

Get Your Ticket Ready: Directing Spirituals with Confidence
Dr. Rebecca Raber (Director of Choral Studies, University of Mary)
Cappella (demonstration choir, University of Mary)

INTRODUCTION

- Dr. Richard Harrison Smith, our choir director and Academic Dean of the college, had a special gift for teaching and understanding the spiritual.
 - He was a stubborn Norwegian Lutheran (as he put it)...but an absolute expert in spirituals.
 - *What inspired him—inspired us.* This is important for all teachers to note. Enthusiasm is contagious!
 - He understood and respected the the spiritual and coached us to sing them in such a way that audiences were immediately drawn in.
 - The music inspired within us the elements that bind us all together as human beings...sorrow, joy, courage, and hope. It was something that came from within, from our very souls.
- It was a natural fit for me to start my academic study of spirituals in graduate school. I have studied spirituals for over 20 years, researching repertoire, reception, historical context, and performance practice. I eventually chose to study coded messages in spirituals for my final lecture recital and dissertation topic. Information on this can be found at the address at the end of the handout.

WHO CAN/SHOULD DO SPIRITUALS? AND WHY?

- You are encouraged to embrace this music, using it as a celebration to honor various cultures and contributions.
- We must make the distinction though, between appreciation and appropriation. **What's the difference?**
- *"Cultural **appreciation** in music education involves honoring, understanding, and respectfully studying the origins of musical traditions, while **appropriation** occurs when elements are adopted without any attempts at understanding, giving proper credit, or respecting the art."*
- *This is folk music, American folk music...music that is community-focused, part of oral tradition, unknown authorship, and originating within a specific American experience.*
- **We need to engage in scholarship to prepare this music.** *Preparing a conversation with your students and audiences is the element that is sometimes missing when we program spirituals, because it feels difficult to discuss the atrocities from which this genre was born. **However, we must do this.** We must do the work to study, understand, and honor this musical tradition.*
- *Dr. Glen Rideout (at the 2022 ACDA convention stated) "We need experts that aren't African American."*
- *Alice Parker, choral legend, said "As musicians, we do not have colors, we have ears. We have voices."*
- Realize and expect that there are different opinions about how to make the music, just as you would preparing Bach or Brahms. I will offer resources at the conclusion of this presentation and be available to help you if you have questions.
- Spirituals are an important and essential part of the choral canon, especially in America.
- Students CAN connect with the emotions present in the text, in the music. **They don't need to have experienced it, nor do we want to have them sing as if they have.** *BUT, we can ask them to try connect those emotions to something they have felt or are currently experiencing.* To empathize is a powerful and needed skill in the world today. THESE things are the important things that bind us together as HUMAN BEINGS. They help us feel like we're part of something bigger than ourselves.

ALICE PARKER: ACDA National Conference, March 10, 2017

- Spirituals created an alternative reality for those that sing them. *Isn't that what all music does for us?*
- This music allowed those that were enslaved to be totally free on the inside
- You sing b/c it's the only way to express what's inside you
- **If you do it exactly as written on the page, you're doing it wrong**
- Again, Alice Parker reminds that the style of singing the spirituals varied from place to place, and we should be open to reasonable interpretation. There are "filters" between the original spiritual and the ears of an audience member: spiritual—arranger—publisher—conductor—singers—audience.

STEAL AWAY (Clayton White)...from a collection "Tryin' to Get Ready" GIA G-6808 (30 songs)

- *Steal Away*, is one of the most recognized and documented coded message songs of the spirituals repertoire.
- Steal Away has FOUR possible meanings and connotations: the meaning was "in the air" as they'd say
 1. Dying and going to heaven
 2. Longing for a return to Africa
 3. To "steal away" to a secret meeting out in the swamp to meet or worship as they pleased
 - Green trees a bending (bending a branch to create a hollow or indicate the location)
 - Humming the melody and spreading the music throughout the community to notify them that a meeting would be held that night.
 4. Signaling your intention to escape...this could serve as a goodbye

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THE OLD SHIP OF ZION (Richard Harrison Smith)

- This song's dynamic narrative describes a venerable old ship that is ready to carry all weary souls safely to heaven, just as she has delivered many more thousands before.
- Sometimes modes of transportation were used interchangeably to represent the Underground Railroad
- "Kingdom" is a reference to Heaven, which represents freedom (either in the freed states or Canada).
- The "world catch a fire" refers to "hell," or slavery itself—something to be escaped from.
- "She is rollin', jes rollin'" symbolizes the movement of the people of the Underground Railroad away from slavery to freedom.
- This is further underscored by the command, "O get your ticket ready, the ship will soon be leavin', get your ticket ready to go!" **This is a clear statement—a signal, a call to action—**
- The music SOUNDS as if it's connected to the text and advancing the story.

PERFORMING THE SPIRITUAL: Items to consider

- *It's ok to change your opinion; the more you invest in preparation, the clearer the picture becomes.* This is true of any study but particularly important to any historically neglected area of musical study.
- *Invest time in scholarship to prepare discussion and provide context to your singers.*
- Strive to provide more info. Don't assume that they know/understand context. (example-The Slave Bible)
- Tunes were "collected" and written down by missionary musicians (beginning in 1867), traveling from plantation to plantation, listening to singers carefully to accurately represent these compositions.
- Because of the word of mouth tradition, there were many variations in both melody and text.
- Many songs even included coded language (the topic of my dissertation)
- **Diction/Dialect**
- **Rhythm** is integral. Rhythmic drive!
- Adjust **balance**...the bass voices drive the rhythm
- **Tone color** that suits the emotional palette of the piece
- **Blend/Vibrato** (a little more soloistic sound can ok)
- **Accompaniment** (agree/disagree?). Distinction between spirituals and gospel.
- How do you put that in context for students? What does your spirit *want* to sing...*need* to sing?
- **Programming flexibility** (all seasons, anywhere in a concert, all ages, etc)
- Again, we know that music can build community...it can strengthen and reassure the community.

RESOURCES

- How to use spirituals in the classroom?
 - Warmups (using simple melodies, "Amen," "Yonder Come Day")
 - Spontaneous use...as a means of coping, or as a response to events
 - Improvising (standard/benchmark)
 - Call and response nature to encourage solo singing confidence in short scope (standard/benchmark)
 - Artistry--making it your own and performing things not on the page (Alice Parker)
- Using movement in the classroom (Dalcroze, Orff techniques)
- Cross-curricular connections: think of the educational reinforcement possible!
 - History, Literature, Geography, Language, Art, Movement/Dance, Religion
- Lesson Planning: links to connect you to lesson plans and educational materials
- Places to Visit: to learn more...in your own travels, or touring with your students
- Websites & books listed
- **REMEMBER: successful choral conductors are dynamic storytellers! As a conductor preparing, rehearsing, and performing this choral music, it is critical to both communicate the context and history of spirituals during the learning process, and also make appropriate stylistic choices in the music. Revealing the historical context and rich textual interpretation of this body of repertoire allows conductors to tell this story more effectively through their informed pedagogy, ultimately enriching and inspiring both singers and listeners.**



LINK
to
RESOURCES

to find out more about the choir
www.cappellaumary.com