed should be discouraged; instead performers should be given license to move in a way that feels organic to their connection with the music. The use of prescribed choreography when singing spirituals puts the genre in line with show choir music or musical theatre dancing, as opposed to allowing the impetus of the music to drive the movement. Given the genre's history with minstrelsy and the use of the spiritual as flippant entertainment,

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[76] Curtis and Cloud, "Traditions," 21.

[77] Walker, *African Roots,* 165.

one should do their best to avoid any unintended associations with a part of history that many Black people find troublesome. That said, nothing makes the performance of a spiritual more rigid than the reluctance to physicalize the music.

3.2 Dialect

The enslaved men and women who were brought from Africa in the 17th century were forced to abandon their native languages, and since those from the same tribe were often sent to different plantations, they had to find a new way to communicate.[78] As Eugene Thamon Simpson (b. 1932) writes:

> To understand why the dialect of the slaves differed so greatly from the language of other indentured servants and immigrants that came to America, one must be fully cognizant of the fact that for two hundred fifty years, *the slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write under penalty of death* and were therefore only able to learn the language aurally. They only heard it, never saw it in written form where they could analyze it syllable by syllable. Small wonder that their speech was "quaint" and to some, almost unintelligible.[79]

William Francis Allen (1830–1889), Charles Pickard Ware (1840–1921), and Lucy McKim Garrison (1842–1877), in what is believed to be the first ever written compilation of Negro spirituals, entitled *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), discussed the challenge that they faced in transcribing the dialects of the recently freed men and women:

> A stranger, upon first hearing these people talk, especially if there is a group of them in animated conversation, can hardly understand them better than if they spoke a foreign language, and might, indeed, easily suppose this to be the case. The strange words and pronunciations, and frequent abbreviations disguise the familiar features of one's native tongue, while the rhythmical modulations, so characteristic of certain European languages, give it an utterly un-English sound. After six

[78] "Slavery | Stratford Hall," Stratford Hall Plantation, 2015. https://www.stratfordhall.org/educational-resources/teacher-resources/slavery/

[79] Eugene Thamon Simpson, *The Hall Johnson Concert Spirituals: An Annotated Guide to Interpretation and Performance* (West Conshohocken: Infinity Publishing, 2015), 12.

> months' residence among them, there were scholars in my school, among the most constant in attendance, whom I could not understand at all, unless they happened to speak very slowly.[80]

The recently freed men and women of the antebellum period who were creating and consuming spirituals did so through oral and aural traditions. Such was the way of African cultural transmission at the time. The use of oral learning was further galvanized by the prohibitive nature of slavery, and their restrictions from learning how to read or write by law. Documentarians such as Allen, Ware, and Garrison faced their own set of challenges in that they were restricted to the Western method of dissemination through European notation, and the need to alter the spelling of standard English words to reflect what it was they were hearing.[81]

> Many of the African languages spoken by the slaves did not contain the phonetic "th" sound. Thus words that begin with "th" have a "d" or "t" sound. For instance, "That," "than," or "the," become "dat," "dan," or "da," and words like "thick" or "thin" become "tick" or "tin;" "with" becomes "wid." Rs are usually suppressed ("Lord" becomes "Lawd" and "never" becomes "nevah") and "going" shows up as "gwine."[82]

The enslaved Africans of the antebellum era were not keenly aware of English grammatical rules or pronunciation. Moreover, the English that the enslaved peoples spoke developed amongst themselves without the benefit of a native English-speaking coach. This is the reason why some spiritual texts seem basic, void of logical segues between refrains and verses, and often repetitive. However, the enslaved peoples had a clear comprehension of the subjects and stories that they sang about and found means to create beautiful poetry.

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[80] Allen, Garrison, and Ware, *Slave Songs*, xxiv.

[81] Randye Jones, *So You Want to Sing Spirituals: A Guide for Performers and Professionals* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 92.

[82] Curtis and Cloud, "The African-American Spiritual," 19.

The use of dialect in African American music and culture is fraught with controversy and can at times be problematic. Many of the songs the American public heard that used African American dialect were through minstrelsy, a popular form of entertainment, especially before the American Civil War. Professional minstrel troupes made up of White performers would travel throughout the United States and Europe presenting caricatured performances of how they viewed Black people in America. [83] The performers would dress up in vaudevillian costume with brown or black makeup on their face, while accentuating features such as lips and eyes in order to portray an image of what they viewed as African aesthetics. Aside from the offensive appearance of these troupes, most minstrel songs used an exaggerated and denigrating form of dialect that was loosely based on the pronunciation of English words as spoken by enslaved Africans on southern plantations.[84] After the American Civil War these minstrel depictions were still present in parlour performances, but the professional touring troupes had largely disbanded. By the 1870s the written African American dialect could be found in sacred repertoire; however, the touring college choirs such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Choir decreed not to use African American dialect where possible.[85] This may have been an effort to demonstrate to the world that African Americans did not all speak in this fashion, and that those who had some level of formal education were especially capable of speaking standard English.

Soprano and musicologist Randye Jones suggests that the decision of how much dialect to use should be based on three factors:

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[83] Jones, *Spirituals*, 92.

[84] John Graziano, "The Use of Dialect in African-American Spirituals, Popular Songs, and Folk Songs," *Black Music Research Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 264.

[85] Sablosky, *What They Heard,* 283-284.

1. The text in the musical score. If the lyrics written are "we gonna have a good time," an assumption can be made that the music should be sung in slave dialect, whereas if the text reads "Go not far from me, O God. Cast me not away," standard English is likely the best option. Sometimes, though, a piece such as "Children, Go Where I Send Thee", with texts such as "I'm gonna send thee one by one, one for the little bitty baby," the lyrics are a mix of archaic standard English, and colloquialisms, and you should use your better judgement.

2. An understanding of the composer's or arranger's intent. Here, Jones may be referring either to familiarity with the composer's style, or like in her first point, an understanding of what the composer or arranger has included in the score. For example, R. Nathaniel Dett wrote in a European-classical style, and endeavoured to remove the spiritual from the dialects used in minstrelsy. Therefore, slave dialect should absolutely not be used unless he has spelled it out. In contrast, Moses Hogan's arrangement of "My Soul's Been Anchored", he instructs the singer to substitute "de" for "the" clearly *encouraging* slave dialect.

3. The singer's ability to pronounce the dialect without it negatively impacting the interpretive or technical aspects of the performance.[86] If singers are having trouble singing the slave dialect as written or prescribed, and it is affecting the performance by making it harder to convey the text, then perhaps using standard English would be a better choice.

Though the topics of race and authenticity will be addressed later, note that Jones does not address race as a factor. The opposite is true, as she continues: "none of these considerations

[86] Jones, *Spirituals*, 94.

has anything to do with the racial or cultural background of the singer; rather they require the same level of commitment to study as any other area requires."[87]

Composer and educator Rosephanye Dunn-Powell (b.1962) echoes Jones' sentiments:

> Just as singers who are unfamiliar with German, French, Spanish, or any other language, must study the language and learn the diction in preparation for performance, the same is necessary for those who are unfamiliar with the spiritual. Because, to some degree, the slave dialect is a language of the past, it is suggested that singers listen to early recordings of black folk music to become familiar with the dialect, speech patterns, and inflections of this language.[88]

Dunn-Powell goes on to suggest that research is an essential part of preparation when singing spirituals, as it provides singers with a clearer sense of the history—especially that of the enslaved American Negro, musical practices, stylistic and interpretive elements relative to the repertoire. She also recommends studying the text to derive apparent and hidden meanings from the score as this will "determine one's approach to interpreting the spiritual and will influence one's expression of mood and emotion."[89] She notes that there are some singers who, when they see a spiritual with standard English, will revert the text back to slave dialect. This has been a practice for some time and can be considered when deciding how to approach dialect in spirituals.

Until recently, James Weldon Johnson's ideas and treatises on dialect were the most formidable source on the topic, and they are still entirely valid today. His ideas about spirituals

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[87] Jones, *Spirituals*, 94.

[88] Rosephanye Dunn-Powell, "The African-American Spiritual: Preparation and Performance Considerations," *The Journal of Singing* 61, no. 5 (May/Jun 2005): 471.

[89] Ibid, 469.

range from dialect to spiritual categorization to feel to interpretation. One of the most useful treatises that he authored was on the use of consonants. Johnson found that there were three central concerns surrounding the topic of dialect:

1. The strong correlation between dialect spoken by African Americans and that spoken by Caucasian southerners.

2. The difficulty non-southern Americans experienced pronouncing the dialect.

3. That many held the dialect as "uniform and fixed," which he believed was a mistake because there were regional variations.[90]

Regarding Johnson's first point, musicologist Dr. Felicia Barber (n.d.) notes that at the turn of the 19th century, 90 percent of the Black population of the United States could be found in the south. One of the main languages that was spoken at the time was African American English (AAE), otherwise referred to as slave diction.[91] This language evolved from the blending of "African" diction with the diction of the slave owners in the south, who largely spoke Southern States White English (SSWE). The use of AAE in spirituals provides a softening of English consonants, owing largely to many of these sounds not existing in native African languages. Because AAE is differentiated from SSWE and Standard American English (SAE), and because AAE was considered dialect used only by enslaved people, there has been a negative connotation associated with its use:

> The AAE dialect was often characterized as "uneducated," "broken," "incorrect," and "inferior" … Early collections often contained introduction material that can only be described as scathing and derogatory depictions of the arrangements, the dialect found within them, and their creators. This type of negativity has had a significant and ongoing generational effect on the misrepresentation of a culture...The unfortunate result has been anxiety and trepidation regarding the

[90] Felicia Barber, "Gaining Perspective: A Linguistic Approach to Dialect Found in African American Spirituals," *The Choral Journal* 58, no. 7 (2018): 28.

[91] Ibid, 29.

> performance of the spiritual genre. Specifically, less programing of older arrangements that heavily reflect dialect not only because of reasons previously discussed but because some do not want to encourage the negative perception of broken, incorrect, or ugly speech, terms previously associated with the dialect. In addition, many non-African American performers and teachers are apprehensive, not wanting the use of dialect to be perceived as racism.[92]

One cannot extract AAE from the spiritual. It is one of the ways in which authenticity can be fostered in performance. In his famous preface to *The Book of American Negro Songs,* Johnson writes, "Most [spirituals] lose in charm when they are sung in straight English. For example, it would be next to sacrilege to render: 'What kinda shoes you gwine weah?' by: 'What kind of shoes are you going to wear?'"[93] Interpreters of spirituals should feel free to use educated judgement when it comes to deciding whether it is suitable or not to use slave dialect. "Lord, How Come Me Here?" would not have the same conveyance if sung "Lord, Why Am I Here?" even if the poetic meter allows for it. In modernizing the language, an entirely new set of lyrics is created that doesn't entirely demonstrate the affect of the piece. However, when performing a piece that replaces "the" with "de", or "children" with "chillun", you may consider just singing "the" and "children", as it likely will not negatively affect the interpretation of that piece, won't stick out to listeners, and won't lead to your choir accenting irregular words.

Concerning Johnson's second point regarding non-Southerners' inability to convincingly perform the spiritual using AAE or SSWE, the most obvious solution to this problem would be the study of AAE diction. If a singer finds it difficult to navigate dialect in a spiritual, they have the option of either spending more time listening to expert diction via recordings or a coach, or alternatively they could study the language using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

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[92] Ibid, 30-31.

[93] Johnson and Johnson, *Negro Spirituals*, 46.

Below, I've included a table that outlines common phonological modifications that exist in African American English. While the table is not comprehensive, it highlights the substitutions that are most useful when viewing spiritual scores.

Some Common Phonological Modifications in African American English

Consonants	**Rule**	**Phonetic example**	**IPA example**
"ing"	drop the "g," the "n" is now pronounced.	growing = growin'	groʊɪŋ = groʊIn
voiced dental fricative "th"	"th" becomes "d"	this = dis	ðɪs = dɪs
voiceless dental fricative "th"	"th" becomes "t"	thanks = tanks	θaŋks = taŋks
"r" as ending consonant	the "r" is dropped.	brother = brudda'	brʌðɚ = brʌdə
word ends in "ild" as in "wild"	the "d" is dropped.	child = chil'	tʃʌɪld = tʃʌɪl
Vowels	**Rule**	**Phonetic example**	**IPA example**
the "or" sound in words such as "door," "or," or "your"	"or" sound becomes "oh"	corner = cona	ˈkɔɹnɚ = ˈkoʊnə/ˈkonə
"t" in middle of word	"t" becomes "d"	letter = ledda'	lɛtɚ = lɛdə
"i" sound such as in "wide"	"ah-ee" dipthong becomes "a" as in flap.	sighed = sad	sʌɪd = saːd
"e" sound such as in "when" "again"	"e" becomes "i" like in "sin"	when = win	wɛn = wɪn
Exceptions	**Rule**	**Phonetic example**	**IPA example**
the word "the" preceding vowel	"e" in "the" sounds as "ee"	the = dee	ðiː = diː
"o" in the word "to"*	"to" is pronounced "tuh"	to = tuh	tuː = tʌ

* does not apply to "two" or "too"

In regard to Johnson's third concern, there are certainly discrepancies between regional spirituals' use of dialect. In *Slave Songs of the United States*, most songs are written in AAE; however, several songs use Louisiana Creole or Gullah language—a Lowcountry dialect found in the southeastern coastal region of the United States. Given that the spirituals that we sing today are taken from a mixture of different regions—mainly the southern United States, the Caribbean, and upper South America—Johnson's table is a wonderful resource, but has to be tempered with a regional and contextual lens, as dialect would not have been inherently uniform throughout all of the slave colonies.

3.3 Ornamentation

3.3.1 Melismas

What constitutes an authentic use of melismatic ornamentation in African American spirituals is a matter of debate. Many scholars and performers argue that the spiritual genre should not include anything that sounds akin to popular music "licks" or melismas, such as one might hear in gospel music. This argument is fortified by the postbellum notation of spirituals by transcribers who wrote down the mostly unornamented music as they heard it sung by freed men and women. Additionally, the new spiritual arrangements written during and after the Harlem Renaissance seem to leave little room for improvisation. Indeed, arrangers such as R. Nathaniel Dett and Harry T. Burleigh were trying to avoid improvisation and ornamentation in their arrangements, so as not to have the spiritual compared to or "denigrated" as the likes of jazz music, which was burgeoning at the time.[94]

The dismissal of elaborate ornamentation as a performance practice in African American spirituals may be validated by the idea that the music has been strictly notated since the beginning of the 20th century, with the advent of the concert spiritual.

> It is important to note that although Spirituals were initially learned aurally, in the cotton fields, on the plantations, and in the Black churches of the south, this extraordinary music is now primarily learned and taught using written notation, thus making it accessible to those who are more comfortable in the visual learning tradition…In contemporary Spiritual compositions, the solo lines, as well as the choral parts, are strictly notated with only minimal use of ornamentation. This is one of the primary differences between the genres of Spirituals and Gospel Music.[95]

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[94] Weaver, "Dett," 51.

[95] Robert Lee Jefferson, "Spirituals and Gospel Music Performance Practice: A Dual Curriculum That Bridges the Cultural Divide," (DMA Diss., University of Maryland, 2010), 11.

Still, there is evidence that ornamentation would have been used by enslaved people during the era of slavery. An estimated 30 percent of Africans who were captured in the 18th and 19th centuries and brought to North America were of Islamic descent.[96] Afro-diasporic historian Sylviane Diouf (b.1952) suggests that the melodic style of the field holler evolved from West African Muslims' melismatic recitation of the Quran, particularly the adhan, the Islamic vocal call to prayer.[97] The adhan is a simple melody, which includes long, decorated, swooping notes, in combination with falsetto, trembling or quivering of the voice, and pauses between phrases.

> The music of the African Muslims in the Americas was markedly different from the musical styles carried over by the non-Muslims, with their strong reliance on rapid drumming, polyrhythm, call and response, group singing, and short melodic lines. In contrast, the typical song coming from the Sahel was a solo, moaning kind of song that blues expert Alan Lomax called a "high lonesome complaint." The American South, Mississippi in particular, having a long tradition of absolute tyranny, was fertile ground for the blossoming of the style.[98]

Diouf adds that a close study of the musical nuances of the blues — an American art form with direct ties to the African American spiritual—clearly indicates that African American music was heavily influenced by African-Islamic traditions. Musicologist John Storm Roberts (1936–2009) notes that the long, bending and swooping notes of the blues can be directly analogized to the Islam-influenced musical style found in West Africa.[99] He adds that spiritual performance affects

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[96] Khaled A. Beydoun, "Antebellum Islam," in *Howard Law Journal* 58, no. 141 (December 2014), 155.

[97] Diouf, *Muslims,* 275.

[98] Ibid, 272-273.

[99] Ibid, 274.

such as using blue notes, or "quarter tones at the third, fifth, and seventh of the scale," is characteristic of Islamic-influenced music, "as is producing a note slightly under pitch".[100]

> Even an untrained ear can recognize the similarities that exist between…the hollers that preceded the early blues and the *adhan*, the call to prayer, an area that has not been explored by musicologists. Contrary to the participatory work song, with its call and response, the field holler was always sung solo…Like the call to prayer, the holler is characterized by the use of melisma, a declamatory style, and a simple melody. To non-Muslims the *adhan* would have sounded just like another song.[101]

Diouf suggests that over time, non-Muslim Africans and enslaved people born in the United States became familiar with the Islamic adhan, even if they didn't realize what its function was, and adopted the melismatic style as their own. To that end, it seems that added ornamentation in spiritual genres is something that can be reasonably considered for performance, provided that it is used within the proper subcategory of spiritual. One might not use it in a jubilee, for example, since the tempo and affect of jubilees are typically quite dissimilar to those of the adhan and field holler. However, it may be perfectly acceptable to use subtle ornamentation in a work song, or perhaps even a sorrow song, harkening back to Lomax's reference to the Islamic style being akin to a "high lonesome complaint." The use of ornamentation in spirituals should be approached with a sense of nuance and good taste. If the performance of the piece begins to sound less like a flowing interpretation of a historical musical device, and more like a pop singer going off the rails, ornamentation may be excessive in this type of music.

Many modern arrangers of spirituals write the vocal line to sound authentically ornamented, such as the many glissandi and final soprano and alto "down" melisma written into

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[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid, 274-275.

Moses Hogan's arrangement of "The Battle of Jericho". Singing the music as written, therefore, will provide the effect of ornamentation without having to make decisions about what level of ornamentation would be authentic. However, like Randye Jones's ideas about piano improvisation—that pianists who have the ability to improvise should feel free to do so when they encounter a spiritual notated in a pseudo-improvisatory style—singers who come across a score that gives the impression of improvisation can certainly design their own ornament, provided that they have the skill to do so successfully.

3.3.2 Hums and Digs

Many choral arrangements, and solos for that matter, utilize humming as a musical device in spirituals. The spiritual hum differs from humming in other genres—such as in lullabies or in choral works like "Chramer, gip die varwe mir" from Carl Orff's (1895–1982) *Carmina Burana*—in that it is almost always in support of the message sung by the soloist, rather than just for musical effect. There are many ways to hum: for example, is the hum strictly in time or laid-back and back-phrased? Is the hum sung in agreement or disagreement with the soloist's text? Typically, the hum is in agreement, but in some theatrical settings it may diverge. Is the hum lazy and heavy, or is it light and active? Is it mournful or celebratory? All of these affects can be applied to the spiritual hum. When deciding how to treat the spiritual hum, one should also consider the importance of finding the right tempo for the piece. If a piece such as a sorrow song, which should be performed more moderately, is performed too quickly, the humming will sound inappropriately like jubilation. That is a choice you may make as an interpreter, but it should be deliberate and backed by a specific intention. Conversely, if the piece is performed too slowly, the humming will begin to sound lugubrious, especially if you also add in another component of the hum, the "dig".

The dig is a device that we hear often in modern popular music; some refer to it as a "scoop". I refer to it as the dig because the pitch bends from a bit lower than one might imagine a scoop starting from. The spiritual hum does not sound as convincing without the dig, but as with all spiritual performance practices, it must be nuanced. If one uses too much dig, your performance will sound like a revving motor. However, if there's not enough dig, it sometimes sounds out of place within the genre. The dig is not only used in humming sections. Performers can choose to employ it in specific points of text, typically at the final syllable of a phrase. One can sing "I'm buildin' me a home" strictly as written with no dig, but it will sound square. As soon as you add the intentional dig, you can play with how *low* you want to dig and how long it will take to come back to the fundamental pitch, but again this is a matter of nuance and experimentation.

The spiritual has many performance practices to consider when preparing these pieces for concert use. Having an awareness of the broad categories, as well as the more specific social function of these pieces will aid in your authentic interpretation of the music. Knowing that a piece such as "Wade in the Water" can be simultaneously a work song, coded song, and slow and melodic spiritual, may help you to clarify your own ideas of how you would like to interpret the piece. Tasteful details such as digs and melismas may also add desired textures to the song and make it uniquely your own, or you may decide that including those details detract from the contextual value of the piece. Regardless of what effects you choose to employ when performing the music, it is important to approach the spiritual with respect and consciousness, always keeping in mind that there are real stories behind the creation of this music.

CHAPTER 4 – CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is impossible to examine popular music in North America without considering race and culture. Films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which glorified the white supremacy of the Ku Klux Klan, and *The Jazz Singer* (1927), wherein actor Al Jolson (1886–1950) gives an abhorrent rendition of "Mammy" in blackface—caricaturizing black performers—exemplify the status of cultural thought at the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, cultural exchanges between White and minority cultures have improved vastly. Still, there is room for a global conversation on the importance of respecting the cultures of others, especially as it pertains to dominant and non-dominant cultures. In the late 1900s, the term *cultural appropriation* began to emerge within academic circles as a term to describe the disrespectful borrowing of cultural aspects by people who did not belong to the source community. Cultural *appreciation* followed some years later as a positive opposition to appropriation. The parameters of cultural appreciation continue to evolve as cultural authorities, researchers, and activists seek common ground. One of the concerns that some have regarding spirituals is how to handle the performance of this genre by non-Blacks, especially White people. This is due to the historic violence enacted on Black enslaved people by their White "masters" during the era of slavery, and for decades after. This chapter aims to explore these problems, and to offer suggestions of how to *appreciate* rather than *appropriate*, as well as how to navigate the performance of spirituals by those outside of the Black community.

4.1 What is Cultural Appropriation?

Cultural appropriation is a term that has only come into common use in the past 20 years or so, and it was not until in 2017 that the term was added to the Oxford English Dictionary.[102] Cultural appropriation is defined as "the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society."[103] I define cultural appropriation in Western music as the taking of non-Western and/or non-White genres and performance practices, in order to suit one's own artistic or economic purposes. It carries connotations of dominance and exploitation, it most often happens across racial lines, and involves cultures that have been marginalized. Cultural appropriation invariably demonstrates a lack of understanding of the historically and emotionally significant elements of the minority culture. There are many versions of this definition, because this is such a complex issue. The act of cultural appropriation becomes especially harmful when the source community, i.e. the community that is being taken from, is a minority group that has been historically oppressed or exploited in other ways.

As an example, in 2018 the Montreal International Jazz Festival presented a musical by renowned Canadian stage director, playwright, and producer Robert Lepage (b. 1957). The piece was entitled "SLĀV" and was described by organizers as "a theatrical odyssey based on...traditional Afro-American songs, from cotton fields to construction sites...from slave songs

[102] "Cultural Appropriation," Grammarist, accessed July 1, 2020, https://grammarist.com/new-words/cultural-appropriation/.

[103] Oxford English Dictionary, "Cultural Appropriation," (Oxford University Press, 2014), accessed August 1, 2020, https://www-oed-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/view/Entry/45742?redirectedFrom=cultural+appropriation.

to prison songs."[104] "SLĀV" drew criticism internationally because the show, whose premise surrounded the singing of traditional African American spirituals, used a cast of mostly White actors to portray African American slaves.

Lepage, the organizers of the festival, and the lead actress—Betty Bonifassi (b. 1971), who is White and was the writer of the show—were all accused of cultural appropriation. Because of the public outcry from Montreal and international communities, the festival eventually, and reluctantly, shut the production down after three of the ten scheduled performances had passed. In a July 2018 interview conducted by Sidhartha Banerjee (n.d.) of the Canadian Press, Lepage voiced his irritation at the cancellation of the project, and was unapologetic in his defense of the show:

> To me, what is most appalling is the intolerant discourse heard both on the street and in some media...everything that led to this cancellation is a direct blow to artistic freedom...[acting is the process of] stepping into the shoes of another person to try to understand them, and in the process, perhaps understand ourselves better...this ancient ritual requires that we borrow, for the duration of a performance, someone else's look, voice, accent and at times even gender... when we are no longer allowed to step into someone else's shoes, when it is forbidden to identify with someone else, theatre is denied its very nature, it is prevented from performing its primary function and is thus rendered meaningless.[105]

Lepage went further, stating that over his 40-year career he has produced or directed numerous shows, which condemn historic injustices against distinct cultural groups without including

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[104] Sidhartha Banerjee "Robert Lepage calls cancellation of SLAV show a 'direct blow to artistic freedom,'" The Star, accessed August 20, 2020, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/stage/2018/07/06/robert-lepage-calls-cancellation-of-slav-show-a-direct-blow-to-artistic-freedom.html.

[105] Ibid.

performers from said cultures. He maintained that those shows had been acclaimed by diverse communities throughout the world and that he had never before been accused of racism or misappropriation.[106] In a joint statement from Lepage and Bonifassi, the pair added, "[…] this history was written by the oppressors as much as by the oppressed, by whites as well as by blacks...it's necessary to continue the dialogue about this difficult period, first to bear witness, but also to avoid repeating it in the future."[107]

A petition that condemned the production and called for its removal from the festival lineup collected more than 1500 signatures from the Montreal arts community. The production, though cancelled in Montreal, went on to be performed in rural communities throughout the province of Quebec, Canada, notably in cities whose racial demographic was less diverse, averaging a visible minority presence of 8% or less.[108] Lepage promised to be more culturally sensitive as he adapted the work after the cancellation of the festival production. It should be noted that he never clarified what changes he intended to make.[109]

There are several major issues within this story that demonstrate cultural appropriation. First, Lepage is a White director, who felt that there was no problem with telling stories about, and from the perspective of, Black people without the input *of* a Black person. The exclusion of a

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[106] Ibid.

[107] Michael Love Michael "Moses Sumney Cancels Performance at Montreal Jazz Festival, Citing Racist Show," Paper, accessed on August 18, 2020, https://www.papermag.com/moses-sumney-cancels-performance-at-montreal-jazz-festival-citing-racist-show-2583496435.html?rebelltitem=5#rebelltitem5.

[108] "Quebec playwright Robert Lepage promises 'to do better' after SLAV controversy," Globalnews.ca, accessed on August 19, 2020, https://globalnews.ca/news/4799541/quebec-playwright-robert-lepage-says-controversial-slav-play-reworked/.

[109] Ibid.

Black voice from the conversation surrounding how this show should be framed was a mistake. Second, the show had a cast of seven actors of which only two were Black, and those two performers were cast in supporting roles. It is surprising that a show about Black people and the history of enslavement would not use Black actors to portray enslaved people, especially in a city whose actor base could support such a choice. The principal concern is less about the singing of spirituals by Whites, but rather their physical portrayal of enslaved African Americans. Lepage's imputation that this is a "blow" to theatre—by challenging the notion that all actors should be allowed to step into any role that they like—is fallacious. Many actors of colour lament their inability to step into many roles due to the industry's expectations of who should portray what, especially when the theatrical work is historic. Would it make sense for dark-skinned Black actors to play the parts of historic figures Marie Antoinette or Captain von Trapp? This was a missed opportunity for Black actors to have a significant part in an artistic medium that offers few roles of colour. Third, the unapologetic nature of Lepage, the festival, and Bonifassi reeks of privilege. Lepage's intimation that he has done this type of cultural misappropriating on multiple occasions in the past should not be a point of pride. That for over 40 years he has continually borrowed the stories of minority cultures without any deference to authorities within those cultures indicates a negative pattern of behaviour wherein his privilege has given him a false sense of righteousness. Their joint statement propagating the idea that because White people were involved in slavery, spirituals and accounts from the era of slavery belong equally to everyone involved dismisses the horrific circumstances of slavery, and the lasting negative effects that it has had on Black people. It is a matter of the dominant culture inserting itself into the minority culture's experience in a flagrant display of narcissism. Lastly, that the show went on to be performed in rural, conservative communities—tucked comfortably away from the

liberal and socially progressive attitudes commonly found in larger cities—shows insincerity on Lepage's part concerning his vow to learn from his mistakes, and also displays a clear disregard for the feelings of Black people.

4.2 What is Cultural Appreciation?

There is no distinct definition of cultural appreciation. In fact, the term cannot be found in any common dictionary or encyclopedic source. Rosanna Deerchild (b. 1945), host of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *Unreserved* radio program, defines cultural appreciation as something that "truly honours [a] nations' art and cultures. [One takes] the time to learn and interact, to gain understanding of a culture, or cultures, different from your own." I define cultural appreciation as a genuine endeavour to learn about or explore different cultures or traditions. Not for selfish reasons such as money or celebrity, but simply to honour another culture. It is a cultural exchange based on mutual respect, consent, and participation, and puts the person appreciating the culture firmly in the role of student.

Cultural appreciation is a less common term than cultural appropriation, but many of us regularly engage in the former practice. We appreciate various types of music, food, fashion, and visual art from around the world. Our appreciation is a direct result of the way that we connect with these foreign experiences. But the ultimate question is: how do we experience another culture without misappropriating or being disrespectful?

4.2.1 How Do We Avoid Culturally Appropriation?

Nine points are worth considering when endeavouring to avoid cultural appropriation:

First, recognize the signs of cultural appropriation. It is not enough for you to solely acknowledge appropriation after a third party brings it to your attention. The only way that we

can end appropriation, or at least abate it, is for everyone to know what appropriation looks like, and to be prepared to condemn it when it presents itself. This is the best form of allyship.

Second, recognize that solely giving credit to a culture is inadequate. Cultural appropriation often gives the offending group veneration and acknowledgment for aspects of a culture that they have appropriated. This reinforces the imbalance of power between dominant and minority cultures.[110] Credit alone is not enough; if you intend to engage in a culture outside of your own you should involve people from the minority culture. Be curious, ask questions, and encourage the authority to share their cultural perspectives with you. For example, if you were to perform a concert of spirituals from the Gullah region and neglected to include someone from within that culture in either the instruction of the music or as a part of the performance, this could be construed as cultural appropriation. Additionally, by not including someone from that culture, you may miss significant details such as the importance of percussive elements in the Gullah spiritual performance practice. Giving credit to the Gullah people for the creation of the music would not be enough, actual engagement with the culture would be missing. If you ask someone from the minority culture for input and they choose not to engage, do not become antagonistic. Celebrate their agency.

Third, be conscious and intentional in your efforts to avoid cultural appropriation. In the 21st century, it is no longer acceptable to rely on the defense of ignorance when confronting issues such as cultural divides and marginalization. The internet and the development of globalization, as well as social movements such as Black Lives Matter, all highlight the inequities among different cultures and ethnicities. We can access information that we previously

[110] "Why Cultural Appropriation Isn't Cool," Reach Out Australia, accessed on July 31, 2020, https://au.reachout.com/articles/why-cultural-appropriation-isnt-cool.

might not have been able to procure without considerable effort; reliable information is now available in person, online, through audiovisual resources, and in print. To raise your consciousness surrounding the issues of cultural appropriation, ask yourself these important questions:

1. Do I genuinely grasp the culture that I am trying to honour, or do I simply have a rudimentary understanding of it?
2. Am I perpetuating a stereotype that might negatively affect the musical culture in question?
3. What is the significance of the cultural piece that I am performing?
4. Am I doing this in an effort to relate with and participate in another culture, or is this being done for economic gain or an attractive bit of social media?

If you find yourself in a scenario wherein someone is about to appropriate music—or any facet of culture—of which they clearly have little or no understanding, challenge their engagement with the material. Either they will justify their familiarity with the material, or, hopefully, they will consider their privilege and reapproach the cultural scenario from a respectful standpoint. In the case of "SLĀV", musicians who were supposed to perform at the Montreal International Jazz Festival declined to participate because they recognized the cultural damage that would be done by idly allowing cultural appropriation. They recognized the signs, and they took action to prevent cultural harm.

The fourth point to consider when attempting to avoid cultural appreciation is to remember that if you do not understand the piece from another culture, you should not use it. Musicians are taught to be critically aware of the use and performance of classical forms, techniques, and styles. Similarly, we must be conscious of the traditional forms and practices of the music and instruments that we borrow from other cultures. People study their own and other

cultural traditions vigorously in order to become expert in certain practices. Do not presume to understand the intricacies of a culture simply by investing a few short hours into a custom. Spirituals have become a part of popular culture in American music. Most people can name at least two or three spirituals, and probably sing a verse from each. The spiritual can therefore feel like a music that needs no technical approach. However, many spirituals sung today are art songs and are offered alongside classical works that few would present onstage without considerable preparation. Spirituals must be given the same deference as other classical works and should be approached with artistic sensitivity.

The fifth point concerns the importance of educating yourself about other cultures. It is extremely important to be aware of historical context when approaching the cultural traditions of others. If you do not understand all of the pain, the politics, the trauma, and the triumphs that lead to the development of a genre of music, you are bound to misstep. When dominant cultures appropriate, it devalues the cultural significance of the minority culture's tradition for the dominant group's enjoyment. You might ask yourself: how well do I understand the history of my own culture and its relationship to other cultures? It is not enough to read the single paragraph blurb that is placed at the front of your octavo score. Doing your own in-depth research before seeking counsel from the community in question is very important, as it is not the minority culture's responsibility to educate others comprehensively. Given the centuries-long history of the spiritual and its slavery-catalyzed beginnings, education is very important. Singing the music of enslaved people without any context of what they endured is not only poor performance practice, it is culturally offensive. Many Black people feel as though non-Blacks should avoid this genre altogether, and not being prepared to answer questions surrounding the musical and social origin of the spiritual will only add fuel to the cultural appropriation debate.

Sixth, ensure that the cultural authority is paid for their time. If you ask a member of the culture in question for in-depth advice surrounding artistic practices, or if you are asking the authority to engage in a workshop with your ensemble, be sure that you financially compensate them, and do not wait for them to ask first. In the past, I have been asked to workshop spirituals with choirs and conductors without receiving compensation for my time. When one considers the amount of time, dedication, and financial investment that is required to become an authority in any field, it is unfair to expect someone to lend their expertise without offering them remuneration. This does not mean that authorities will always require compensation for their knowledge, but it means that it is important for you and your organization to consider authoritative knowledge a budgetary line item. Individuals and smaller organizations with limited budgets may be able to negotiate a gratis exchange with compensation in-kind, however, large organizations with sizable budgets should take care not to take advantage of someone who may not have the luxury of financial flexibility. Taking their time by reaping their cultural knowledge and experience for free is racist.

Seventh, if you are part of a dominant culture, be cognizant of your relative privilege. Understand that dominant communities often have a greater responsibility to show deference when borrowing aspects of a less affluent culture. If a minority culture is exploring a dominant culture, they may show less deference; this is not out of a lack of respect, but rather because the dominant culture is treated as normative.[111] For example, someone singing the spiritual "Kum ba ya" might have a greater need to be familiar with the origin and intent of the song than someone

[111] Ryan Cho, "Cultural Appropriation and Choral Music: A Conversation That Can Make Our Music and Community Better," Lifeofkeiko, accessed July 28, 2020, https://lifeofkeiko.wordpress.com/2014/09/01/cultural-appropriation-and-choral-music-a-conversation-that-can-make-both-our-music-and-community-better/.

singing the French folk song “Au clair de la lune”. In part because “Au clair de la lune” is included in the normative folk traditions of both European and North American cultures, using standard French dialect. Whereas “Kum ba ya” originates from a non-normative African tradition, using a dialect that is even less common than African American English.

Eighth, consider whether your good intentions outweigh the real-world consequences of performing the music of the community that has been marginalized. Will your well-intentioned concert ultimately cause pain, diminishment, or a feeling of disrespect to the minority community? If there is even a remote possibility that the answer is yes, rethink how you are engaging with the music and its source community. Haphazardly grabbing on to parts of a cultural tradition and transforming them into short-lived trends does not only negatively affect the marginalized community and the traditional components taken from them. Everyone is affected by the consequences since perpetuating cultural appropriation and cultural stereotypes—by not standing up for what is right and just—eliminates opportunities to dismantle the systemic racism that continues to pervade and impact our society. Once again, I’ll use “SLĀV” as an example: while Robert Lepage may have considered his theatrical piece to be inoffensive and harmless, the community that was most affected by White actors portraying slaves—the Black community—did feel diminished by the misappropriation of a part of their historic cultural identity. Had Lepage or the producers of “SLĀV” taken the time to consider how taking a painful aspect of Black history and adapting it for the production’s dramatic purpose might be construed as offensive, the production may not have been cancelled, nor would it be part of Canadian theatre infamy.

The ninth and final point is that, unfortunately, even if you abide by all these points, you may still be accused of appropriation. This is because there is seldom only one authority in a

cultural community. Gaining permission from a sole person does not mean that all other connected and concerned parties will agree with that authority. While you may do due diligence and follow points 1 through 8, knowledge is invisible, and it will not always be obvious to others that you have invested in the work necessary to be culturally conscious. Take for example a concert that was presented at Western Michigan University in February 2019, wherein an African American man, Dr. John Wesley Wright (n.d.), a choral conductor with over 30 years of experience, was accused of cultural appropriation for presenting a concert of spirituals performed by a majority White choir. While most would view a conductor with 30 years of experience performing and workshopping spirituals as an authority, a Black student at the university, Shaylee Faught (n.d.), criticized Wright for his choice to program this concert with the ensemble. Faught was further incensed by Wright's invitation to the mostly White audience to sing along with the choir, as well as by the conductor's unapologetic stance on non-Blacks performing spirituals: Wright asserted that spirituals "don't belong to one race".[112] Whether you agree with Wright or Faught's position, one thing is clear: there is a fine line between appropriation and appreciation, and being an authority for some, does not make you an authority for all. If you are accused of cultural appropriation, do your best not to become defensive, listen to the perspective of the other person, and take a moment to reflect on their point of view before asserting your own. Be prepared to solidly answer questions about your familiarity with the material and the culture surrounding it.

Cultural appropriation is a divisive practice, and aids in the dissemination of toxic stereotypes. It frequently leads to misconceptions and conflicts that are entirely avoidable.

[112] "University choir sparks questions over who can sing black spirituals," The Hill, accessed on August 12, 2020, https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/484335-university-choir-sparks-questions-over-who-can.

However, if communities work together to find better, more empathetic approaches to making art, cultural appropriation may become a thing of the past.

4.3 The Singing of Spirituals by Non-Blacks

There is an ongoing debate regarding whether people who are not Black should sing spirituals, and if they do, whether they should use dialect. A discussion surrounding performance practice would be remiss without even a brief mention of this issue. Composers such as R. Nathaniel Dett and H. T. Burleigh went so far as to reimagine what the spiritual is, such that more people could have access to the genre. Indeed, the concert spiritual has many more Western classical traits than its early spiritual predecessor. What is universal in the resources considering who should sing the music is a caveat of respect and cultural awareness. That is to say that one should not sing the spiritual, regardless of ethnicity, without a clear sense of where this music comes from, why it is written in the way that it is, why certain nuances of phrasing, dialect, tempo, and ornamentation should or should not be employed. To be frank, White people are often those who feel least able to perform spirituals due to the historic and cultural aspects of the music. Indeed, many resources on spiritual performance practice have entire chapters on the matter.

In a survey completed in 2007, Dr. Caroline Helton (b.1963) and Dr. Emery Stephens (n.d.) found that there were four categories of apprehension when it came to performing the spiritual. 25% of respondents expressed fears of inauthenticity and needing permission to perform the repertoire, 25% cited lack of knowledge in terms of how to access spirituals, more than 25% felt they lacked stylistic knowledge or guidance to interpret the music well, and the remainder of respondents cited ignorance on the part of their colleagues or the general public or their own musical shortcomings as a barrier. In the same study, 25% of respondents felt that race greatly

contributed to perceptions of authenticity, 62% thought it moderately contributed, and 13% felt that it played no role whatsoever.[113]

There is no short or easy answer with regards to what claim non-Blacks have to the spiritual, but Randye Jones posits that there are a few things that should be considered regardless of race when choosing to sing spirituals. First, select the appropriate music. Consider whether your spiritual is a concert spiritual or folk music. Find an authentic score and start with something that is accessible. She suggests starting with neo-Romantic composers such as Hall Johnson or H. T. Burleigh, because they composed their pieces with little dialect and simple accompaniment. Second, choose music that is suitable for your vocal and stylistic approach: songs with melodies, texts and technical demands that are within your "wheelhouse", but which also expand your understanding of the genre. Explore different composers who set the spiritual in jazz, blues, and gospel styles to find what you're most interested in. Third, perform in public, but find audiences that are friendly such as a studio recital, a home church, or a retirement community. "Keep gestures to a minimum and let the song and your voice tell the story."[114] Third, listen to recordings of master performers. In this way, one may develop a keener ear for which stylistic elements can be appropriately applied to the chosen repertoire. Rosephanye Dunn-Powell echoes these sentiments:

> I think white singers, concert singers, can sing Spirituals—if they feel them. But to feel them it is necessary to know the truth about their origin and history, to get in touch with the association of ideas that surround them, and to realize something of what they have meant in the experiences of the people who created them. In a word, the capacity to

[113] Caroline Helton and Emery Stephens, "Singing Down the Barriers: Encouraging Singers of All Racial Backgrounds to Perform Music by African American Composers," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning,* no. 11 (Fall 2007): 75.

[114] Jones, "Spirituals," 127-129.

> feel the songs while singing them is more important than any amount of mere artistic technique. Singers who take the Spirituals as mere "art" songs and singers who make of them an exhibition of what is merely amusing or exotic are equally doomed to failure, so far as true interpretation is concerned.[115]

There are many aspects to performing the African American spiritual that can and should be considered. Paramount to all the points of consideration is that the singer must take the time to consider the context of the material, much the same as they would approach any other art song and dialect. Understanding the history and context of these pieces is integral to telling the story to modern audiences. Performers would be wise to approach this music with a degree of social consciousness. There is an opportunity, through the spiritual, to tell a story that not only highlights the historic plight of the enslaved West Africans and their descendants, but also highlights our collective story. An empathetic gateway can also be found through this music concerning the contemporary stories of immigrants and refugees, and of discrimination and injustice. The enslaved West Africans who found their "balm" in biblical stories created songs that healed and cared for their own people. Unknown to them, this music would do the same for audiences in the centuries to come, communicating universal messages of trials, collective work and struggle, and hope. In order to offer an authentic performance of the spiritual, performers should identify a story worth sharing with their audience; then use the texts and melodies not just as a historic retelling, but as a relatable, contemporary message. This all begins by understanding the role of the spiritual, and making informed decisions where dialect, tempo, and rhythm are concerned.

[115] Dunn-Powell, "African-American Spiritual," 471.

Conclusion

If when preparing your performance of the spiritual you don't consider the history of the genre and what role it plays in a modern performance, you have already lost the sense of context, and you may find your performance is suboptimal. The result of ignoring the historical context is that the music can come off as uncomfortable, misguided, stiff, or worse yet, insulting. The spiritual genre is stacked with deep, moving, inspiring songs, and the more that you sing them, the more gems you'll find within the genre. When you find a good performance of a spiritual, sit with the performance for a while, discern what it is that you like about the performance. Think about what moves you about the interpreter and try to apply it to your own work. There is a lot of understanding and empathy to be found by situating the spiritual within our modern-day socio-political contexts. What are people fleeing from in contemporary underground railroads? Who are the authentic voices that wade in the water? What activism can be incited by the performance of this music? What walls that continue to divide us might be encouraged to crumble through the recollection of our shared past? What personal experience can we bring to the forefront of our portrayal of this music? The spiritual thrives on our ability to interpret it with generosity of spirit, with our physical bodies, with care, and with fearlessness.

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