"SPIRITUALS," BY LILLIAN RICHTER, C. 1940

The new millennium has brought a renewed sense of purpose in choral music for ensembles of all types. Concerts have become a forum in which to address many societal concerns from human trafficking to homelessness. The efforts of conductors and performers throughout the United States to raise awareness of the needs of marginalized individuals has had significant impact on many issues that were not part of our public conscientiousness until quite recently. Yet, we seem unable to successfully address the iniquity that has plagued us for centuries: racism.

The purpose of this article is to study the importance and relevance of the African American spiritual genre in the contemporary public-school classroom. As an instructional resource in the modern choral ensemble, the spiritual can be used to both educate and heal. Yet, ongoing debate as to who should sing spirituals and where and when their performance is appropriate often impedes their meaningful contribution. Strategies for ways in which the spiritual might be respectfully implemented as an aid in these conversations will be shared. Resources for the appropriate planning and programming of spirituals and excerpts of interviews with two arrangers, Dr. Alice Parker, and Dr. Raymond Wise, are used to support the information included.

AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALS IN THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL CHORAL ENSEMBLE

OUR MOST POWERFUL WEAPON AGAINST RACISM

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The inhumane treatment of individuals brought from West Africa beginning in the early seventeenth century and continuing for almost three hundred years is a horrific chapter in the American story. The deep-seated bigotry maintained by many, even today, against people of color is a truth that cannot be ignored. The African American spiritual is a musical reminder of that struggle. But how can a reminder of our worst attributes be an educational tool? It is in remembering and studying our failures that we grow and eventually overcome our past.

Imagine a classroom alive with conversation as the students receive new music that they will prepare for an upcoming festival. Among the repertoire: "The Battle of Jericho," arranged by Moses Hogan. A white student is overheard to say, "Oh, I love it when we sing spirituals. They are so fun!" An African American classmate responds, rather indignantly, "Obviously, you know nothing about spirituals or where they come from, or you would never say they were 'fun.'"

Experience has shown that performing spirituals promotes cultural and educational growth for students and audiences alike, yet not all educators have experienced positive results. Several choral conductors consulted for this article shared their trepidation. One individual, whose name is withheld at their request, related the experience of programming "Ain't Got Time to Die," a work by Hall Johnson. Several students in the ensemble, both Black and white, objected to the piece; others felt the group should learn it. The objecting students expressed that an ensemble of mostly white performers was incapable of presenting an authentic, respectful performance of any spiritual or work in spiritual form. This viewpoint was supported by an administrator who was invited to act as mediator in the classroom discussion. Unfortunately, this viewpoint is not uncommon. The piece was removed from the program.

Conversely, two retired Ohio public-school choral music educators, both African American, felt that telling an ensemble of mostly white singers that they should not sing spirituals is comparable to telling an ensemble of mostly Black singers they should not perform Italian madrigals. In his article "Singing African American Spirituals: A Reflection on Racial Barriers in Classical Vocal Music," Lourin Plant goes quite a bit further.

> Singing spirituals is centrally important to our education and racial transcendence as a nation. Building on the affirmative premise that solo African American spirituals are suitable literature for all on the concert stage, I suggest that singing African American spirituals could bring Blacks and whites intimately closer together.[1]

Although Plant's article addresses performance of the spiritual in solo recital, his examination of the racial divide surrounding the genre is insightful. Plant points particularly to blackface minstrelsy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an ongoing cause for discomfort and anxiety. This "theatrical practice" began as early as the 1820s in the Northern United States and continued well into the twentieth century; it involved white performers (and later Black ones as well) depicting Blacks in horribly caricatured and racist stage spectacles. Blacks were represented by white performers, supposedly relishing in the joys of life on the plantation, with "burnt cork-blackened faces, exaggerated red or white lips and white eyes."[2] Theater troupes such as Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels, the Christy Minstrels, and the Georgia Minstrels traveled the country performing in theaters, churches, synagogues, and on riverboats.

In the early days of the minstrel show, Blacks were not the only victims of the satirical productions. Chinese, Japanese, Irish, German, Welsh, Italian, and Russian Jewish immigrants were also the subjects of these derogatory theatrical displays.[3] However, leading up to the Civil War, performances in blackface served to unite the white population against the Blacks, leveling the playing field among poor whites and immigrants "at a time when simply being white was not enough."[4] The result was a lingering stereotype of the African American race in the United States that continued in theatrical form through the advent of the vaudeville show, radio, film, and television.

While twenty-first-century singers, particularly those in the public-school classroom, may not know specifically about blackface minstrelsy, they can likely name incidents reported by the media in which a celebrity or political figure was criticized for a racially inappropriate costume or public comment. These insensitive displays reinforce the damage caused by the era of blackface

minstrelsy. The lingering stain of this practice, however, should not cause conductors to neglect the rich musical heritage found in the spirituals. To do so is an even greater disservice. Plant says, "Spirituals give eternal voice to the righteous hope for freedom, justice and understanding."[5] Singing was a critical part of the slave experience, one that actually allowed for the survival of some individuals. Performing these important historical artifacts tells the story of their grief in ways that simply reading about them cannot.

The subject matter found in the spirituals is universal. Performers may find relatable stories that help them process their own life experiences.

When asked who should sing spirituals, Dr. Raymond Wise, Professor of Practice in African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University, states his opinion that spirituals are for everyone. Although he encourages performances of spirituals by all singers, Wise observes that the loss of the emotional expression needed in the spiritual is a danger. He suggests this can be avoided by first teaching the story of the people and finding ways to connect the story with the singers.[6] Eileen Guenther discerned that the subject matter found in the spirituals is universal. Performers may find relatable stories that help them process their own life experiences. She quotes Arthur Jones, who writes that the spirituals are "deeply meaningful, archetypically human experiences, relevant not only to the specific circumstances of slavery, but also to women and men struggling with issues of justice, freedom and spiritual wholeness in all times and places."[7] Wise states that concern expressed by those in the African American community regarding performance of the genre by non-African Americans is representative of a fear of appropriation, monetization, or commercialization.

In an email communication with Dr. Alice Parker, the composer and arranger shared:

> Two years ago, I participated in a prolonged discussion with a group of highly motivated college students who were feeling that as whites, they had no right to appropriate the spirituals for their concerts. I said: "Close your eyes. Open your ears. Is it good music? Do you have to be Lutheran to sing Bach? Or Catholic to sing the Latin chants?" They were mixing up a very complicated social problem with the arts—and the wonderful thing about the arts—all of them—is that they erase those perceived "differences" and put us all on a very human level.[8]

Classroom discussions of this kind are critical to our development as human beings and the development of well-rounded musicians. Often, we avoid them because they can be uncomfortable. The opinions and feelings of the singers should be welcomed. However, the discomfort often created by the sharing of those opinions should not prevent us from taking risks and exposing our singers to all types of music, including the spirituals.

Equally as important as the human connection mentioned by Dr. Parker is the cathartic power of the spiritual. Students who enter the modern public-school classroom often carry burdens that are not readily visible. Young people who have experienced grief, loss, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, homelessness, mental illness, and many other struggles can identify with this music. The "mysterious force" of these songs serves both individuals and humanity.[9]

> It's almost like *therapy*. It begins to take the frown out of the face. The shoulders begin to come back to their natural position. What's happening is, you're going through a cleansing process. You're coming back to where you wanted to be. Things are not quite as bad as you think they are. And the more you sing it, the more you find relief, the more you believe that there is a way out of this.[10]

Spirituals should not be programmed without diligent consideration of purpose. Before selecting an arrangement, conductors should consider the event for which the spiritual is being performed, the other works

surrounding the spiritual on the program, the position of the spiritual on the program (beginning, middle, or end), the source of the arrangement, and the intended experience for the performers and audience.

Many popular spiritual settings are up-tempo and joyous in nature. Requiring a large choral tone and full of rhythmic energy, Stacey V. Gibbs's setting of "Ezekiel" for double choir is a perfect example. The tendency is to position works of this kind as the "closer" of the program, a choice that demonstrates the concerns expressed by Dr. Wise. While concluding a performance with a spiritual is not necessarily inappropriate, its placement should relate to the overall program. Perhaps the theme of the program is equality, and the final three selections are "We Shall Overcome" arranged by Tom Trenney, "Two South African Freedom Songs" arranged by Henry Leck, and finally Gibbs's setting of "Ezekiel." In this way, the pieces support the message of the program while still treating the final selection with respect.

The quality and purpose of the arrangement are as important as the spiritual's context. Dr. Wise explained his concern for both monetization and commercialization related to this subject specifically. Arrangements that are merely representative of the style for the sake of a marketable product or profitability are disrespectful. One popular practice is to take the melody of a spiritual and add a gospel accompaniment. Several arrangements of this type were included on recent festival performances in my native state.[11] While this is not wrong *per se,* it can lead both to misunderstanding of the genre and inappropriate performance practice. Consider the use of accompaniment carefully when choosing an arrangement. What is the function of the accompaniment? Does it support the voices and especially the text, or does it overshadow the important message found therein? A common error is to include dancing and clapping along with the accompaniment if it is in the gospel style.

Dr. Wise suggests that choosing an arrangement that includes some of these characteristics may have many benefits to the ensemble: perhaps it is age appropriate or voiced well for the age and skill of the group, but it is also important to teach about the work's original purpose and intent. Singers should understand that the piece has been adapted from its true form and selected for them for specific reasons. Exposing the singers to a setting or recording of the work closer to its original form may be pedagogically valuable. Further, educators must be aware of arrangements that claim to be spirituals but are not. Curtis and Cloud state:

> Approximately 30% of new music that is pushed by distributors and publishing houses as described by title alone does not belong in the spiritual category.… Many of these offerings are not spirituals but instead are either imitations of the African American folk idiom or popular Broadway versions of minstrel music.[12]

Something must be said of dialect in teaching the spirituals, as this can be an area of anxiety for both conductors and performers. White singers express concern that singing in dialect is disrespectful to their Black peers, and Black singers may feel their white colleagues are making fun when they sing in dialect. Further, there are no concrete rules to follow in the use of dialect. Thankfully, there are excellent resources that should be consulted in decision making.

Repertoire and Resources

Mark Seigrist's dissertation, "Diction and Dialect: Performance Practice in the American Negro spiritual and Slave Songs," and Rosephanye Dunn-Powell's article "The African-American Spiritual: Preparation and Performance Considerations" (*Journal of Singing*, May/June 2005) are both outstanding resources. André Thomas's book *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton: Heritage Music Press, 2007) and Anton Armstrong's "Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song" (*Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir,* GIA Publications, 2005) are extremely useful. Thomas's book is especially helpful in that it gives brief biographical information on some of the more prolific spiritual arrangers and mentions the frequency and manner with which each employs dialect. According to Thomas, dialect in literature is used to represent characters; it

is used in the concert spiritual to create an accurate and stylistically appropriate performance.[13]

In his book, Thomas provides an analysis of Stacy V. Gibbs's setting of "Way Over in Beulah Lan,'" which includes significant use of dialect. The dialect contained in this work requires careful planning and decision making by the conductor. The composer uses *ovuh* rather than *over* and deliberately omits the 'd' at the end of *land* to prohibit excessive emphasis of the hard consonant. Throughout the arrangement, *de* is substituted for *the* and *gonna* is used instead of *going to*. In the final verse, *chillun* is written in place of *children*. Thomas states that he was not comfortable with this particular dialectic choice and chose to perform *childrun*, using the *schwa* with his ensemble.[14] This kind of consideration, which is meant to best aid the singers in a positive experience as well as a respectful performance, is critical. Some ensembles may feel perfectly comfortable with the use of *chillun* while others may not. To do as Thomas suggests and employ color to the tone through the *schwa* is both conservative and authentic.

Seigrist's and Armstrong's writings on the classifications of spirituals are helpful to singers and conductors as they develop an understanding of purpose in the genre. Seigrist's explanations of cries, calls, and worksongs can aid performers in their interpretation of tempo and the shaping of important elements such as soloistic improvisation. Armstrong's explanation of religious spirituals, freedom spirituals, and escape spirituals can lead to meaningful classroom discussion. It is of particular interest that the classifications of escape spirituals and freedom spirituals are somewhat fluid. For example, Guenther views "Go Down, Moses" as an escape spiritual, while Armstrong suggests it is a freedom spiritual. Pedagogically, a lively discussion or class project might arise from asking singers to examine several spirituals and determine their classification of each. Vital to that conversation is the understanding that there is likely not just one correct answer.

Opportunities for project-based learning through the singing of spirituals are significant. Perhaps an ensemble performing William Dawson's "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit" would benefit from a class project involving a cross-curricular study with the work at its center. Published in 1946, Dawson's setting of "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit" was arranged while he was director of the School of Music at the Tuskegee Institute. The U.S. Department of Education includes Tuskegee on its list of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).[15] An exploration of the Tuskegee Institute and its significance throughout the twentieth century could be quite powerful. For instance, the formation in 1941 of the first Black aviation squadron at Tuskegee Institute (the Tuskegee Airmen) "included pilots, navigators, bombardiers, maintenance and support staff, instructors, and all the personnel who kept the planes and pilots in the air."[16] Despite discrimination and segregation, the Airmen became one of the most respected flying squadrons of World War II. In addition, The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male involved 600 Black men. Of the 600, 399 had syphilis, the remaining 201 did not. The study, begun in 1932 and continuing until the early 1970s, purposefully withheld treatment from those with the disease (without their consent) in order that the effects of the disease on Black men might be studied and "in hopes of justifying treatment programs for Blacks."[17] While not directly tied to Dawson's music, these opportunities for cross-curricular study will aid singers in gaining a deeper understanding of Dawson, his work, the intense discrimination suffered by Blacks throughout the twentieth century and, of course, the spiritual genre.

If project-based work is not practical for the ensemble, simply asking the students to journal about two contrasting spirituals or two contrasting performances of the same work would allow for development of the performers' musicianship as well as their ultimate understanding of the significance of spirituals in our culture. Asking the students to share their journal entries with the ensemble can open the door even further to relevant discourse.

Religious Music in the Public-School Classroom

The teaching of sacred music in the public schools is another common debate. Some public-school programs avoid teaching sacred music at all, particularly in the younger grades, and use it sparingly at the high school level. Interestingly, many educators do not give

a moment's thought to having students sing a *Kyrie* by Mozart but would not consider programming Moses Hogan's *Ride on King Jesus*. This dichotomy is often rooted in a lack of information.

The most common misperception is that the First Amendment prohibits the use of sacred music in schools. This is incorrect. The First Amendment prohibits the infringement on or advancement of religion in the public schools.[18] Music cannot be used to encourage or inhibit a religion. However, the elimination of sacred music in the public-school choral ensemble is considered detrimental to the overall education of the students therein according to the National Association for Music Education.

> The study and performance of religious music within an educational context is a vital and appropriate part of a comprehensive music education. The omission of sacred music from the school curriculum would result in an incomplete educational experience.[19]

In the 1971 United States Supreme Court ruling in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, Chief Justice Warren Burger suggested the following questions be considered when programming or teaching religious music in the public schools:

- What is the purpose of the activity? Is the purpose secular in nature, that is, studying music of a particular composer's style or historical period?

- What is the primary *effect* of the activity? Is it the celebration of religion? Does the activity either enhance or inhibit religion? Does it invite confusion of thought or family objections?

- Does the activity involve excessive *entanglement* with a religion or religious group, or between the schools and religious organizations? Financial support can, in certain cases, be considered an entanglement.[20]

The objective when including spirituals in the classroom must be to create musically, socially, and culturally literate human beings. With Burger's questions as guides, educators should feel confident in programming the genre. Further, volumes of documents exist to support the discussion related to the necessity and legality of sacred music in the schools.[21]

Conclusion

The relevance and educational value of the African American spiritual in the modern music classroom cannot be overstated. To shy from this artform for fear of offense or to remain uneducated as to its relevance in the world of choral music is to deprive one's singers of immense educational opportunity. Further, it is not enough to teach just the notes and rhythms. A teacher who recognizes that spirituals should be included in the curriculum but is not willing to risk going beyond the basic musical structure is doing as great a disservice as if the genre were not taught at all. The musical *and* cultural concepts to be learned from the genre are innumerable. Educators who teach about the spirituals through recordings and videos, programmed repertoire, research projects, and discussions provide avenues by which the musicians in their classrooms may grow in their musical knowledge and their human development.

The choral ensemble benefits from the singing of spirituals by broadening the global understanding of all participants. Discussions related to the slave experience, past and present societal norms, and current shared experiences establish an atmosphere of empathy and sensitivity. These discussions pave the way for the creation of a school environment that is both positive and cohesive. All that is learned through the study of poetry, significance of scripture, African heritage, folklore, and heroes of the slaves encourages an awareness of all peoples and their commonalities. The study of the traditions and customs brought to this country by the slaves fosters a cross-cultural discernment creating a consciousness of other societies.

Finally, at the heart of the performance must be a dedication to respectful, emotion-filled singing. Dr. Raymond Wise shared that he had spent much time in his youth feeling uncomfortable with the singing of spirituals by non-African American performers. He felt that this was the music of "his people." A deeply reli-

gious man, Wise stated that one day, God spoke to him and said, "Raymond, those are not 'your people.' They are *my* people, and this music is for everyone."

A colleague once said, "I can forgive you anything if you move me." The goal of the spiritual should always be to move and inspire its performers and its listeners. This is a music of hope. The slaves dreamed, prayed, longed, planned, communicated, cried, grieved, and rejoiced through singing what has become an immense body of work meant for all people. We must sing with our spirits and with our understanding so that the contributions of the slaves to the world of music shape a new humanity where ignorance and cruelty are no more. CJ

Author's note: This article is derived from the doctoral dissertation by the author titled "Can You Move Me? Artistry, Expression and Education through the African American Spiritual in the Public-School Classroom."

NOTES

[1] Lourin Plant, "Singing African American Spirituals: A Reflection on Racial Barriers in Classical Vocal Music," *Journal of Singing-The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing*, 61, no. 5 (May/June 2005): 451.

[2] Ibid., 453.

[3] Ibid., 454.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 456.

[6] Raymond Wise, interview by author, Powell, Ohio, April 9, 2020.

[7] Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993): xi, quoted in Guenther, 66.

[8] Alice Parker, email communication with author, June 5, 2020.

[9] Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 2000), 114.

[10] Horace Clarence Boyer, interview by Llewelyn Smith quoted in Ward, 113.

[11] OMEA District X Adjudicated Event Program, March 2020.

[12] Marvin V. Curtis and Lee V. Cloud, "The African-American Spiritual: Traditions and Performance Practices." *Choral Journal* 32, no. 4 (November 1991): 20.

[13] André J. Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton: Heritage Music Press, A Division of the Lorenz Corporation, 2007), 89.

[14] Ibid., 126.

[15] "White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities," accessed June 12, 2020, https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/.

[16] "Tuskegee Airmen History," Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., accessed July 3, 2020, http://tuskegeeairmen.org/explore-tai/a-brief-history/.

[17] "U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 3, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm.

[18] *National Association for Music Education*, "Sacred Music in Schools," accessed June 24, 2020, https://nafme.org/about/position-statements/sacred-music-in-schools-position-statement/sacred-music-in-schools/.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Useful resources include Brian A. Whitaker, "Religious Music in the Public Schools: A Guide for School Districts," *Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal*, 2003, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 339-362, https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1162&context=elj. "Religious Music in the Schools," *Music Educators Journal*, 83, no. 3 (November 1996): 1-4, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2307/3398976. Tim Drummond, "Singing Over the Wall: Legal and Ethical Considerations for Sacred Music in the Public Schools," *Music Educators Journal*, 101, no. 2 (December 2014): 27-31, https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432114547083.