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A Journal of Congregational Song

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Cover: Zoom gathering of Lovelace Scholars, Fellows of The Hymn Society, and members of the current Executive Committee during our virtual Annual Conference, July, 2020.

Cultural Appropriation: Who Is Entitled to Sing Spirituals?

EILEEN GUENTHER

They took everything else from us—
they can't take our music.

Music is a universal expression of art—
it's part of humankind and transcends ownership.¹

The question of “who is entitled to sing Spirituals” has lately been at the forefront of consideration among singers and directors. As recently as this past February, a Midwestern university became embroiled in controversy—“whites singing spirituals is an offense and [objectionable] cultural appropriation”—for presenting a concert of African American spirituals performed by a “mostly white” choir. George Washington University constitutional law scholar Jonathan Turley took strenuous exception:

These artists are celebrating different cultures and musical traditions. When I see a non-Italian singing *La Traviata* or Sicilian folk songs, I am not offended as a Sicilian. I am delighted that my culture is being explored by others. Listening to Marian Anderson was a thrill because she was a great artist and talent, not because she was an African American. When she sang Italian operas, it was not cultural appropriation, it was a cultural celebration. This effort to bar whites from singing certain songs is an attack on artistic expression and free speech.²

If predominantly white choirs and congregations cannot sing Spirituals, what does their absence say? That Spirituals have no place in the twenty-first century? That the enslaved creators do not matter? That, in denying the potential of music to make a difference, we

silence its message of justice? And, as Professor Turley asked, what of artistic expression and free speech?

In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (April 16, 1963), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized “the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”³

At a time when much of white society is desperately trying to understand the African American experience and broaden its knowledge of American history, the value of music as a bridge cannot be overstated. This represents one of the most powerful aspects of Spirituals: their ability to connect us with each other. If, in his “I Have a Dream Speech,” Dr. King could call on “all of God’s children” to sing “My country ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty” and in the same speech also call on “all of God’s children—black . . . and white” to sing “Free at Last,”⁴ there is much to be learned of each other’s history by combining our voices and singing each other’s songs.

For many years, I have explored with African American conductors around the country the question of “who can sing Spirituals.” The lived experience of African American musician-scholars is, try as I might, something I can never fully understand. In spite of having worked with Spirituals all my life, I value every opportunity to engage in new understandings.

“People just want permission,” said Anton Armstrong of St. Olaf College in our recent webinar.⁵ “In the twenty-first century, these slaves’ songs transcend any one race of people and have become a universal

1. Common parlance from discussion around spirituals.

2. Jonathan Turley, “A Mockery of My Culture: Students Oppose a Mostly White Choir for Singing Spirituals as Cultural Appropriation,” Jonathan Turley blog (February 26, 2020). <https://jonathanturley.org/2020/02/26/a-mockery-of-my-culture-students-oppose-a-mostly-white-choir-for-singing-spirituals-as-cultural-appropriation/>. Original article: https://www.westernherald.com/community_culture/article_5abf5768-54c2-11ea-9bec-57446ebed23f.html.

3. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

4. <https://www.newsweek.com/martin-luther-king-jr-i-have-dream-speech-full-text-video-1482623>.

5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qtd7i_8gt8.

musical expression of people seeking release from whatever personal or societal oppression enslaves us. They provide us with an inspiring treasury of song filled with the human exploration of pain, pathos, hope, courage, faith, and freedom.”⁶

Spirituals are the essence of transcendence, art born of the pain of slavery that has survived to shine a light on the horrors of enslavement. They are an artful and soul-filled expression of “Nobody knows the trouble I see.” They are a testament to the creativity and resistance of the enslaved. As Rowan University’s Lourin Plant has written, the music is:

a vital dimension of the moment and situation of African American life. Whether in joy or in . . . sorrow, at work and rest, in worship, in defiance, in flight or danger . . . spirituals illuminate the singing soul at the center of the incomprehensibly stressful lives African Americans struggled to carve out for themselves under the yoke of slavery. Spirituals rose up from a strong, sacred heart, complex, sophisticated, expressive and extemporaneously organic—and as such present a revealing look at the essence of African Americans — resilient souls [with] . . . a surprisingly hopeful optimism that transcended even the wretchedness of the slave experience.⁷

In all these ways, Spirituals offer a view “from the inside out” into the time of enslavement. They simultaneously probe the depths of suffering in the human experience, and yet lift spirits and motivate people in ways no other musical genre does. During the Civil Rights Movement, SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) Field Secretary Phyllis Martin explained to a journalist the essential nature of Spirituals in the South:

The fear down here is tremendous. I didn’t know whether I’d be shot at, or stoned, or what. But when the singing started, I forgot all that. I felt good within myself. We sang “Oh Freedom” and “We shall not be moved,” and after that you just don’t want to sit around any more. You want the world to hear you, to know what you’re fighting for.⁸

Spirituals are, in my view, the most powerful music

in existence. Musicians want to perform them “right,” or at least avoid “pushback” from their congregations, audiences, or singers. While they might wish to bring as much preparation to the performance of Spirituals as to Western European music, in reality, performers often do not spend the requisite time researching the context of the music.

“Objectionable cultural appropriation,” says Temple University’s Rollo Dilworth, includes the “use of language or dialect that is off the mark, or movement added to the performance that is not consistent with the music’s cultural origins.”⁹ To avoid objectionable appropriation, Anton Armstrong calls for integrity in performance, including the use of dialect, tempi reflecting the suffering behind the songs, emphasis on the second and fourth beats and on vowel sounds, attention to vocal timbre, and respect for the dignity of the music.¹⁰

Philip Shoultz, associate conductor of the Minneapolis ensemble VocalEssence, recently told Chorus America in an interview, “There’s a positive attribute to sharing culture, right? And you can’t separate us artificially because now we are so intertwined together, thanks to social media and technology.” Shoultz, who also helps lead VocalEssence’s ensemble, WITNESS, which features music from the African American tradition, says he struggles with those who take “the hard line that if white people are singing spirituals that’s appropriation. Because for me, as an African American who has spent a significant amount of time studying in Germany, with German scholars, that’s telling me that I shouldn’t be singing Bach cantatas and B minor Masses, right?”¹¹

Yes, Mr. Shoultz, you are entitled to sing Bach. Likewise, based on my reading and discussions, the majority of musicians and scholars believe that Spirituals indeed can be sung by all. While Spirituals are a mirror on history, they also speak to us today—with the caveat they must be sung with knowledge and a respect that honors the musical and historic tradition.

That tradition informs performance. “I’ve got a robe” (also known as “I’ve got shoes”), a popular concert encore, is an up-tempo, “Jubilee”-style Spiritual that contains, in my view, the best phrase in any of the

6. Anton Armstrong in André Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007), xii.

7. Spirituals Roundtable, <https://wjcms.org/wp-content/uploads/Notes-on-Slave-Narratives-Spirituals.pdf>.

8. Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 90–91.

9. <https://www.chorusamerica.org/article/cultural-appropriation-culture-stealing-culture-sharing>.

10. Paraphrasing Anton Armstrong, “Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song” in *Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir*, Vol. 1, Heather Buchanan and Matthew W. Mehaffey, eds., 29–34 (Chicago: GIA 2005).

11. *Ibid.*

Spirituals: “Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heav’n ain’t goin’ there.” This phrase exposes the Christian hypocrisy that appalled the enslaved: the dichotomy of owners’ actions in church (serve them communion) and what they did to the enslaved after church was over (whip them for the smallest infraction). From research you will learn that rations of shoes and clothing for the enslaved were often replaced only annually. Thus, robes, harps, wings, and crowns were potent, aspirational symbols of the respect missing in their daily lives but which the enslaved singers were confident would be theirs in heaven. These hopes—captured in song—kept them going, as William B. McClain, my colleague and friend, often says about the Spirituals: “The hope they sang about that was embedded in the Spirituals enabled them to live and survive in the present as if the future they hoped for had already come.”¹²

“When I arrange spirituals,” composer Rosephanye Powell explains, “the story of the African-American slave is the impetus for the arrangement. I have read about and researched the life and culture of the African-American slave for many years. So I cannot separate the spiritual from the life of the slave.”¹³ Powell’s last sentence is key: one “cannot separate the spiritual from the life of the slave.” To reinforce that integral relationship, as Anton Armstrong, André Thomas, and I agreed in our recent Spirituals Roundtable, “Do your homework.”¹⁴

Spirituals must be given the same preparation that the Western European canon of music requires: study the music and its relation to the printed text; read about the history of the era of enslavement when the music was created; converse and collaborate with musicians who have a deep knowledge of the music; listen to recordings; inform yourself about performance practices; investigate the twenty-first-century use of original dialects; observe African American choirs in concert; at rehearsals, in concert programs, or in service leaflets, include original quotations from the enslaved to contextualize the Spiritual. Finally, ask some questions: How

do Spirituals offer insights for the choir, audience, and congregation? Might Spirituals open a door to better understanding contemporary cultural conditions? Above all, approach the music with humility and fidelity to its creators.

Conclusion

The struggle and history that produced the Spirituals are crucial to our culture today. The conflict we see on the streets of our cities is rooted in the systemic racism that has been part of US history for four hundred years. Spirituals tell this story powerfully and poignantly, and we have the opportunity to understand challenges of today through the “eyes” of the Spiritual. The psychologist and musicologist Arthur Jones writes in *Wade in the Water*: “the spirituals [are] sources of wisdom and guidance in addressing current societal and psychological issues. . . . I have come to believe [there] are *universal applications* of the teachings of the spirituals to critical issues of human concern.”¹⁵

“It is very important to me that we encourage the proper understanding and performance of the concert settings of the Negro Spiritual,” says Anton Armstrong. “They remain a very relevant genre of American folk music and a strong voice of Black expression. . . . While the Spirituals emanated from a race of people, they are still most relevant in speaking more universally to the human condition today.”¹⁶



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12. William B. McClain, e-mail to author, July 30, 2020.

13. <http://rosephanyepowell.com/faq/>.

14. Spirituals Roundtable.

15. Arthur Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll: NY: Orbis Books, 1993), xiv xv. Italics in the book.

16. Anton Armstrong, e-mail to author June 22, 2020.