

Choral Reviews

Compiled by Marques L. A. Garrett

Zion's Walls

Traditional Negro spiritual

Arr. William L. Dawson

SATB divisi unaccompanied, Soprano solo

Neil A. Kjos Music Company (5:00)

Musical notation for the beginning of "Zion's Walls". It shows four staves: Soprano (treble clef, one note), Alto (treble clef, one note), Tenor (treble clef, one note), and Bass (bass clef, one note). The notes are all whole notes.

“Zion’s Walls” is simply heavenly! It is one of Dawson’s finest choral arrangements in his Tuskegee Choir Series. His take on this traditional Negro spiritual, “Great Day,” will test the musicianship of collegiate and professional choruses alike. This majestic arrangement has a celebratory tone that portrays Zion’s celestial splendor. The chorus takes on the nature of a symphony orchestra or pipe organ as Dawson develops the piece with varied vocal textures. His use of divisi in the lower voices is akin to a brass choir, and his contrapuntal development in the upper voices has the sweetness of woodwinds. Interpretively, conductors may take liberties to broaden the tempo in the measures that precede the *a tempo* markings. The soprano solo presents a similar opportunity with a quicker strict tempo in the first verse and possibly a broader free tempo in

the second verse. A strong rhythmic drive is important throughout the fugal section of the piece that leads to the grand climactic ending.

Colin Lett, M.Div, MA

Director of Vocal Studies

Center for the Visual and Performing Arts
at Suitland High School

There is a Balm in Gilead

Traditional Negro spiritual

Arr. William L. Dawson

SATB divisi unaccompanied, Soprano solo

(Also available for SSA and TTBB)

Neil A. Kjos Music Company

Musical notation for the beginning of "There is a Balm in Gilead". It shows four staves: Soprano (treble clef, one note), Alto (treble clef, one note), Tenor (treble clef, one note), and Bass (bass clef, one note). The notes are all whole notes.

Dawson’s setting of the spiritual “There is a Balm in Gilead” was published in 1939 while he was serving as director of the Tuskegee University Choir. The setting is voiced for SATB mixed choir with soprano solo but could be sung by any voice comfortable with the

tessitura.

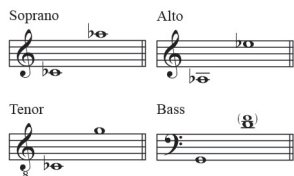
Dawson's reverence for the spiritual is clearly apparent, as his treatment of the melody is delicate and sensitive. An example of this is his decision to end the first phrase of the theme with a meter change to 6/4, facilitating a stylistic character of holding the word "whole" in a manner that feels somewhat unmetered when the tune idiomatically performed. Dawson codified this style when he added the two extra beats to the measure.

Sensitivity to the nature of the piece is shown in the polyphonically enlivened homophony in the lower voices. There is a clear "hymn-like" feeling in the texture with beautiful and subtle moments of counterpoint that highlight both his understanding of the style and his own compositional prowess. The solo is strictly the melody but makes room for a singer to add appropriate embellishments that mimic the subtlety of Dawson's own liberties.

Jason A. Dungee, DMA
Director of Choral Activities
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Out in the Fields

William L. Dawson
SATB Chorus, piano (also available for SSA choir and solo)
Neil A. Kjos Music Company (3:30)
Difficulty: Moderate



"Out in the Fields" is a standout example of the non-idiomatic choral works of William L. Dawson. Known for his arrangements of Negro folk songs, Dawson demonstrates his penchant for the lyricism and lush harmonies of Romanticism in this work. Dawson dedicated the piece to the memory of his first wife, Cornella Lampton, who passed away a year after their marriage.

Although the pitches and rhythms are not difficult,

an ensemble of singers with moderately advanced vocal skills (especially sopranos and basses) and balanced sections is required. Sopranos carry the melody throughout and should be able to sustain pitches in the upper register and have the vocal flexibility to execute the arpeggiated intervals and larger leaps in the melody. The alto, tenor, and bass voices support the melody, sometimes with sustained note values and at other times by echoing fragments of the text in varying rhythmically and lyrically interesting passages, especially at cadences. Basses anchor the harmonic progression. However, there are passages where the basses sing in a high tessitura, especially when they join the tenors then the other voices in singing the melody in unison. There is one measure of *divisi* in the bass part leading to the end, and an optional low pitch for bass on the final chord.

A skilled pianist will be needed to play the virtuosic piano part, which plays a prominent role in the dramatic effect of the piece, especially in the contrasting section marked *presto*, with passages of arpeggiated triplet figures for the left hand while octave chords are played in the right hand. A note in the score indicates that orchestral or wind ensemble accompaniments are available on rental.

Dawson effectively musically illustrates the text, portraying the sense of calm found in leaving behind worries and fears through a connection with God and nature. "Out in the Fields" would be appealing to experienced singers and suitable for a variety of programming themes.

A. Jan Taylor, DMA
Choral Conductor
Houston, TX