



The Concert Spiritual—It is Closer to Western Classical Music than You Might Think

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History of Spirituals

Most of us are aware of the origins of the Negro Spiritual. This folk music emerged in the crucible of American slavery when Africans were brought to the Americas in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and labored under the harshest of circumstances. Infusing elements of their African culture along with Bible stories they learned from Christian missionaries, they sang about their present plight and desire for freedom. These “sorrow songs,” later called spirituals, became a huge part of what sustained the enslaved African community, gave them a sense of hope, and affirmed their humanity. The Negro Spiritual (or spiritual) is what musician and scholar Wendell Whalum refers to as the root and trunk of black music.¹

After emancipation, many freed blacks wanted nothing to do with anything that was reminiscent of slavery and sought to divorce themselves of any vestiges of this terrible history, including the singing of spirituals, seeing this music as unsophisticated and an indication that one was uneducated.² This mind-set no doubt contributed to the reluctance of the students at the Fisk Free Colored School (now Fisk University) to sing spirituals as they toured to raise money to support their school. Eventually, a small group of classically trained singers known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers embraced this folk music of their heritage and enthralled audiences worldwide.

The spirituals, as sung by these trained singers, were more

formalized, arranged in their presentation, not like the more spontaneous, raw singing that occurred in the community of enslaved Africans in the antebellum South. These concert spirituals were arranged and sung by trained groups of singers like the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Later, other college groups presented spirituals on the concert stage. The first arrangers of the choral settings of these songs were the likes of H.T. Burleigh, Hall Johnson, William Dawson, Evelyn La Rue Pittman, Margaret Bonds, and John W. Work, to name a few. These composers also created solo arrangements of the spirituals for concert artists such as Marion Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson. All of these composers were trained in the style of western, classical music. Their arrangements reflect that training.

Spirituals and Gospel Music

It is important to be clear about the distinction between the spirituals and gospel music. The spirituals predate gospel and are what I would call the mother of black music. The spirituals have given birth to many genres, among which are the blues, gospel, jazz, R&B, hip-hop, and many others. Gospel music developed over the decades following emancipation and the Great Migration, with its formal appearance around the time of the great depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. Thomas Dorsey, the father of gospel music, called it gospel

because it was “good news.” Tony Heilbut calls it good news and bad times.³ This music emerged in urban centers across the country in the twentieth century among freed, though socially and economically oppressed, peoples of color. It was not sung in the hush harbors of the invisible church like the spirituals but in visible churches, community centers, and concert halls. It was influenced by the blues while inheriting the rhythm and pathos of the spirituals of slavery. Gospel music encourages improvisation by both singer and pianist (or other accompanying instruments). In fact, it is expected.

The concert spiritual is a different matter. Arrangers of concert spirituals expected their music to be performed as written in the same way other composers of the Western tradition expected performances to be as written. André Thomas in his book *Way Over in Beulah Lan’* states that some conductors will impose rhythm and blues, gospel, and jazz techniques on all performances of spirituals in an effort to create a “black” sound... All of this may be full of good intention; the result, however, is often an experience fraught with stylistic abuse and, ultimately, a mockery of the intentions of the arranger.⁴

Performances of Negro Spirituals may be met with trepidation, including fear of appropriation and black face caricature. As an African American male choral conductor, I encourage my colleagues to approach this music with the same care you employ in the music of the Western tradition. Research the history, culture, and style of the music and seek to render a musically authentic performance that honors the intent of the composer or arranger. Please do not “gospelize” concert (arranged) spirituals unless the arranger has so indicated in the score.

Two examples of a gospel arrangement of spirituals include *Guide My Feet*, arranged by Avis D. Graves, and *We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, arranged by Horace Clarence Boyer. Both are published by GIA Publications. Boyer’s arrangement explicitly says gospel arrangement. Even though Graves’ arrangement does not explicitly say that his arrangement is a gospel arrangement, anyone familiar with the gospel idiom understands this fact within the first few measures, especially if one listens to the recording GIA also makes available. When in doubt, ask a trusted colleague who knows! 

NOTES

- ¹ Wendell Phillips Whalum, “Black Hymnody,” *Review & Expositor* 70, no. 3 (Summer 1973): 353.
- ² James Weldon Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*. Vol. 1 (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc. 1989), 49.
- ³ Subtitle of Tony Heilbut’s *The Gospel Sound* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1971)
- ⁴ André J. Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton: Heritage Music Press, 2007), 87-88.