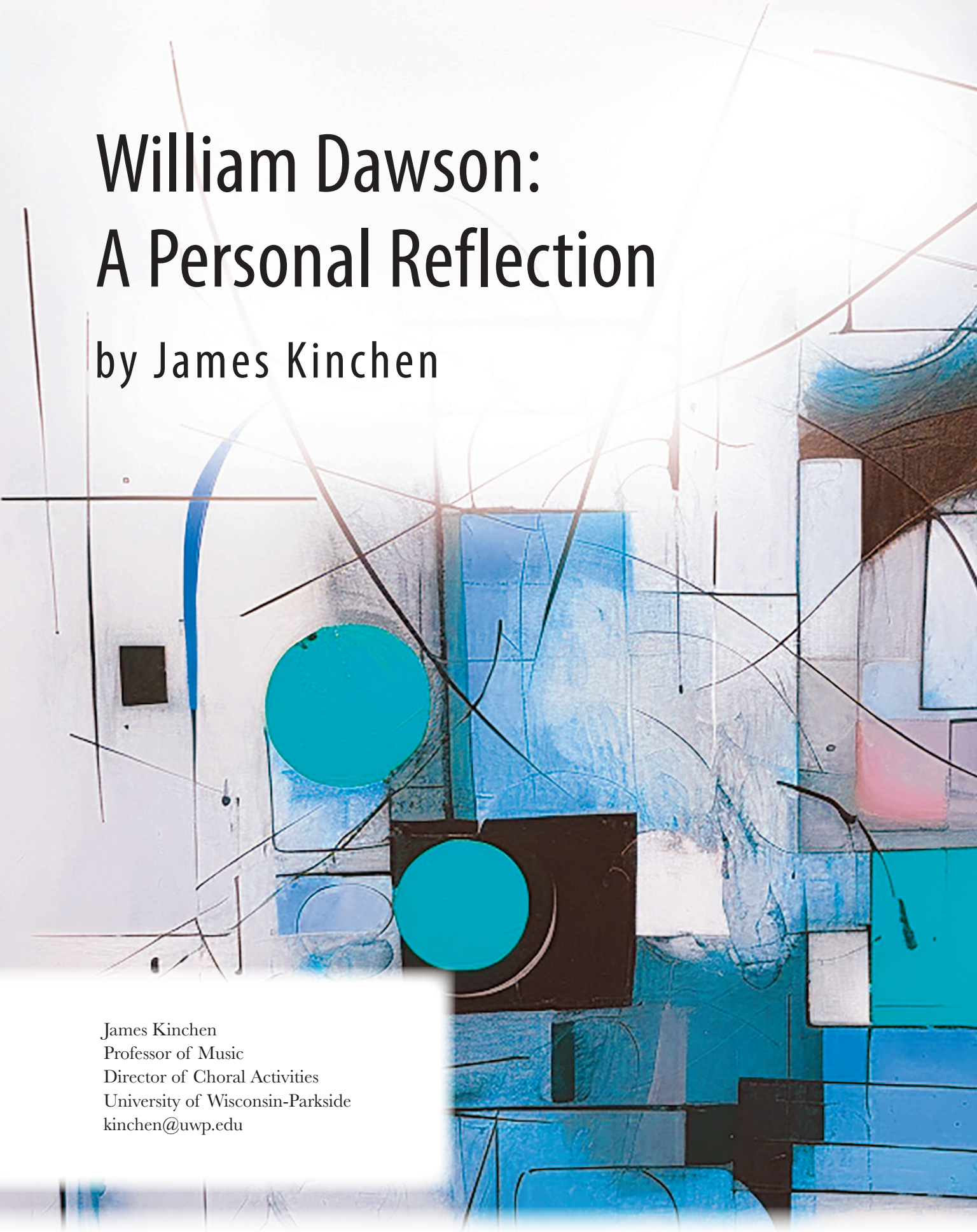
William Dawson: A Personal Reflection

by James Kinchen



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The Recording that Changed Everything

One summer while I was in college, I worked at the Jacksonville office of the Army Corps of Engineers. Jim Jones, a senior draftsman, wanted to learn something about each of the summer workers. When I told him that I was majoring in music, his eyes lit up! "Do you know of Arthur Prysock?" A blank stare and slow shake of the head accompanied my negative response. Clearly disappointed, he extended a lifeline. "How about Billy Eckstein?" Again, I was clueless. "And you are a music major?" he asked incredulously. "What are they teaching you?"

A few days passed, and I came near his drafting table again. He beckoned. "Have you ever heard of William Dawson?" Now my eyes lit up. "Yes!" I responded. Mr. Jones smiled. We sang Dawson's *King Jesus Is A-listening* in my junior high school choir. When I wanted to sing a solo for our festival competition as a tenth grader, I chose his *Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley*. My high school choir sang *There is a Balm in Gilead* and *Mary Had a Baby*. I heard other choirs do *Soon-Ah Will Be Done*, and one local college choir could not leave the stage before singing *Ezekiel Saw De Wheel*, which always brought down the house.

Then Mr. Jones's expression turned more serious. "Have you ever heard the Tuskegee Institute Choir sing?" No, I hadn't, though I knew they had made a record.

Then, *the* question: "Would you like to hear a recording of them?"

My heart was beating faster! "Yes, sir!" I replied.

"My wife attended Tuskegee and sang under Dawson. She has a recording of the choir. I will need to think about whether or not to let you borrow it." I assured him that if he did, I promised to take care of it. He decided to take the chance. He handed it to me, and without the hint of a smile, he said, "This is one of the original recordings. You can't buy it anymore. I believe I can trust you. Take it home tonight, listen to it, and bring it back tomorrow in the same shape it's in now. If anything happens to this recording, I will have to leave home!"

William Levi Dawson was a giant. To actually hear his choir sing his music was a thrill and absolutely epiphanic for me, a young aspiring choral musician! What I heard—the timbre, the phrasings, the deep conviction that permeated their singing, how they sang artfully at the intersection of a universal choralism and yet with proud and undisguised ethnic identity—all fascinated me. I returned the recording to Mr. Jones the next day unscathed. But what I had heard changed me in a way that would last a lifetime.

Meeting William Dawson

I was so excited to attend my first ACDA National Convention in 1979, now a young choral professor at Winston-Salem State University. We were in Kansas City, and I was thrilled to find my still-new mentor, Eugene Thamon Simpson, there. Simpson was a master choral artist and consummate musician who became the first person of color to conduct a Florida All-State Choir. He then organized and led the Committee for Ethnic Music and Minority Concerns when ACDA instituted its Repertoire and Standards Committee structure, back at a time when the organization was anything but inclusive and embracing of diversity. He and I were walking together. "There's Bill Dawson! Let's go over and say hello." My eyes stretched. *The* William Dawson!

At nearly eighty years old, Dawson was still strong, sturdy, energetic, and sharp as a tack, though a little shorter than I had expected him to be. I summoned up all the courage I had. "Dr. Dawson, I would like to ask you a question about *Ain'-a That Good News*," I blurted out. With the candor that I was soon to learn was his norm, he replied, "Well, I'm on my way to a session and don't have time to talk now, but you can come by my room tonight and I will try to answer your question. And bring a score!" Now my head was swimming! I asked his room number. And what time? "Oh, about midnight." Midnight? But that's what he said.

Ain'-a That Good News was a very rhythmic and extremely effective Dawson setting. We had always known it as a single piece of musical energy, each verse set as a variation, which moved unimpeded from start through a short coda to its conclusion, except for a final *ritardando* and *fermata* near the very end. His recent revision had now inserted a slow verse before returning to tempo. I wondered why.

So, a few minutes before midnight, I stood nervously but poised to knock on his hotel door. I knocked. I waited. No answer. I knocked again. And waited. "He is asleep by now," I thought. "I will not knock again, lest I awaken him and irritate him." Sadly, I walked away toward the elevator. I pressed the call button, and when the doors opened, out stepped William Dawson! He invited me into his room to have a seat and show him the passage that I was wondering about. Then he explained his reasoning and started softly singing the recently added passage. I was soon moving to the beat and patting my foot in time, soaking in the moment.

Then, without warning, like a bolt of lightning on a cloudless day, he exploded, "What are you doing?" He pointed his index finger at me, the most accusative index finger I had ever experienced except for that of my father. "Patting my foot," I managed to mutter.

"Why?" he demanded to know.

Completely nonplused, I responded, "Keeping time."

"Is that how you keep time? Is that what they taught you in school? You keep time inside!" he said, thumping on his chest. Then he looked at his watch and announced, "It's getting late!"

I was being thrown out of William Dawson's room! I was 6'1" when I walked in, but I might have been half

Photo 1. March 1985; ACDA National Conference; Salt Lake City. Left to Right: Arthur Evans, South Carolina State University; Eugene T. Simpson, Rowan University; William L. Dawson; James Kinchen, Winston-Salem State University. Photo provided by Emory University Special Collections. Used with permission.

that tall on my way out.

There were subsequent opportunities for memories with Dawson. Dawson the musician hardly ever missed a beat, but I once saw Dawson skip! He attended the 1985 National at Salt Lake City, and there he, Arthur Evans of South Carolina State University, Gene Simpson of what is now Rowan University, and I hung out together (Photo 1). Walking down the street next to him one day, I thought I saw him take a skip. A bit later, it happened again! He noticed my puzzlement and realized that I was eager for an explanation. From marching drills in his youth at Tuskegee, he explained, he literally had keeping in step so deeply ingrained that he could not walk side-by-side with anyone without matching their step. Later reflection on this moment made me marvel. He was walking with three vigorous men who ranged from thirty years to fifty years his junior, and here he was in his mid-eighties, matching our strides down the street.

Dawson in Residency

I sat on the Winston-Salem State University Lyceum Committee, the group that oversaw large event cultural programming for the campus. Mr. Harry Pickard, who chaired the committee and, as savvy as he was crusty, would sometimes ask me as the youngster on the committee, "Mr. Kinchen, do you have any ideas?" Now, in the fall of 1985, I had an idea. As proud as Dawson was of his choral oeuvre, his *Negro Folk Symphony*, premiered

under the baton of legendary conductor Leopold Stokowski, gave him special delight. Sadly, it was not programmed so often fifty years later. Pickard approved right away. We would bring the Winston-Salem Symphony, playing far better than its budget suggested it should, to campus, but would leverage our institutional resources to feature a work by an African American composer on this HBCU campus.

Pickard dispatched me to ask Dawson if he would consider doing a residency and being consultant to orchestra music director Peter Perret. Then, Pickard asked me if I would like to have Dawson come into one of my choral rehearsals and work with my singers as part of his visit. You have no idea how many times I pinched myself as William Dawson stood in my choir room and worked with my choir on *Lit'l' Boy Chile*, *In His Care-O*, and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. His *Symphony* was wonderfully played and received with appreciation at the concert.

I chaired Local Arrangements for the 1988 ACDA Southern Division Conference in Winston-Salem. Dawson called me and asked me to arrange his lodging. We even got a chance to enjoy a meal: Dawson; his former Tuskegee student, Daniel Webster Andrews, Jr.; a local choral leader and member of my committee; and myself. Sharing the evening meal with Dawson also meant sharing a couple of end-of-day rituals: his "vice" of ordering a single scoop of vanilla ice cream and his enlisting the aid of friends to put drops of glaucoma-control medication in his eyes. Dawson led the general session of that convention in the singing his setting of *Every time I feel the Spirit*.

Tribute Performance

This great man, now about to complete his ninth decade of life, deserved special recognition from ACDA, and, especially, the region of ACDA where he had done so much of his work—the region from which the songs of its enslaved sons and daughters caught his attention as a youngster and became so central to his creativity and choral artistry. I proposed a special session to honor Dawson at the next conference two years hence! What could be more appropriate than for him to hear a large choir of students from HBCUs from across the South, schools not unlike his beloved Tuskegee, singing his own African American folksong settings? Southern Division leadership happily embraced the idea and gave the green light.

Later in September of that same year, my office phone rang. "Hello, Kinchen," I said in my customary greeting.

"Dawson," came the reply.

I was a bit confused. "I'm sorry. You must have the wrong number. There is no Dawson here!"

"*This* is Dawson," the caller responded. I was speechless! He continued: "I'm here at the Holiday Inn. I just called Dan Andrews [his former student] and now, I'm calling you. I want you birds to come over here and see me!" Dawson explained that he had been to Raleigh, a couple of hours east of us, to testify at a copyright infringement trial. He was now on his way back to Alabama—*driving*—and thought he should stop for the night.

Once I hung up, I collected myself and called Dan to confirm that this was not some sort of prank. We had dinner with Dawson, and when the server brought a bowl of vanilla ice cream (he had asked for a scoop), the disciplined man that he was, Dawson had a couple of spoonsful and left the rest! We went back to his hotel room and continued to talk. Then without warning and unrelated to any particular prompt, Dawson started singing the refrain of his iconic *Soon-Ah Will Be Done*, gently conducting it in duple meter from his chair as he sang.

I last saw Dawson a year and a half later in Birmingham, site of the 1990 Southern Division Conference. I had left the division to accept an appointment at University of Wisconsin-Parkside. My esteemed colleague, Robert L. Morris, had taken on leadership of the Dawson tribute that I had proposed, and with Bob's usual deep care for "getting it right" and attention to detail, had brought my idea to wonderful fruition. Dan Andrews had made the trip from North Carolina. When we saw Dawson, we were both happy to see him but shocked at his appearance. He had been a very agile and mobile man. Now he had a cane and was much slower, almost fragile. We soon learned why.

Dawson's wife, Cecile, had been facing health challenges, but Dawson saw himself being able to take care of her. However, one day she took a fall in their home, and he was unable to get her up. The episode itself was

disheartening, but all the more was the realization that he could not take care of his beloved wife of some fifty-five years in the way that she needed. He had to send her to an assisted-living facility. Dawson was showing the physical effects of this deep demoralization.

The three of us shared lunch, then sat together in the audience that day as he heard this superb choir of singers from several institutions under the masterful direction of Brazeal Dennard, whose eponymous Detroit-based chorale was one of the earliest African American choirs to sing for an ACDA National Convention, perform a generous and representative program of Dawson's iconic music. He was genuinely appreciative. I was at once moved and proud in a way that I cannot put into words. That was March. A couple of months later, Dawson passed away. I had been the catalyst for this tribute concert, almost surely the last performance of Dawson's music that he heard in his legendary and richly fecund lifetime. And I got to sit next to him as he listened to it!

There is one more performance of Dawson's music that I feel compelled to mention—a concert that took place a year after his passing, but one that I believe he attended in spirit! And it took place before arguably the world's most important assemblage of choral artists. I was honored beyond words, then as National R&R (formerly R&S) Chair for Ethnic Music & Minority Concerns, to preside over a tribute session at the 1991 National Convention at Phoenix, Arizona, that honored William Dawson's contributions to our art and community. Three fine choirs sang a large body of Dawson's choral settings: Jackson State University, directed by Bob Morris; Morris Brown College, under the direction of Glenn Halsey; and the Chamber Singers of Glassboro State, now Rowan, led by Gene Simpson.

At his 1925 graduation ceremony at Horner Institute, Dawson had been rendered invisible. He had written a trio for violin, cello, and piano that had been selected for its premiere performance that day, but he had been consigned to "colored" seating in the balcony and, so, was not allowed to take a bow or receive the audience's generous applause. On this day, William Dawson, absent in body but present in spirit, was the recipient of this richly deserved accolade from ACDA!

A Link to the Past, A Story for the Future

A century and a quarter after his birth, does William Levi Dawson still matter? Does his music, his creative, meticulously crafted presentations of the songs that he was able as a boy to hear community elders, once chattel bondsmen, and the children of the formerly enslaved sing, still matter? Emphatically, "Yes!" His forebears—and my own—were brought to the "New World" as uncompensated laborers, and worse, as human property. It was on the backs of their forced labor that colonies flourished and new nations were founded. Much was taken from those people to gain their submission. But their music and what it meant to them and how it functioned for them within the context of their own West African cultures could not be wrested from them. It was that music—music that at once flowed from their lives while providing accompaniment for it—that expressed their faith, fears, frolics, frustrations, futility, and, yes, their furtive yearnings for freedom. To the extent that logic served at all, their music helped them to make sense of life in a space that most of us could never imagine having to navigate.

Dawson's settings, built on the foundations of the Fisk Jubilee Singers some half a century earlier, helped these noble songs move from cotton field and cabin row to concert stage, while never losing the authenticity, or the hermeneutical or spiritual essence of the music of his ancestors, or casting it in a way that was the least bit disrespectful. His music is a rare and irreplaceable link to an important past, one which, unfortunate resistance to DEI initiatives in present times notwithstanding, is our shared past as citizens of this country, one which we all must know and own.

In the Anniston of Dawson's boyhood, most African Americans were former bondservants or their children. Conversely, most of the white townspeople had only known a world in which life was largely powered and enabled by black servitude, and in which they were, thus, strongly energized and motivated to hold on to that race-based privilege, keep black people in their "place," and maintain this status quo by any means necessary. Dawson would face those cogent forces, though often disguised or moderated, his entire life. But he learned how to navigate them in ways that allowed his own artistry to flourish and have huge impact. And

with consummate dignity!

He wrote a symphony when it was conventional wisdom that such creativity was beyond the composer of color and heard that work premiered by one of America's great orchestras under the baton of one of the premier maestros of the age. His fabled Tuskegee Choir performed for two U. S. presidents and, in that pre-television era, sang for national radio broadcasts. What lessons this giant can offer about martialing the resources of personhood and achievement and determination to refuse to accept a place in the margins to which others want to relegate you.

Dawson matters because he at once honored and elevated the song of the captive laborer. Literary legend James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) lionized these swarthy musicians and their songs:

> O black and unknown bards of long ago,
> How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
> How, in your darkness, did you come to know
> The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?...
> Heart of what slave poured out such melody
> As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
> His spirit must have nightly floated free,
> Though still about his hands he felt his chains.[1]

Look closely at Dawson's work. The slave transformed bitter bondage into song. Dawson transformed that coarse but earnest musical cloth into the finest works of art, often bringing to the service of his work his "orchestral" sensibilities. What audacious imagination and uncommon creativity to transform a repetitive pentatonic melody of limited compass into that celebrated pièce de resistance, *Ezekiel Saw De Wheel!* And certainly, composers and arrangers of this genre in the years since Dawson have been, as they should, influenced by more contemporary and current stylistic elements and cultural values. But Dawson's music, steeped in Romantic values of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, still speaks legitimately and with profound authenticity to singers and listeners alike.

Choirs still want to sing, and audiences still want to hear Dawson's music. His music attracts choral musicians of all ages and stages. One fond memory of mine is of being asked during the height of the pandemic by a dear and esteemed colleague to come to his suburban, not very diverse high school and work with his very fine choir. I found them in the auditorium, with several empty seats between each singer, very appreciative for the opportunity to still sing.

Together we worked the "Introit and Kyrie" from Mozart's *Requiem* and Dawson's *Ezekiel Saw De Wheel*. The kids loved the Dawson! His folk settings have real appeal. And it is lasting appeal. Even the "simpler" pieces are no guzzle of empty calories! Dawson's works have an enduring place in the choral canon. He respected this music in the deepest way and respected the "Black and Unknown Bards" who first made it. As a boy his heart was touched, spirit moved when he heard these songs. He knew their story, a story that many elders in his community could recount firsthand. He knew the deep place from which they came—and which they were capable of reaching. Perhaps he wondered with Johnson:

> What merely living clod, what captive thing,
> Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
> And find within its deadened heart to sing
> These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
>
> How did it catch that subtle undertone,
> That note in music heard not with the ears?
> How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
> Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.[2]

It was a mystery that William Dawson honored with all his heart and soul! CJ

NOTES

1 James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922.

2 Ibid.