

William Dawson: An Interview with Mark Malone

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What originally drew you to want to research William Levi Dawson? Did you have personal experience with Black music and musicians?

As a member of the choir at Hialeah High School (HHS), a suburb of Miami, Florida, I had rich experiences singing arrangements and settings of African American spirituals. William Dawson's works were my favorite. As a junior, I was selected for an honor choir and was absolutely enthralled with the clinician, Jester Hairston.

Despite the concerted efforts of many to achieve racial equality in America, the results of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent legislation in 1964 and 1968 were slow to take effect. As such, the Dade County, Florida, public schools were still racially segregated in the late 1960s. As a senior in high school, public school faculties were finally integrated in February 1970, but not the students. Despite the fact of continued supposed "separate but equal" schools, I and my peers in the HHS choir frequently heard the segregated/all-African American Miami Northwestern High School Choir and greatly admired the repertoire of spirituals the ensemble performed under the direction of their charismatic and talented conductor.

Considering the intellectual and socio-political landscape of the 1970s, did you find that your curiosity about this Black American composer was welcome by your committee, and was it treated with the same enthusiasm as other composer studies?

My mentor at Florida State University during my master's degree was Dr. Colleen Jean Kirk, who later became my major professor during doctoral studies. Colleen Kirk was one of the thirty-five founding members of ACDA in 1959 and eventually served as national president from 1981 to 1983. Dr. Kirk knew of the creative accomplishments of William Dawson and encouraged my interest. She also knew that I had been accepted into the doctoral program in choral music education and that an in-depth study of William Dawson would not only provide much-needed information about this important musician, but would be of high quality as a dissertation topic.

Under her aegis, I contacted Dawson and an initial interview was confirmed in January of 1979. The focus of this first investigation was to reveal the impact of Dawson's life and work and was my choice for a required project to complete the master's degree in music education. The master's project on Dawson af-

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forded me an invaluable primary resource from which I later forged a dissertation prospectus. Once doctoral course work and comprehensive examinations were completed, my committee enthusiastically embraced Dawson as a worthy dissertation topic that, when completed, would make a huge contribution to the field of choral music education.

In your book, *William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator*, you mention that Dawson consciously understood in the 1930s that there was a “complete disregard for the 14th Amendment that granted full citizenship to the formerly enslaved and promised equal protection under the law.”¹ Could you explain how this might have informed his compositional choices and his educational style?

More than thirty years before William Dawson was born, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was ratified in 1868, giving full citizenship to those recently enslaved and assured equal treatment through lawful protection. Yet from birth, Dawson continued to face inequalities and blatant discrimination as an African American. Public schools for Black children did not exist in his hometown of Anniston, Alabama; members of the Ku Klux Klan wreaked havoc and terror to keep Black people “in their place”; and though persons of color technically had the right to vote, Jim Crow laws left African Americans disenfranchised. Once at Tuskegee Institute, one of the early Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Dawson thrived in what could be considered a semi-safe environment. Ventures out into the world at large, however, brought harassment from white people, refusals to allow lodging in hotels, outright confrontation from officials regarding entering buildings through the front door, and barring admission to colleges due to the color of his skin.

Having learned of composer Antonin Dvořák as a student at Tuskegee, and through his association with African American composer Harry T. Burleigh, which began in 1921, Dawson emulated the Bohemian (Czech) composer. The early admiration of Dvořák soon led to a feeling of oneness with the composer for his rise to international success through composing

music in a Nationalistic style, taking direct inspiration from the indigenous folk music of the Czech people. Boldly, Dvořák overcame the dominance of Germanic music in Czechoslovakia to musically refute the prevailing notion of the insignificance of Czech folk music. Dawson felt empowered to replicate Dvořák’s example by not only deriving inspiration from the organic melodic material of his own race, but quoting it exactly, and extending its importance through his own compositional ideas.

Dawson saw a direct parallel to the path trod by Dvořák with his own struggles for racial and social uplift in America. William Dawson’s compositional choices and his educational style were a direct reflection of his alignment with the experiences and accomplishments of Antonin Dvořák in order to overcome “second-class citizenship.”

William Dawson composed various genres including choral/symphonic works, solo art song, and other concerted compositions. What do you think drew him to primarily focus on the “Negro Spiritual” as his dominant form of composition?

Hildred Roach, Lawrence Jackson, and others have commented on the dearth of instrumental compositions following the successful premiere of the *Negro Folk Symphony* in 1934. After presenting lecture/recitals across America during the 2022-2024 academic years, I am amazed that so many voice instructors and other music professors are unaware of Dawson’s vocal solo compositions.

Explanations for Dawson’s compositional concentration on “Negro spirituals” include first, that since The Tuskegee Choir was the premier performance group under Dawson’s direction at Tuskegee Institute from 1930 to 1955, his compositional efforts seemed geared to establish and continue the national reputation of the choir. Second, Dawson’s choir at Lincoln High School, the Tuskegee Choir, and performances of his choral opus that Dawson chose for all-state and special event choirs throughout America and abroad led to his continued national and international fame.

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Being a musical ambassador from the U.S. State Department and the performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski are highly impressive accomplishments. Did you get a sense of how he ranked these achievements in surveyance of his career?

In terms of the ranking of the premiere of his symphony and the three months he spent in Spain as a music ambassador, each represents a different thrust of Dawson's musical output. I got the sense from Dawson that each was considered important milestones to be treasured. Yet, the impressive impact of the *Negro Folk Symphony* that shared Dawson's compositional creativity through multiple live performances by the orchestra considered the best in the world at that time (and via radio from coast to coast) was a stunning achievement that was difficult to surpass.

Dawson, originally from Alabama, lived in Kansas, Missouri, and Chicago. Did he remark whether these separate regions differed as it related to the Black experience, racism, or musical opportunities?

Following graduation from Tuskegee Institute in 1921, Dawson accepted the position of band director at Kansas Vocational College in Topeka. While in the capital city, he sought to enroll in music study at Washburn College. The school registrar was reluctant to admit a Black student and asked him to pass a special exam as a matriculation requirement. Yet, the dean of music at the college, Henry Stearns, allowed Dawson to take composition classes and experiment with playing stringed instruments. Dawson was allowed to join the musician's union in Kansas.

While living in Kansas City, Missouri, Dawson encountered many challenges due to his race but experienced many opportunities to make music. Dawson took the position of music director at Lincoln High School and established instrumental music programs in elementary schools. Seeking to enroll at the Horner Institute of Fine Arts, the registrar quoted segregation laws to deny admission. Yet, Dawson's avid interest in studying music permitted him to enter the school through the grace and compassion of Regina Hall, one

of the music faculty. Dawson's admission to Horner Institute meant that he could receive one-on-one instruction from faculty only after the school closed for the day. William Dawson was confronted by Muehlebach Hotel officials for entering through the front door and was told to exit and enter through the back door.

Upon asking to audition for a position in the band that performed in one of the parks in Kansas City, Dawson was told he would have to join the musician's union. After he joined the union, the conductor still hesitated. It was only after Dawson sat in the horn section during a rehearsal and demonstrated his performance skills that the director relented and allowed him to rehearse and perform with the band.

Dawson was not allowed to sit with his graduating class due to his race and was remanded to the balcony, as if he were still under the aegis of an enslaver. Following a commencement performance of his composition *Trio in A for violin, cello, and piano*, Dawson was not allowed to stand and acknowledge the acclaim.

In Chicago, Dawson had myriad opportunities but did encounter some difficulties. He worked for two music publishers, conducted a church choir, played first trombone in the Chicago Civic Orchestra as the only African American in the ensemble. He endured open hostility from some performers, others did not speak to him, and there were those who completely ignored him. All of the white bands that auditioned in 1929 for a performance spot in the 1933 Chicago World's Fair had access to the same select group of instrumentalists, yet Dawson had to amass his own performers to contend for the opportunity to present a concert at the Fair. His sixty-piece band and a chorus of twenty voices won a spot to present a concert as the World's Fair's Black performing ensemble.

How was Dawson's work as an educator an outgrowth and continued legacy of his own education at Tuskegee? Did he reference the significance of the influences of H. T. Burleigh and others educators at Tuskegee?

First and foremost, the influence of Booker Taliaferro Washington made an impact on the life of young William Dawson, who embraced the Washingtonian philosophy as a driving force in his response to racial



William Levi Dawson papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Used with permission. Date unknown.

discrimination, unequal opportunities, and confirming his worth as an individual. Further, music mentoring from choir director Jennie Cheatham Lee and director of bands Captain Frank L. Drye provided pedagogical models for success, demands for performance excellence, and a rich background of repertoire.

Dawson's travel with the Tuskegee Quintette along the Redpath Chautauqua Circuit afforded the young musician contact with national political and social reform figures, as well as composers such as H. T. Burleigh. Boldly, William Dawson shared his own compositional manuscript with Burleigh for critique and guidance. Burleigh's sage advice led to the first significant publication for Dawson in 1923: a vocal solo setting of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "A Negro Love Song," titled *Jump Back Honey, Jump Back*.

Prior to graduation from the Institute, the entire

Tuskegee faculty considered each potential student before confirming eligibility for commencement. The professors contemplated the existence of the "Tuskegee Spirit" in every pupil that would shine the light of wisdom on the world. Of course, it did not require lengthy scrutiny for the Tuskegee faculty to confirm Dawson's ability to illuminate the world with his ambition, personality, and talent.

It appears that Dawson never sought employment outside of the Historically Black College and University system. Was this a conscious decision? Did he ever mention his loyalty to Tuskegee or the education of Black students?

Despite a temperamental nature in his early years at the college, during which he would get mad regard-

ing an issue and take the train to Chicago, William Dawson was forever loyal to Tuskegee. In those early days, President Robert Russa Moton would have to follow Dawson to Illinois and persuade the composer to return. Having initiated his tenure at the college at the outset of the Great Depression, the challenges of maintaining enrollment in degree programs within the School of Music were greatly challenging, yet disappointing to the composer.

Ultimately, however, William Dawson was committed to the students and the music program at Tuskegee, remaining in the position for twenty-five years. Tributes to Dawson abound from former students, especially from nationally known author Ralph Ellison, attesting to Dawson's imposing presence as a pedagogue and conductor. Yet, faculty and former students revealed their understanding of his deep love for them in exacting excellence in performance and providing an example for success in the world at large.

Dawson did spend a year in residence as conductor of the choir at Fisk University, marking his only full-time employment outside of Tuskegee. In demand as a choral clinician and conductor of all-state choirs nationwide, Dawson traveled extensively but remained a resident in the town of Tuskegee and kept a post office box on the Tuskegee campus until his death.

Dawson believed that his work as a Black man in a white-dominated and unequal world would prove eventually to lead to “social change leading to racial equality.”² Were you able to ascertain how Dawson felt about the American pursuit for equality toward the end of his life in the 1990s? In addition, how much did Dawson consider what he accomplished as movement toward a more equal and just society?

Following the example of his mentor, Booker T. Washington, William Dawson was a strong believer in attempting to work within established protocols or restraints to achieve social change that would eventually lead to equality of the races. Never one to aggressively or overtly challenge barriers for African Americans, he often stood quietly unmoving in response to blatant racial discrimination or would use a soft answer to quell micro-aggression aimed at Black people.

While serving as music director at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, William Dawson met and befriended art instructor Aaron Douglas. The two became fast friends that lasted a lifetime and were sounding boards for the struggles encountered by people of color. Douglas was already a reader of *Crisis*, the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and greatly encouraged Dawson to take into account social, economic, and artistic challenges for people of color. Finding a friend of the same cultural background began to lift Douglas from his perceived prison of isolation as a Black artist, which inspired him to depart Missouri for Harlem in 1925. This time is considered by many to be among the most productive years of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas's influential leadership and creativity would guide many to proclaim him to be the Father of African American Art.

While William Dawson chose a different path that eventually led him to spend most of his life in Tuskegee, Alabama, Rae Linda Brown, David Yarbrough, and others proclaimed that though he worked from a satellite location, Dawson's life and work reflected adherence to the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. The Reawakening afforded African American writers and artists a means to clearly define themselves devoid of the extreme caricature attached to their race. Among the goals expressed were: achieving social justice, building a sense of racial pride, encouraging the creative self-expression of African Americans, and a focus on intellectualism. William Dawson's life and work clearly emphasized each of these ideals in pursuit of equality for African Americans.

Achieving Social Justice

Perhaps the goal of reaching racial equality and a manifestation of the Fourteenth Amendment could be termed a “Black Lives Matter” message from the flowering of artistic output during the Harlem Renaissance. Dawson believed in utilizing organic African American melodic material and extending its significance and influence, or as Kyler says, “to struggle for equality through nonviolent intransigence and artistic means.”³ The spirituals, or “Negro Folk Songs” as Dawson preferred (as it aligned him with Antonin Dvořák), afforded Dawson recognition and acceptance

as a gifted composer, both in his native country and internationally.

Building a Sense of Racial Pride

In purposely choosing to include the term “Negro” in two of his instrumental compositions, *Negro Folk Symphony* and *A Negro Work Song*, Dawson wanted to ensure the world knew that a Black man had written symphonic works. In following the footsteps of Dvořák, Dawson chose to set the folk melodies and motifs of those enslaved in America during the antebellum period in the form of vocal solos and four-part choral pieces, to embellish, preserve, and celebrate their significance. Again, eschewing the label “spirituals” and preferring “Negro Folk Songs,” Dawson asserted pride in his race.

Encouraging the Creative Expression of African Americans

In contrast to Antonin Dvořák, who was inspired by the folk music of his country, William Dawson sought to directly quote the folk music of African Americans in his choral and instrumental works. Especially evidenced in his choral settings, Dawson went further to invoke his extensive study of music to harmonize and use compositional techniques to extend the significance of the original vocal themes fashioned by enslaved Africans in America. Indeed, some of his choral works are creative concert adaptations of organic material that are more like new compositions. Thus, William Dawson often listed himself as composer.

Focus on Intellectualism

In my interviews with Dawson, he spoke often of his desire to “be something.” To that end, he set out to achieve a music education by matriculating at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to earn an elementary and secondary education. Determined to continue to learn, Dawson persisted in the face of racial discrimination and segregation laws to be admitted for study to complete a bachelor’s degree in music. Further study led him to hone his compositional skills and achieve the status as a master of music. Forged with his education and experience Dawson returned to Tuskegee for twenty-five years to develop artistic and life skills in students and assist them in their journey to reach self-actualization.

For over half a century following retirement from

Tuskegee, Dawson accepted invitations to serve as guest conductor for choirs/orchestras, headliner for music events, keynote speaker in myriad venues, and special guest for interviews via radio and television. His commitment to lifelong learning was a topic he eagerly shared and a quest he encouraged everyone to adopt.

Conclusion

None of his struggles for equality dampened William Dawson’s determination to succeed. He viewed any roadblocks as mere minor setbacks and endeavored to find a way around, over, or under to get beyond any difficulty or challenge. When asked late in life if the barriers to matriculation was a discouragement, Dawson replied, “You don’t let that disturb you—you have a goal.”⁴

William Dawson’s life and work is a testament to his efforts to achieve equality through the example of his mentor, Booker T. Washington. He was extremely proud of all his musical accomplishments and implicitly delighted by his work toward a more equal and just society. However, he was not effusively specific, nor boastful of the strides he made toward racial and social uplift. ■

NOTES

¹ Mark Hugh Malone, *William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 23.

² Ibid.

³ Carolyn Kyler, “Dawn in Harlem: Exploring the Origins of the Harlem Renaissance Through Image and Text,” *Critical Insights: Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Grey House Publishing/Salem Press 2015), 5.

⁴ Mark Hugh Malone, *William Levi Dawson*, 32.