

William Levi Dawson

(1899 – 1990)

Reexamination of a Legacy

Vernon Huff

The year 2019 marks the 120th anniversary of the birth of composer William Levi Dawson (1899-1990). Dawson's arrangements of spirituals were groundbreaking in the way they elevated the genre. Thousands of people were introduced to spirituals by performances of the Tuskegee Institute Choir, as well as thousands more in the many years since his arrangements were first published. This article will compare four of Dawson's notable arrangements to earlier settings of the same tunes.

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Biography

William Levi Dawson was born in the town of Anniston, Alabama, in 1899. He grew up surrounded by music; Dawson's parents, who were likely former slaves themselves, sang the old spirituals to him. In his article "William Dawson and the Copyright Act," John Haberlen wrote:

"Dawson knew the deep emotional content and mood of the folk songs intimately since he grew up with them. The songs were a part of his consciousness through his childhood experiences. As he recalled the melodies and words from the oral tradition, Dawson wrote the melodies down from memory, freely improvising as naturally as any good singer would have interpreted the songs."¹

As a child, Dawson knew about the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama—a school first led by the famous Booker T. Washington—and yearned to go there. Young Dawson saved his money and, with the support of his mother, bought a train ticket and left Anniston for Tuskegee at the age of thirteen.²

After graduating from Tuskegee, Dawson continued his education at Washburn College, the Horner Institute of Fine Arts, and at the American Conservatory of Music. He was a high school choral director, first trombonist in the Chicago Civic Orchestra, and in 1929 and 1930 he won several notable composition prizes. Although he led a full life in Chicago, Dawson felt the pull of Tuskegee when President Robert Moton asked him in 1931 to return to his alma mater as director of the new School of Music and conductor of the Institute choir. After



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performing at the opening of Radio City Music Hall and in Carnegie Hall in 1933, the choir achieved national success. Regular radio spots and annual national tours contributed to the acclaim of the choir and Dawson throughout the country. Dawson retired from teaching in 1955 but continued to travel around the world, lecturing and conducting festival choirs.

When choosing repertoire for the Tuskegee Institute Choir, Dawson, a composer by trade, set about arranging some of the old “plantation songs” from his youth.³ Beginning in the 1930s, Dawson published many arrangements of spirituals and several original compositions under the Tuskegee Institute Press label (which was later acquired by Neil A. Kjos Music Co.). As the acclaim of the Tuskegee Institute Choir grew, so did the appetite for Dawson’s arrangements. Although Dawson’s arrangements have been sung by choirs all over the world, it is important to note that originally he wrote these pieces for his own ensemble. The Tuskegee Institute Choir was his laboratory, and his arrangements would not have exceeded their abilities. With the specificity of the markings that he put in his arrangements, one can imagine that Dawson was very demanding of his choristers. Dawson and the Tuskegee Choir released the album “Spirituals” in 1956,⁴ just after his retirement from the university, so conductors can get a sense of the sound Dawson was trying to achieve.

Ground-Breaking Arrangements

Dawson’s arrangements are extraordinary in their own right, and when compared to earlier and contemporary settings, they are ground-breaking. Most published choral settings of spirituals from this era were set as four-part hymns, but Dawson used his extensive classical training to arrange songs in new, more technically challenging ways. In every piece, however, the main tune is always easily discernible. In an era when composers were moving toward more and more complex musical settings, Dawson could use complex musical language, but never to the detriment or obfuscation of the original tune. His arrangements are celebrations of songs from his youth, not merely academic exercises. They are crowd pleasers to be sure, but each piece re-

tains its original nature. In the following sections, early published settings of four spirituals “Ain’t That Good News,” “Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit,” “Soon I Will Be Done,” and “Balm in Gilead”—will be compared to William Dawson’s settings.

The first significant publication of spirituals was *Slave Songs of the United States* in 1867. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison gathered 136 tunes from all over the Southern states into one single volume. Although most songs may not be familiar to modern audiences, the collection is a treasure trove of valuable songs and a glimpse into the past. Only the melody line is notated, and no editing or musical harmony was added. The book is still available from Dover Publications.⁵

In the early part of the twentieth century, many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) published anthologies of spirituals arranged in four-part, hymn-like settings. In many instances, university choir directors, many of whom were also published arrangers of spirituals, edited these collections. Contained in these volumes are many tunes that would be familiar to modern audiences.

To truly understand the transformative nature of William Dawson’s arrangements, it is helpful to examine many of the musical precursors that are available to us today. Of course, this music is rooted in oral traditions and was passed on simply by singing the songs. Early twentieth-century devotees to the traditions and importance of spirituals recognized that if the songs were to be passed on to later generations, they must be written down. The story of the earliest codified versions of spirituals is the effort to preserve an integral part of African American culture and history.

One of the earliest books about the spiritual as a genre is *Folk Songs of the American Negro* written by John Wesley Work Jr. (1871-1925) and published by Fisk University in 1915. Work was the choir director at Fisk in the early part of the twentieth century, and he, along with other members of his family, were important arrangers and conductors of spirituals. The book tells the story of the history of the spiritual as a genre of music.⁶ It examines many of the art form’s musical characteristics, tells stories associated with many of the tunes, and chronicles efforts to collect and preserve the music. The

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story of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, whose early tours were instrumental in the popularization of spirituals, is told in great detail.

“There is a Balm in Gilead”

One setting preserved in the book’s pages is “Balm in Gilead,” which was based on text from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah 8:22—“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of my people?” (Figure 1).

“Balm in Gilead,” as found in *Folk Songs*, is set in the key of B Major in a time signature of 2/4, with a two-line, standard hymn-like SATB chorus and three solo

verses. In this piece, as in most settings from this era, there are no directions for singers and director, or dynamics or articulation marks. This setting was strictly notes and text. It was Dawson and his contemporaries who took these tunes to the next level with their imaginative arrangements.

William Dawson’s 1939 setting of the tune is titled “There is a Balm in Gilead” and is set for SATB chorus and soprano soloist (although a tenor soloist would also be appropriate). Dawson uses an ABABA form, where the A is the chorus and the B is the verse. He only uses the first and third verses of the original tune and has the soloist sing the second verse text and the melody in the final chorus while the choir hums underneath.

There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, To make the wound-ed whole, There is a
Balm in Gil-e-ad, To heal the sin-sick soul. There is a soul.
1. Some-times I feel dis-cour-aged, And think my work's in vain. But
2. Don't ev-er feel dis-cour-aged, For Je-sus is your friend, And
3. If you can-not preach like Pe-ter, If you can-not pray like Paul, You can
then the Ho-ly Spir-it Re-vives my soul a-gain. There is a
if you lack for know-ledge, He'll ne'er re-fuse to lend. And
tell the love of Je-sus, And say, "He died for all." D. S.

Figure 1. John Wesley Work II, *Folk Song of The American Negro*, 1915, “Balm in Gilead.”

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The opening melody is given to the tenor voice, with the alto part paired in thirds and sixths, and the sopranos humming an “A” pitch almost the entire time. Although the piece is set in a 4/4 time signature, at “makes the wounded *whole*, *There is a Balm...*” Dawson extends the measure to 6/4 in every instance so that the singers can linger on “whole” (Figure 2). This has a subtle effect of stretching out the line, which adds emphasis to that particular word of text. Dawson adds <> markings on the word “wounded” and tenuto markings on the word “sin-sick” to give special emphasis to those words.

For choirs able to sing a cappella music well, this is an accessible and dramatic piece. The staggered entrances of the choir sections tenor, alto, soprano hum,

and bass are effective at pulling the audience in. The solo is haunting, supported by the underlying humming of the choir.

“Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit”

The second piece is “Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit” (Figure 3 on page 25). The earlier setting is found in *Religious Folk-Songs of the American Negro As Sung at the Hampton Institute*. Originally published in 1874 under the title *Cabin and Plantation Songs As Sung by the Hampton Students*, the 1929 fourth edition was edited by R. Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943). Dett spent nineteen years on the faculty at the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) as choir director, and modern audiences will know many

The image displays a musical score for the piece "There is a Balm in Gilead" by William Dawson, specifically measures 9 through 16. The score is arranged for four vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4, with a 6/4 extension for the word "whole".

Measures 9-12: The Tenor (T) part begins with the lyrics "soul. There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to make the wound-ed". The Alto (A) part enters with "soul. There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to make the wound-ed". The Soprano (S) part has a whole note "A" (humming). The Bass (B) part enters with "There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to make the wound-ed".

Measures 13-16: The Soprano (S) part has a whole note "whole," followed by "There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to heal the sin-sick". The Alto (A) part has a whole note "whole," followed by "There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to heal the sin-sick". The Tenor (T) part has a whole note "whole," followed by "There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to heal the sin-sick". The Bass (B) part has a whole note "whole," followed by "There is a Balm in Gil-e-ad, to heal the sin-sick".

Dynamic markings include *f* (forte) and *pp* (pianissimo). There are <> markings above the word "wound-ed" and tenuto markings above the word "sin-sick".

Figure 2. William Dawson, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, mm. 9–16.

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of his arrangements and compositions, including “Listen to the Lambs.” His oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* was published in 1937 and has received renewed attention in the last few years with notable performances by major choirs and orchestras. The setting examined here is straightforward. In the key of E flat, the piece comprises a short chorus, which repeats once, followed by three verses, each sung by a soloist. The tempo is marked at 68–72 beats per minute. The solo line is rhythmically difficult, but the familiar chorus is very singable.

William Dawson’s arrangement, first published in 1946, has been a staple of church, community, and school choral programs for generations. Comparing the two settings, Dawson’s excellent craftsmanship is apparent. Dawson sets his arrangement at a much quicker tempo, *allegro moderato*, at quarter note equals 120 beats per minute. The first two chords of the piece have fermatas over them—a sure way to grab the attention of the audience, before launching into the opening chorus (Figure 4). Dawson sets only two verses of the original text, and those are reserved for a baritone soloist. The choir hums underneath the solo,

which is reminiscent of a church choir or congregation singing behind a preacher during a worship service. When the chorus returns after the first solo line, the dynamic level is reduced to an unexpected *piano*, and

Andante molto espressivo ♩ = 68 - 72

Fine

1. Up - on the moun - tain my Lord spoke, Out His mouth came fire and smoke.
2. All a - round me is looks so shine, Ask my Lord if all was mine.
3. Jor - dan riv - er is chil - ly and cold, Chills the bod - y not the soul.

Figure 3. Nathaniel Dett, *Religious Folk Songs of the Negro as Sung at the Hampton Institute*, 1927, “Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit.”

Allegro moderato ♩ = ca. 120

Figure 4. William Dawson, *Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit*, mm. 1–7.

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Dawson subtly changes the harmony. The half- and whole-step motion in the bass line should be pointed out to choirs who attempt this work.

As the piece builds toward the finale, it is important to note the bass line again, as it rolls from measure 41 to the end (Figure 5). As the upper three parts repeat material found earlier in the piece, the basses sing a rapid eighth-note counter melody that draws the listener's attention all the way until the *rit.* and *allargando* before the fermata in the penultimate measure. At the final cadence, the basses enter first on the dominant, and with the sopranos, sustain the E^b while the inner parts sing, "Yes, I will pray" one more time to end the piece.

"Soon Ah Will Be Done"

"Soon I Will Be Done" is from the Hampton Institute text and is another well-known tune (Figure 6 on page 27). The words "Fisk Jubilee Collection, by permission" appear in the margin of the page. This means that the piece was borrowed from Fisk University and may have been performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

"Soon Ah Will Be Done" is set in B minor, in 4/4 time, for SATB choir and soprano soloist (or perhaps the soprano section sings the solo line). The opening melody is notable in that it ascends and descends along a harmonic minor scale from b1 to b2, while the bass line simply starts by serving as a pedal point at the tonic and subdominant in the opening chorus before the authentic cadence at the end. In each of the three verses, the soloist sings one line, and the entire choir then

41

S time I feel the spir - it, Mov - ing

A *ff* I will pray When the spir - it moves me

T time I feel the spir - it, Mov - ing

B *ff* Ev - 'ry time I feel the spir - it, Mov - ing in my heart,

43

S in my heart, I will pray; Yes, Ev - 'ry

A in my heart, I'll pray; Yes, Ev - 'ry

T in my heart, I'll pray; Yes, Ev - 'ry

B Oh, the spir - it, mov - ing in my heart, Oh, yes

Figure 5. William Dawson, "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," mm. 41–44.

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repeats the text twice before cadencing in a similar way at the end of the chorus section earlier in the piece. This setting would have been for an SATB choir. Unlike a congregational hymn, the piece is full of crescendos and decrescendos and markings from *mezzo piano* to *forte*. These dynamic markings are a departure from the

other early arrangements examined.

William Dawson's arrangement of "Soon Ah Will Be Done" is one of his earliest published pieces. The originally copyright is in 1934, three years after he began his tenure as the conductor of the Tuskegee Institute Choir. As with the Fisk version, Dawson's setting

Refrain
Tutti *mf*

Soon I will be done a - with the troub - les of the world,

cresc.
3 Trou - les of the world, The troub - les of the world,

mp *f* *mf* *Fine*
5 Soon I will be done a - with the troub - les of the word, Goin' home to live with God.

mp *mf*
9 1. No more weep - ing an a - wail - ing, No more weep - ing and a - wail - ing,
2. I want t' meet my moth - er, I want t' meet my moth - er,
3. I want t' meet my Je - sus, I want t' meet my Je - sus,

mf *f* *D.C.*
13 No more weep - ing and a - wail - ing, I'm goin' to live with God.
I want t' meet my moth - er, I'm goin' to live with God.
I want t' meet my Je - sus I'm goin' to live with God.

Figure 6. Nathaniel Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at the Hampton Institute*, 1927, "Soon I Will Be Done."

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is also in B minor, but his tempo marking is much faster than the earlier version: half note equals 104 (Figure 7). This is an exceptional difference from the earlier version. The form is ABACAD, with the A section being the chorus, and the other letters representing each of the verses. Each verse is treated in a different way, with the melody at first being set in the bass voice, then the soprano voice, and then the bass voice again. In each verse, Dawson writes a more and more complex treatment. The first verse is a call-and-response format between the bass line and the rest of the chorus. With the second verse, after a call-and-response, which echoes the first verse, Dawson has the choir repeat the

phrase “weepin’ and an’ a wailin’,” with *portamentos* on the word “wailin’” (Figure 8). This has the effect of drawing attention to the despondent text in an effective way. At the end of every verse, Dawson treats the text “Goin’ home t’ live wid God” a bit differently. The third verse contains the text, “I wan’ t’ meet my Jesus... In de mornin’ Lord,” which ends with the final, joyful acclamation, “I’m goin’ t’ live wid God” on a B Major chord.

Choirs that begin working on this piece may be deceived at the ease with which they learn the chorus section. The verses are rather difficult and can require much focused attention. In “Soon Ah Will Be Done” as

Allegro (♩ = 104)
pp lightly
 S
 A
 *Soon ah will be done **a - wid de troub-les ob de worl', troub-les ob de worl', ___ de troub-les ob de worl'.
pp lightly
 T
 B
 *Soon ah will be done **a - wid de troub-les ob de worl', troub-les ob de worl', ___ de troub-les ob de worl'.
 * Soon I
 ** a-with

Figure 7. William Dawson, *Soon-Ah Will Be Done*, mm. 1–4.
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32
 S
 weep-in' an' a - wail - in'; No more
 A
 weep-in' an' a - wail - in'; I'm goin' t' live wid God. No more
 T
 weep-in' an' a - wail - in'; I'm goin' t' live wid God. No more
 B
 weep-in' an' a - wail - in'; I'm goin' t' live wid God. No more

Figure 8. William Dawson, *Soon-Ah Will Be Done*, mm. 32–35.
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in Dawson's other arrangements, he takes great care in giving the choir and director an abundance of dynamic and articulation markings.

"Ain'-A That Good News"

John Wesley Work III (1901-1967) of Fisk University compiled the anthology *American Negro Songs and Spiritu-*

als: A Comprehensive Collection of 230 Folk Songs, Religious and Secular, published in 1940. Like the Hampton Institute text, which was a narrative history of the spiritual, this book is a collection of "Spirituals, Blues, Work Songs, Hollers, Jubilees, [and] Social Songs." Included in the collection is the well-known song, "Ain't That Good News?" (Figure 9). Like many other spirituals of this era, this is set in a call-and-response format, with

The musical score is arranged in four systems, each with a vocal line (Soprano and Alto) and a bass line (Tenor and Bass). The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are as follows:

1. I've a crown up in the King-dom, Ain't that good news! I've a
2. I've a harp up in the King-dom, Ain't that good news! I've a
3. I've a robe up in the King-dom, Ain't that good news! I've a
4. I've slip-pers in the King-dom, Ain't that good news! I've
5. I've a Sav-iour in the King-dom, Ain't that good news! I've a

5
crown up in the King-dom, Ain't that good news! I'm go-in' to
harp up in the King-dom, Ain't that good news!
robe up in the King-dom, Ain't that good news!
slip-pers in the King-dom, Ain't that good news!
sav-iour in the King-dom, Ain't that good news!

9
lay down this world, Goin' to shoul-der up my cross, Goin' to

13
take it home to Je-sus, Ain't that good news! Fine

Figure 9. John Wesley Work III, ed., *American Negro Songs and Spirituals: A Comprehensive Collection of 230 Folks Songs, Religious and Secular*, 1940, "Ain't That Good News?"

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the solo in the soprano line, and the choir responding. The choir then sings, “I’m goin’ to lay down this world, Goin’ to shoulder up my cross, Goin’ to take it home to Jesus, Ain’t that good news!” It is important to note that the harmonies here are rather simple, especially in the second line, in which the basses simply sustain an “f” pitch. There are no dynamic or articulation markings written.

Dawson first released his setting, titled “Ain’-a That Good News,” in 1937, and published an expanded version in 1965. In the later edition, Dawson adds a two-page middle section. It is not uncommon to still find both versions in church and community choir libraries.

Dawson’s lively, up-tempo setting (quarter note equals 104) begins with a syncopated opening motive, which is repeated in whole or in part for the rest of the piece. Compositionally, Dawson uses the technique of fragmenting the melody and repeating short segments of it multiple times (Figure 10). The soprano line regains the melody, which is no longer fragmented, and Dawson builds the piece toward a *fortissimo* fermata on “my Lawd!” (Figure 11 on page 31), before rushing to the finale. The arrangement, like his others, is full of articulation markings, and it seems that each note of the piece is treated with care.

Lively (♩ = 104)

The musical score is for a four-part vocal setting. It begins with a tempo marking of 'Lively (♩ = 104)'. The first system shows the Soprano (S) line with a dynamic marking of *f* and the lyrics 'I got a crown up in - a the King-dom, Ain'-a that good news!'. The Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B) lines are mostly silent, with a dynamic marking of *mf* and the lyrics 'Ain'-a that' appearing later in the system. The second system shows the Soprano line with a fermata over the words 'good news!'. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass lines also have fermatas over 'good news!' and 'Ain'-a that' respectively. The score includes various articulation markings such as accents and slurs.

Figure 10. William Dawson, *Ain'-a That Good News!*, mm. 1-7.

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64 *cresc.* *ff* *lunga* *quickly*

S good news, good news, good news, good news, my Lawd! A-ain'-a that

A good news, good news, good news, good news, my Lawd!

T good news, good news, good news, good news, my Lawd! A-ain'-a that

B good, good news, good news, good news, good news, my Lawd!

69 *a tempo* *fz* *lunga* *p*

S good news, Lawd! _____

A good news, good news, My Lawd! A-ain'-a that good news! _____

T good news, good news, My Lawd! A-ain'-a that good news! _____

B good news, good news, My Lawd! A-ain'-a that good news! _____

Figure 11. William Dawson, *Ain-a That Good News!*, mm. 64–73.

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Conclusion

With his arrangements for the Tuskegee Institute Choir, William Dawson transformed the concerted, choral spiritual.⁷ His music set a new artistic standard in the genre—a high bar for all who followed him. In fact, a clear line can be drawn between arrangements that were crafted before and after Dawson published his works. Dawson grew up hearing spirituals at church and home, and he continued singing them during his years studying at the Tuskegee Institute. They were a part of him. When Dawson assumed direction of the Tuskegee Choir, his arrangements of spirituals soon became the core of the group's repertoire. Through the group's extensive touring and national radio broadcasts, his music became known throughout the country. And luckily for millions of choral singers and audience members, Dawson published his arrangements for all to enjoy.

Dawson's music was born from his knowledge and love of spirituals coupled with his prodigious classical musical training. When studying his music, his craftsmanship and artistry are apparent. Instead of presenting pieces in hymn-like fashion, as was the prevailing tradition, Dawson brought his considerable musical skills to elevating the form even further. For hundreds of years, spirituals were the music of slaves. Born out of tragedy, spirituals have been called the first American folk music. During the 1930s and 40s, African American choirs who sang spirituals were becoming popular with audiences of all colors. Collegiate choirs such as the Hampton Institute Choir, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the Tuskegee Institute Choir, and professional choirs such as the Hall Johnson Choir and the Wings Over Jordan Choir were popularizing spirituals like never before.

Since 1867 when *Slave Songs of the United States* was published, there has been a steady publication of solo and choral arrangements of spirituals. It was Dawson's arrangements, however, that completely transformed the genre. With his musical intellect, attention to detail, and love of the music, his works have been a part of the standard canon of choral repertoire for decades. His arrangements have withstood the test of time, and hopefully choirs and audiences will continue to benefit

from his remarkable craftsmanship for generations to come. ■

NOTES

- ¹ John Black Haberlen, "William Dawson and the Copyright Act," *Choral Journal* 23, no. 7 (1983): 5–8.
- ² By far the most comprehensive look at the life and music of William Dawson is Mark Malone's PhD dissertation at Florida State University, "William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator," 1981. All biographical information in this article is taken from that work. Malone discusses the major periods of Dawson's life, examines his arrangements, and Dawson's philosophy of teaching.
- ³ Dawson's most popular arrangements and compositions can be found in Neil A. Kjos Music Co. anthologies, *Dawson Spirituals, Volume One and Two*, 2008, including all of the arrangements discussed in this article.
- ⁴ *Spirituals: Tuskegee Institute Choir*, directed by William L. Dawson, MCA MSD-35340, 1956, re-released in 1992.
- ⁵ For the backstory to the creation of this volume, read Samuel Charter's *Songs of Sorrow: Lucy McKim Garrison and "Slave Songs of the United States,"* University Press of Mississippi, 2015.
- ⁶ One such notable recording is *The Ordering of Moses: Live From Carnegie Hall*, May Festival Chorus, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra & James Conlon, Bridge 9462, 2016.
- ⁷ For further study about William Dawson and his work, the author suggests these studies: Huff, Vernon Edward, "William Levi Dawson: An Examination of Selected Letters, Speeches, and Writings." DMA diss., Arizona State University, 2013; Johnson, David Lee, "The Contributions of William L. Dawson to the School of Music at Tuskegee Institute and to Choral Music," EdD, University of Illinois and Urbana-Champaign, 1987.