

ABSTRACT: Conducting the Coded Message Songs of Slavery: Context, Connotation, and Performance Preparation

The coded message songs of slavery are a mysterious and fascinating entity. Within the lyrics of these seemingly innocuous plantation songs are coded messages for escape, messages that provided secret information to enslaved workers on Antebellum plantations. Over the course of more than 250 years of slavery on American soil, countless enslaved Africans found freedom through the use of coded message songs and the Underground Railroad. What are these songs? Which lyrics provided this secret information? How can a study of this music provide a better musical experience for conductors, singers, and listeners? This disquisition offers answers to these important questions, as well as a presentation of this body of repertoire from the choral conductor's perspective. First, I provide a brief historical context for the music of slavery. I analyze and interpret important historical collections of spirituals and examine them through the lens of their text. Period accounts (from newly freed slaves and by song collectors) as well as information from modern conductors and scholars provide insight into and support for my method. A discussion of textual interpretation and musical representation follows, including a valuable list of common themes used in coded message songs. In the main body of the document, I present nine spirituals that contain coded message. I focus on the lyrics of the coded songs, introducing the connotations of the messages within the music. I also offer insight to choral conductors considering this repertoire and some interpretive choices that may be made when performing this music. Finally, this study contributes appendices with concrete pedagogical resources to assist conductors in their teaching and presentation of coded message songs to their singers. 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 coded message songs 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.