THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

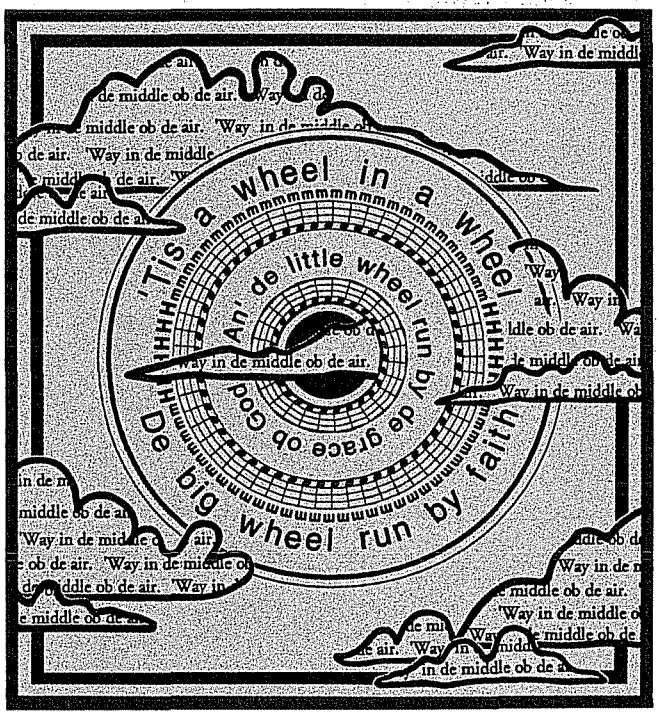
TRADITIONS AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

by Marvin V. Curtis and Lee V. Cloud

THE CONDUCTOR AT A recent high school choral concert commented to the audience that spirituals were not written by African-American people, but by white people as a calming influence on their slaves, whom they considered savages. In a separate, unrelated instance, a vocal major at a music conservatory reported that George Gershwin, because he wrote *Porgy and Bess*, was the main composer of African-American music.

These perspectives of African-American music are unfortunate but hardly surprising considering the lack of information and the degree of misinformation in textbooks used for music curricula across our country. African-American music — the spiritual in particular— has simply not been adequately examined. Grout and Palisca, in the third edition of *A History of Western Music* (Norton, 1990), mention the spiritual in only one sentence, and that in the context of Dvořák; the subject does not even appear in the index. However, slight mention is made of African-American composer William Grant Still. Stolba, in *The Development of Western Music: A History* (W. C. Brown, 1990) also mentions William Grant Still, but nothing about the spiritual.

Books used in choral conducting classes fare no better. Adler's (1985) *Choral Conducting: An Anthology*, Boyd's (1970) *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Conductor*, Bush's (1984) *The Complete Choral Conductor*, Garretson's (1988) *Conducting Choral Music*, Heffernan's (1982) *Choral Music: Teaching and Artistry*, and Jacob's (1973) *Choral Music: An Historical Survey of Choral Music from the Middle Ages to the 20th Century* have no musical examples or general information about spirituals or other African-American repertoire or composers. Kaplan's (1985) *Choral Conducting* mentions two spirituals by William Dawson. However, no performance practice material is included.



Serious study of the music of African-Americans — the spiritual, worksong, blues, jazz, gospel, art song, and symphonic work — has generally been excluded by the academic American musical society. This has prevented carefully researched and documented information from being disseminated, and has lead to many stereotypical attitudes about the insignificance of African-American music. Evidence of further historical stereotyping can be seen in the programming of African-American music, which is generally considered a vehicle of light entertainment. This is particularly disturbing in the case of the African-American spiritual.

Unless university music education and choral music degree programs make a concerted effort to teach African-American music, many choral conductors will learn little if anything about repertoire, history, and performance practices, and will therefore be denied a wealth of substantial repertoire and an aesthetic appreciation beyond surface appeal.

The West African Musical World

It is appropriate to begin with some historical perspective of African-American music and its place in West African and African-American philosophy and culture.

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The cultural life of the area called West Africa is important to this discussion because the slave trade concentrated on Africans from this region of the continent.

African tribes viewed the world as one of relationship between body, soul, and mind—people connected to one another through family, customs, and dependency, with society as cooperative, not competitive.

Oral history—the passing down of music, folklore, superstitions, traditions, and history through words from generation to generation—was an important element of this culture. It was a means of establishing a living history of the people, and it was revered, for as White says, "words take on a quality of life when they are uttered by the speaker."[1] The speech was rhythmic and somewhat musical because of the raised and unraised tones of the African languages. Lazarus Ekwueme calls this the "toneme," or the rising and falling in pitch—the slurs, slides, and glissandos that help to convey and determine meanings of words.[2] In addition, words were not spoken in isolation, but were punctuated by responses from the listeners. The audience was expected to respond and to acknowledge what had been said. This "call and response" had a formal structure that influenced later musical developments, especially in song.

For early West African people, song represented the preservation of communal values and solidarity. Song provided the chance for individuals to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of environment and society by permitting the expression of deeply held feelings which ordinarily could not be verbalized. As Hugh Tracey put it, "You can say publicly in song what you cannot say privately to a man's face, and so this is one of the ways African society takes to maintain a spiritually healthy community."[3]

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West African music is filled with polyrhythms, multiple timbres (depending on drum sizes), and percussive sounds, including body percussion, tapping on objects, stomping of feet, or hitting just about anything. However, these percussive sounds are not arbitrary, but reflective of the speech patterns of West Africans. In this regard, the drum not only maintains rhythmic vitality, but sends messages, and most importantly, creates the mood for dance.

Dance, "the expressive movement of the head, torso, limbs, and feet"[4] is rooted in the West African people as a very natural and instinctive part of their culture. The word "expressive" is important, for the dances of the African tribes were not of the folk, social, or court type of Europe, and they were not based upon the technique of classical ballet. Dance and the word "expressive" refer to the idea that the dancer deals with "what is felt, what emotion is being experienced by the dancer himself. The beauty of Black dance lies in its total lack of inhibition."[5] Therefore, the music of West Africa, whether religious or secular, combined some element of dance that conveyed the emotion of the people involved. This dance was usually accompanied on the instrument of the people, the drum.

The drum provided combinations of duple and triple rhythms that overlapped each other. Nketia refers to these patterns as being in "strict time . . . controlled by relating them to a fixed time span, which can be broken up into an equal number of segments or pulses of different densities."[6] One of the most famous West African rhythm patterns, usually "articulated in hand-clapping,"[7] is ♩. ♩. ♩, with the quarter note occurring either at the beginning or end of the pattern.

Chernoff, who studied African drumming for 10 years and was a research fellow at Trinity College in Legon, Ghana, describes the music of indigenous Africa as polymetric since "...musicians did not find their entrances by counting from the main beat, but rather they found their entrances in relation to the other instruments."[8] Chernoff continues as he notes that

> in African music, then, the main beat coincides with the entrance of the chorus and not with that of the soloists, and in particular contrast to our music, the main beat comes at the end of a dynamic phrase and not at the beginning. Part of the power and drive of African music derives from the way that African musicians play *forward* towards the beat . . . an African musician is not

so much moving along with a pulsation as he is *pushing* the beat to make it more dynamic.[9]

It should be noted that the strong beats in West African music occur on two and four instead of one and three as in Western music. In addition, African melody was built from scales that "usually have between four and seven steps with the choice of these steps depending entirely on the individual society and culture."[10]

Finally, West African music is community music. Everyone becomes involved in creating through singing, playing, or dancing. Music is used to relieve the monotony of work, to contribute to greater efficiency by helping workers to cooperate, and to alleviate fatigue. In the words of Ekwueme, "No one goes to a musical event merely to hear black music, people go to see it also."[11] One more important point, the West African musician was a keeper of historical events and an informer of current events.

The Creation of the Spiritual

From 1619 to 1808, Americans imported West Africans to this country as slaves. At the time of the first U. S. census in 1790, there were 757,000 Africans (most of whom lived as slaves in the south) out of a total population of four million whites. By 1860 there were 4.4 million Africans in America, 90 percent of whom were slaves.[12] It must be remembered that there was a constitutional provision that counted slaves "only three-fifths as much as free persons in determining congressional representation. The 1790 census and subsequent censuses up to 1860 made separate tallies for Blacks who were slaves and those who were free."[13] Slavery was abolished in 1880 although Africans were still being imported.

The slavery system resulted in whippings and beatings, and the devastating destruction of the family unit as family members were sold. Even religious denominations held slave auctions to finance missionary projects. African-Americans heard the cry "Love thy neighbor" roll off the lips of religious societies as they watched nothing being done about the dehumanization of their lives. They were merely admonished by white preachers with St. Paul's saying to "Obey your Masters. Your reward is in heaven."

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These circumstances were instrumental to the Africans in the creation of a folksong. The song probably began as early as the 17th century, according to John Lovell in his book *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (Macmillan, 1972). Tilford Books, in *America's Black Musical Heritage* (Prentice Hall, 1984), tells us that the term spiritual was used to show the unique relationship between "this type of song and the holy spirit," and that these songs "possessed a lyrical quality and expressed a wide range of emotions such as elation, hope and sorrow."[14]

Using Old Testament Biblical stories of faith, hope, and liberation for lyrics; providing a musical structure that utilized aspects from the African languages (call-and-response, polyrhythms); and combining the African tonality with the Western seven note scale; the spiritual became a song sung in a strange land. It provided unity to the slave community and gave inspiration to a people who had been denied their instrument of communication (the drum), forced to accept the Puritan idea that dance and their former life in Africa was sinful, and denied the chance to learn reading and writing. It also provided solace to the sting of the lash against the skin. It gave the community a chance to comment on its own situation while it provided each member a sense of belonging in the midst of a confusing and terrifying world. Most important, the spiritual provided the community with a coded language for use in emergencies.

This coded language, understood only by the community, represented the hope, liberation, sorrow, moanings, cries, and faith of a people yearning to be free. It was the secret song that helped plan escapes and uprisings. The spiritual reminded the African that "The River Jordan" was not in the Middle East; it represented the Ohio or Mississippi Rivers that when crossed meant freedom. "Canaan Land" or "Beulah Land" represented Canada, while "Steal Away to Jesus" probably meant slipping away under cover of darkness to freedom. "Heaven" was not up in the sky after death, but freedom today. The "Gospel Train" was not a steam powered locomotive, but Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. The freedom fighters in the Bible such as Moses, Daniel, Joshua, Samson,

Joseph, and David were represented in the lyrics, while Jesus was the ultimate liberator, the hope for deliverance.

Coded language could also refer to activities in everyday life. An example of this is "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel" which is part of the *ring shout* tradition. The verse that says, "You'd better min' my brother how you walk on the cross, your foot might slip and your soul get lost," gives reference to where the shout occurred and specific instructions of what to do while shouting. The first line of the text in this portion of the song (You'd better min' my brother how you walk on the cross) refers to the front of the church where the pews are pulled back to the side; a group of shouters forms a circle that moves counterclockwise, and a group of singers forms off to the side to provide the music. With the pews pulled back, the circle is positioned at the point of the church called the "nave" or the "cross" where one aisle intersects the other. The next portion of the text (your foot might slip and your soul get lost) refers to the shouters and the church's belief of differences between sacred and secular dance; secular dance takes the feet up off the ground while sacred dance maintains contact with the earth. By reading the refrain and one verse of text, we begin to gain a perspective of hope and a vision of being included in God's master plan.

Refrain:
Ezekiel saw de wheel
(caller/soloist)
Way up in de middle ob de air
(response)
Ezekiel saw de wheel
(caller/soloist)
Way up in de middle ob de air
(response)
De big wheel run by faith
An' de little wheel runs by de
grace ob God
'Tis a wheel in a wheel
Way in de middle ob de air

Verse:
You'd better min' my brother how
you walk on de cross (call)
Way in de middle ob de air
(response)
Your foot might slip an' your soul
get lost, (call)
Way in de middle ob de air
(response)

The references to a wheel in a wheel, as they are correlated with the nature of the shout being in a circle, focus our minds on more than a trivial song; we see a philosophical connection between God and man, and direct contact with the earth. The shout should start with a slow tempo and gradually get faster and faster. Dawson, in his arrangement of "Ezekiel" begins with just a solo line and chorus, and by the conclusion of the work has the "dooma-looma" as a way to increase the tempo. In the folk sense, the music for the shout is generally in call and response form, and as the shout progresses, different soloists take over the role as leader. As the tension for the liturgical drama increases, the shout becomes so fast that words and phrases are no longer important, but the concept of call and response remains as the central focus of the musical element. At this point there may no longer be complete words and phrases, but the communal involvement of call and response is still a part of the musical structure. Dawson's compositional use of "dooma loomas" and quickened tempo suggests the heightening of dramatic tension.

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family unit, the tribe. It continues to represent the oral tradition that has incorporated embellishments from individuals and community. It has and continues to establish a way for African and African-American life and customs to be passed from generation to generation.

It should be remembered that these songs were created by the community, not by individual composers, and that no dates and times can be given to their creation. The spirituals evolved as slavery and the abolitionist movement developed to the reality of emancipation. It was through the efforts of William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison that the first collection of these songs was published in 1867. The book, *Slave Songs of the United States*, published by Peter Smith in 1929, contains 136 examples of music, all of it without harmony, and scribed in Western European notation reflecting the meters and rhythms as they were actually sung. It is stated that "I have never felt quite sure of my notation without a fresh

comparison with the singing, and have then often found that I had made some errors. . . . The best that we can do, however, with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original."[15]

Through the Fisk Jubilee Singers American audiences first heard the spiritual in a concert setting in 1867. The Singers continued to perform spirituals on their first world tour from 1871 to 1874 and on their second world tour from 1875 to 1878, singing before the crown heads of Europe. The African-American composer Harry T. Burleigh, who was trained at the National Conservatory of Music in New York, published the first spiritual, "Deep River," in 1917. In 1892 Anton Dvořák became the Director of the Conservatory and Burleigh became one of his students. Through their interaction, Dvořák was introduced to spiritual melodies and influenced to use several of these melodies in his symphonic work, *The New World Symphony*. It was Dvořák 's belief that "America's Negro and Indian folk music could serve as a nationalistic school of music in the United States."[16]

Other resources by African-American composers, who notated and wrote extensively on these songs, are: Nathaniel Dett's *Religious Folksongs of the Negro As Sung at Hampton Institute* (Hampton Institute Press, 1927), J. Rosamund and James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of Negro Spirituals Volumes 1 & 2* (Viking Press, 1925 and 1926), John W. Work's *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (Bonanza Press, 1940), W. C. Handy's, *Blues: An Anthology: Complete Words and Music of 53 Great Songs* (Albert and Charles Boni Publishing Company, 1926), and Roland Hayes' *My Songs* (Little Brown Publishing Company, 1940).

These published spirituals were written for concert use and performed quite extensively by many choirs. However, the tragedy of these concerts is that the average American did not attend choral or classical concerts. The average American attended minstrel shows which featured white men in black face performing a caricature of Africans—skits about southern life with slaves as "darkies" who were happy to serve their masters, and who played jokes on each other and themselves and spoke with exaggerated speech. Into these shows songs such as the spirituals were introduced to American audiences who saw them as popular entertainment songs.

Awareness of Culture and Performance Practices

Without the benefit of appropriate education about spirituals, many people have developed assumptions about their performance. Most frequent among these assumptions are: the dialect must be changed to standard English; spirituals must be sung fast; finger snapping is appropriate because the music is rhythmic; the eighth note must be "swung;" and finally, a "Black voice" is needed to sing them.

The dialect, which is a part of history and style, should not be replaced by standard English. We, as English speakers, should not articulate all sounds, but should instead emulate characteristics of the pronunciation of the slaves as they combined elements of their regional dialects with the English they heard from their masters. The slaves received no formal education. In fact, they were prevented by law from being taught to read or write. So, the language they spoke and sang was one they developed by ear. Many of the African languages spoken by the slaves did not contain the phonetic "th" sound. Thus words that begin with "th" have a "d" or "t" sound. For instance, "That," "than," or "the," become "dat," "dan," or "da," and words like "thick" or "thin" become "tick" or "tin;" "with" becomes "wid." R's are usually suppressed ("Lord" becomes "Lawd" and "never" becomes "nevah"), and "going" shows up as "gwine." Pronunciation of vowels often follows rules of English grammar (e.g., "de" is used preceding words that begin with vowels, while "duh" or "da" is used preceding words that begin with

consonants. Johnson and Johnson, in *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (Viking Press), explain the pronunciation of words in dialect.

The dialect works in the rhythm of spiritual arrangements. William Dawson's "Soon-ah-will be don-ah wid da troubles ob da worl' " or "I gotta crown up in'a dat kingdom, ain'a dat good news" do not translate rhythmically to "Soon I will be finished with the troubles of the world," or "I have a crown up in that kingdom isn't that good news." Dialect is an integral facet of the compositions and should be given the same respect we generally give to foreign languages. This includes perhaps printing translations in our programs so that audiences will understand what they are hearing, and providing verbal explanations about dialect if needed.

The spirituals are based upon various functions in everyday life. Consequently, they should be sung in tempos appropriate to those functions and their attendant moods. The work song used to accompany the chopping down of a tree with axes, or to pick cotton, cannot be any faster than the work entailed in routine chopping or picking. The tempo should reflect the activity. This means that as directors and interpreters of music, we must portray a sense of swinging hammers and picking cotton. It also means that we must learn the tempos of certain dances. An estampie performed in waltz tempo is every bit as damaging to a spiritual as it is to a Renaissance chanson.

In general, knowledge and conveyance of body motions can greatly aid the performance of spirituals. This can be seen, for instance, in "Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child," which is a lament. Its tempo should be as a gentle rocking, with arms folded across the chest. Another lament is "By an' By." This should be performed as if sadly singing to oneself. A contrast to this is "Great day, the righteous marching" which should lead the conductor to use a march-like tempo in performance. Another example is "Ain't no grave can hold my body down, when the bright trumpet sounds I'll be getting up walking 'round." Tempos for these marches should reflect the shuffle-step of the African-American church tradition: the foot slides along the floor and creates the drama that is associated with the sound of large marching units. Such a march is not, by any means, like that of a drum and bugle corps.

In keeping with the tempo and character of the mood of spirituals, it should be noted that finger-snapping is not appropriate. Indeed, snapping fingers in "All we like sheep" from Handel's *Messiah* is no more appropriate than snapping fingers in "Every Time I Feel the Spirit." In the African-American religious tradition, finger snapping belongs only in secular music. Handclapping is acceptable in spirituals, but only if it does not contradict the musical intent. Spirituals are not "fun." They are serious and should be considered as we do serious music by Palestrina, Bach, Handel, Mozart, or Brahms. And just as musicians are careful in selecting editions of classical repertoire by master composers, musicians should evaluate editions of spirituals on the basis of appropriate applications of musical style and expression. Beware of publications that edit African-American music inappropriately just to promote fun arrangements.

Approximately 30% of the new music that is pushed by distributors and publishing houses as described by title alone does not belong in the spiritual category. For example, a recent catalog of a major U. S. distributor wrongly lists the following titles as spirituals: "Dancin' at the Rock," "Gonna Rise up Singin,' " "Good News Tonight," "I've got Music in my soul," "Light at the end of the Tunnel," "This Train Goes Marching In," "Train Bound for Glory," "That's what the Devil said," "Too Hot Down There," and "Shut de Door."

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Another well-known catalog lists "I want to shout Amen" as "a new secular spiritual that just bursts with energy! The handclapping chorus and verses make it ideal for choirs of any age." This is an oxymoron. Another piece, "Heavenly Band," has the description: "Saint Peter is the leader of the heavenly band. . . .The oompahs and doddle-doos all combine to a rousing finale." Unfortunately, most African-American vocal repertoire as represented in music catalogs and publishing houses or distributors is described as spirituals. Many of these offerings are not spirituals but instead are either imitations of the African-American folk idiom or popular Broadway versions of minstrel music.

A guide to appropriate arrangements of spirituals is Evelyn Davidson White's book, *Choral Music by Afro-American Composers* (Scarecrow Press, 1981). Mrs. White gives ranges, keys, and levels of difficulty for the works cited. She presently is working on a second edition that will include more

information. Another source is the *Best Choral Guide for Church and Schools featuring Our African American Heritage in Music* published by the Carl Fischer Music Store in Chicago, Illinois. This guide, a part of the Carl Fischer Music Catalog, lists arrangements of spirituals available in print by African-American composers. Although some of these editions might be questioned, the vast majority are acceptable and should be studied according to criteria already mentioned. Other valuable reference books are: *The Forge and The Flame: How the African American Spiritual was Hammered Out* by John Lovell (Macmillan, 1972), *America's Black Musical Heritage* by Tilford Brooks (Prentice Hall, 1984), *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* by Eileen Southern (Greenwood Press, 1982), *Black Music in the United States* by Samuel Floyd and Marsha Reisser (Krause International Publications, 1983), *Bibliography of Black Music* by Dominque-Rene DeLerma (Greenwood Press, 1981), *The Music of Black Americans* and *Readings in Black American Music* by Eileen Southern (Norton, 1983), and *Spirituals and Sinful Tunes* by Dena Epstein (University of Illinois Press, 1981).

The treatment of rhythm, especially with regard to the swinging of eighth notes, is another important aspect in the performance of spirituals. To quote Rosamund and James Weldon Johnson, authors of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (2 volumes):

> The "swing" of the spiritual is an altogether subtle and elusive thing. It is subtle and elusive because it is in perfect union with the religious ecstasy that manifests itself in the swaying bodies of a whole congregation, swaying as if responding to the baton of some extremely sensitive conductor.[17]

The swing of the spiritual should not be confused with the swing of jazz. The swing of the spiritual is a part of the religious experience of African-Americans. It is a *feeling* not a notation, and in order to feel it, one must be aware of the history of the music—of the time and of the struggle. One must study the music and the people and not make assumptions based on popular entertainment forms that have emphasized stereotypical nuances. One must also get inside the music and attempt to convey the experience. The spiritual should not be confused with jazz, and consequently, editions that use the words "in a jazzy style" are misleading. "Swing" is an entertainment style not appropriate in the performance of spirituals. Just as spirituals should not be confused with jazz styles, they should also not be confused with gospel styles. Spirituals and gospel songs are not the same. Each has its own aesthetic and performance style.

The use of appropriate pronunciation, tempos, and qualities of rhythmic line in terms of mood and character should not be confused with the use of a supposed "black voice." Pronunciation, tempo, and rhythm are viable technical elements which performed in a certain way may produce an African-American style. It is this style which is important. According to Johnson and Johnson,

> I think white singers, concert singers, *can* sing Spirituals-if they *feel* them. But to feel them it is necessary to know the truth about their origin and history, to get in touch with the association of ideas that surround them, and to realize something of what they have meant in the experience of the people who created them. In a word, the capacity to *feel* these songs while singing them is more important than any amount of mere artistic technique. Singers who take the Spirituals as mere "art" songs and singers who make of them an exhibition of what is merely amusing or exotic are equally doomed to failure, so far as true interpretation is concerned.[18]

Summary

To understand the African-American spiritual and other forms of African-American music is to begin to understand the life of the African-American. This music represents not just notes on a page,

but also the experience of slavery, reconstruction, segregation, civil rights, Brown vs. the Board of Education, political strife, and other aspects of African-American life. This should not be viewed as a detour from standard musical training, it should be a part of standard musical training. Leaving it out deprives students and audiences of the experience of an important and valuable aesthetic. We must elevate the spiritual to its proper place in musical study, considering its performance practices as valuable as those in genres of Western culture in the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras. It will be through studying the spiritual and its history that more authentic performances will be created and the African-American aesthetic better appreciated. Perhaps on this level we can also learn something about each other. Perhaps we can learn something about culture, and perhaps we can learn to appreciate the diversity amongst us. Finally, if we move past the spiritual and begin to learn and perform the music of African-American composers, perhaps we will begin to break down the barriers of racial prejudice that still haunt us. Thus we could create a world that the African slave sang about, a land flowing with milk and honey, with streets covered with gold, holding plenty for everyone.

Notes

[1] White, Joseph. (1984). *The Psychology of Blacks*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, p. 5.
[2] Ekwueme, L. (1974). "African Music in the New World." *Black Perspective in Music* (2).
[3] Merriam, Alan. (1982). *African Music in Perspective*. New York: Garland, p. 129.
[4] Thrope, E. *Black Dance*. New York: Overlook Press, p. 9.
[5] Ibid., p. 13.
[6] Nketia, J. (1974). *The Music of Africa*. New York: W. W. Norton, p. 126.
[7] Ibid., p. 126.
[8] Chernoff, J. (1979). *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 45.
[9] Ibid., p. 56.
[10] Nketia, J. (1974). *The Music of Africa*. New York: W. W. Norton, p. 116.
[11] Ekwueme, L. (1974). African Music in the New World. *Black Perspective in Music* (2), p. 137.
[12] Taeuber, K. E. & Taeuber, A. F. (1966). The Black Population in the United States in Smythe, J. (Ed.) *The Black American Reference Book*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, p. 61.
[13] Ibid., p. 162.
[14] Brooks, T. *America's Black Musical Heritage*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, p. 32.
[15] Allen, W. F., Ware, W. P., & Garrison, L. N. (1929). *Slave Songs of the United States*. New York: Peter Smith, p. iv.
[16] Southern, E. (1982). *Biographical Dictionary and Afro-American and African Musicians*. CT: Greenwood Press, p. 56.
[17] Johnson, J. W. & Johnson, R. R. (1961). *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*. NY: Viking Press, p. 28.
[18] Ibid., p. 29.