



# Book Reviews

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***William Levi Dawson:  
American Music Educator***

Mark Hugh Malone  
University Press of Mississippi  
203 pp.  
\$25.00 (Softcover), \$23.75 (Kindle)

*William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator* is an excellent resource for a deeper look into the life and work of William Dawson. The author, who both personally interviewed Dawson and spent countless hours in the Rose Archives at Emory University in Atlanta, presents “information on Dawson that could be used by a variety of scholars such as historians, musicologists, critical theorists, and others” (p. 5).

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one presents the first thirty years of Dawson’s life, including his education at the Tuskegee Institute, his first position at a high school in Kansas, and his pursuit (really, a lifelong quest) of additional education. His skill and experience as a fine trombone player is also mentioned, including this review from a concert the Tuskegee Male Quintette presented in Burlington, Vermont, on August 17, 1921:

William L. Dawson, second tenor, was also a trombone artist of note. His three trombone solos during the day were among the features of the program and patrons would gladly have heard more had there been time for it. (p. 21)


The second chapter chronicles not only his years as the head of the School of Music at Tuskegee, but also the history of music education at the Institute and the changes brought about by economic depression and war.

Chapter three focuses on the nationally renowned Tuskegee Institute Choir under Dawson’s direction, tracing the choir’s multiple tours and appearances on radio and television. One of these was their performance at the opening of Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan in December 1932. A review of that performance in the *Wall Street Journal* stated:

Mr. Dawson plays upon the voices of his mixed choir as if he were playing an organ, and an organ is the only instrument to which the tones he evokes are comparable. It is grand music. (p. 57)

Also included are the many media critics who responded to the choir’s performances at that time, allowing the reader to form a sense of the way Dawson and his choir were received by mainstream—largely white—America.

The fourth chapter shares a timeline of Dawson’s life as a composer and his compositions within the framework of American music, delving into his approach to authentically compose and perform African American folk music for both choral and instrumental ensembles. The composer’s preferences for the nomenclature of his arrangements was:



[H]e objected to the word “Black” to describe the music, explaining his belief that the basic elements of music consist in vibration rather than pigmentation. He preferred the word “Negro” for its Latin roots, explaining that the word, at least at that time, was used in all the Romance languages to refer to people of African descent. (p. 81)

There is also discussion on the label of “Spirituals,” which Dawson believed “was not for audience entertainment; rather, the songs, if approached correctly, should reveal the spirit of God contained in the music and serve as a holy blessing to both performer and listener” (p. 81). Malone also includes a chart with possible meanings of the words found in spirituals.

The closing chapter examines Dawson’s pedagogical legacy. He came to believe:

The conductor is everything! The conductor, he asserts, is responsible for every activity in which the group engages... The effective conductor...also needs to be able to give a personal example, when necessary, during the rehearsal period. An accurate model is frequently more helpful than excessive explanation. (p. 117)

The book concludes with three appendices: Dawson’s choral and orchestral compositions and arrangements; his awards and honors; and significant letters, speeches, and interviews he gave during his lifetime. For many of us who were first introduced to African American choral music through the arrangements of William Dawson, this book is a valued read for conductors to learn of his legacy and trailblazing career.

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## **From the *Choral Journal* Archives—William Dawson**

John B. Haberlen, “William Dawson and the Copyright Act,” (March 1983, page 5).

Mark Hugh Malone, “William Dawson and the Tuskegee Choir,” (March 1990, page 17).

Vernon Huff, “William Levi Dawson’s Life in Speeches, Letters, and Writings,” (August 2014, page 65).

Vernon Huff, “William L. Dawson: Reexamination of a Legacy,” (May 2019, page 20).

