

Book Reviews

Andrew Crow, Editor

In Their Own Words:

Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals

Eileen Guenther

MorningStar Music Publishers, 2016

492 pages, \$28.00 paperback

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The African-American spiritual is one of the most performed choral genres in the United States. Most, if not all, choral singers have experienced these songs. The history of the spiritual and its development into mainstream choral music began with the violent, discriminatory, and heart-rending events of the forced migration and enslavement of Africans. Eileen Guenther's book, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*, urges the reader to understand and connect with the sorrowful context that created this genre. Through primary sources including first-person written narratives and interviews with slaves (and former slaves), Guenther provides an opportunity to better comprehend this painful period so that performers may approach their lives and the spirituals from a more authentic perspective.

Throughout the book, Guenther provides direct accounts, without interference, of the cruel realities of slave life and the powerful music it bore. Through elegant formatting, Guenther features primary source accounts as

the centerpiece of the book. She explains, "Words of those enslaved, whether spoken to someone else or written by themselves, appear in italics" (p. xx). Nearly every page includes these italicized quotations, bringing credibility, authenticity, and depth to the entire book. Guenther's commentary contextualizes the quotations, rarely distracting from the heart behind the speakers' voices. Her commentary and juxtaposition of quotes from white slave owners, overseers, and justices alongside the italicized accounts of slaves often provide the most powerful and revealing passages.

The book divides 19 chapters into three parts with two appendices. The most substantial part of the book is Part II (chapters 8–16), which justifies words from the book's subtitle: "Slave Life." Each chapter of Part II explores a different aspect of the slaves' daily reality. These chapters and the quotations within them give every choir director who programs spirituals reason to acquire this book. Although not related

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specifically to spirituals (Part I and Part III achieve that), the context provided in Part II brings more meaning and power to these songs' performances and simultaneously dignifies the songs' creators.

In her introduction, Guenther notes that chapters 5, 18 and 19 are quickly applicable to an overscheduled musician who may not read the entire volume, and they are probably the most important chapters of Parts I and III. While chapter 19 offers a synopsis of the book's longer exploration of the slaves' lives and circumstances, chapters 5 and 18 focus specifically on individual spirituals, giving accounts of the music's themes and appearance in daily life. The appendices are literal and thematic concordances between the text of 100 selected spirituals and biblical scripture. They are particularly useful to the church musician who intends to pair a spiritual with scripture in a Christian church service.

André Thomas's influential book *Way Over in Beulah Lan'*: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual has become an essential resource to aid conductors and their ensembles in authentic performance of spirituals. Eileen Guenther's new book is similarly valuable and provides even broader context to that performance practice. The book is useful as a reference for programming and performing specific spirituals, but it can also be read from beginning to end. The tone is approachable and often conversational as it moves frequently between quotations and brief commentary.

Extensive endnotes for each chapter and the bibliography provide an invaluable resource for us to continue grappling with a terrible period of history that conceived an emotionally powerful oeuvre. Guenther states it best: "Context is the prism that allows us to appreciate fully the songs of religion, the songs of protest, and the songs of despair and hope that created the slaves' community and continue to move our spirits today" (p. xix).

—Brian Stone