

PERFORMANCE & PRACTICE

KEY INFORMATION & PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES FOR SPIRITUALS

SLAVE SONG CATEGORIES:

- 1. Religious Spirituals:** make direct reference to the members of the Holy Trinity or feature preaching/teaching themes. *Examples: My God is So High, King Jesus is a Listenin', Little Innocent Lamb, Lord, I want to be a Christian*
- 2. Freedom Spirituals:** offer a sense of “deliverance” or earthly trials and often reference Old Testament stories of Moses and the Israelites. *Examples: Great Day, Go Down Moses, A City Called Heaven, All My Trials, In dat Great Gittin' up Mornin'*
- 3. Escape Spirituals:** the interesting “coded” or “signal songs” of the slaves. They have hidden messages embedded in the text designed to secretly communicate and plan escapes from their plantations unbeknownst to their slave masters. *Examples: Follow the Drinking Gourd, Steal Away, Wade in the Water, Keep Your Lamps, The Old Ship of Zion, Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*
- 4. The Shout & Hollers:** many of the more “secular” spirituals fall into this category, offering instruction on movement to accompany the singing. This is a little known-about category. *Examples: Secular tunes from R. Allen's 1801 edition...or otherwise not written down.*
- 5. Work Songs:** this music is best known to accompany movement, usually working on the plantation or in the fields. It's true that most spirituals can simultaneously belong to other categories and still be a work song. A defining characteristic of a spiritual is rhythmic vitality and drive. They were designed to be “moved to” in a working or traveling manner, even the very slowest songs. These were often *call and response* style.

PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS:

Approach: spirituals evolved over hundreds of years, native music from Africa amalgamating with the music and culture of the new America. It is a rich oral tradition, created and perpetuated *by the community of singers*, not individual composers. Because of this, there is an innate flexibility and sense of animation that must be present in the music.

Rhythm: Native African music was permeated by complex rhythms and syncopation, often layered upon layers, in voices and drums. The white slave-masters were frightened that slaves were communicating through the use of drums, and banned their use. The slaves sought to get a similar feel as the drums through a uniquely percussive use of only their voices in their singing. Although this was tempered when eventually fused with the more “European style” of America, this rhythmic vitality must be clearly present as the basis of every song.

Synchronicity: Also to be minded, the music was not only clearly inspirational to its singers, but also completely *functional* in synchronizing the work or traveling movement that accompanied it. Sense of clear and purposeful rhythmic drive, anchored by the lowest voices must be present.

Diction: there are no codified manners of choosing/presenting diction for spirituals, because it is an oral tradition and not documented, but there are three widely recognized practices:

- 1. Standard English:** standard English...the conservative approach, albeit a somewhat inaccurate representation of the authentic style that draws listeners to spirituals.
- 2. Spiritual/African-American Dialect:** attempts to lend the most integrity and authenticity to the art
 1. Phonetic decay...drop final consonants *example: burnin' (drop g)*
 2. Consonants...modification of sounds that were not in common usage *example: “that” becomes “dat”*
 3. Diphthongs...there is no diphthong, first vowels only *example: “my” becomes “mah”*
 4. Schwa...neutral approach to vowels *example: “heavenly” becomes “heb-un-ly”*
 5. Clipping syllables... *example: “witness” becomes “wi'-ness”*
- 3. Hybrid:** most commonly used, combines authentic dialect with standard English

Regardless of the diction choice, it must still be rhythmic, not only in the onset, but its release as well, providing momentum through each phrase by propelling the text forward.

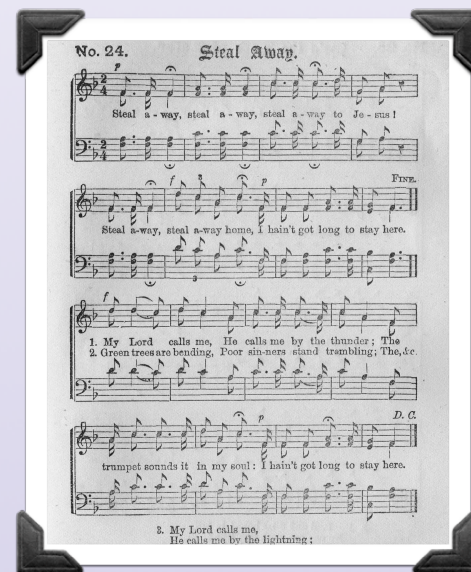
Tone Color: one must balance one's own artistic sensibilities with the knowledge and respect of the singers that originated the music. The voices should be full bodied and rich in all parts, paying close attention to unity and balance, and possessing a tone color to suit the meaning of the text.

Characteristics: spirituals often exist in a *call and response* style...a conversation of sorts within the choir. Phrases are usually short and repetitive, alternating verses (with questions or struggles) and refrains (with answers/solutions). Syncopation, poly-rhythms, and complex rhythmic layering are almost always present as an element of the music.

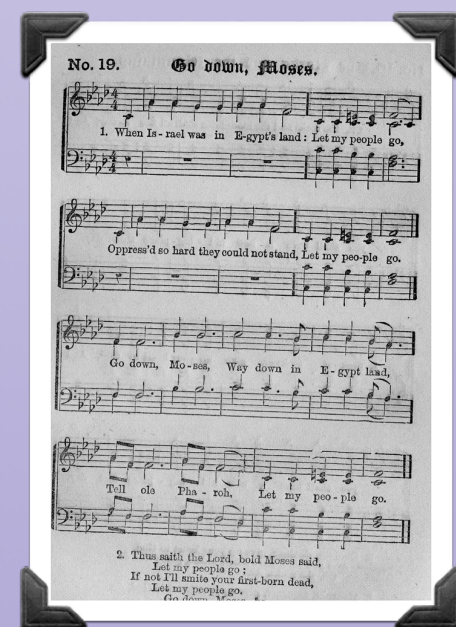
Consider: a spiritual deserves as much score study, scholarly regard and respect as other pieces of music in the standard choral repertory. Conductors should take time to discover as much information about the spiritual as possible before presenting the music to choristers in an effort to illuminate the specific meaning of the text, song and the spirit of the culture.

STEAL AWAY: The Meaning Behind the Music

Spirituals provided the enslaved with a means of safely and openly communicating with each other about their plans to escape their bondage. Their slave masters had little or no idea that while they were singing about “stealing away to



Jesus,” they were actually making plans to run away from their plantation. *Wade in the Water* gave instructions not on baptism (as the slave-master was led to believe), but for escaped slaves to travel in the water so that their scent would be more difficult to trace by hound dogs. When spirituals refer to the “devil,” they actually mean the slave-master.



When they speak of “Moses,” it was a signal that Harriet Tubman (nicknamed “Sister Moses”) was close at hand and ready to help slaves escape on the Underground Railroad. Any reference to “hell” was code for “being sold further south,” the worst imaginable fate.