

CHAPTER 5. STEAL AWAY

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home. I want to cross over into campground.
My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder.
The trumpet sounds within a my soul. I ain't got long to stay here.
Green trees are bending, poor sinner stands a trembling.
The trumpet sounds within a my soul. I ain't got long to stay here.⁵⁰

Introduction

Steal Away, is one of the most recognized and documented coded message songs of the spirituals repertoire. Not only does *Steal Away* contain coded message within its lyrics, but it is also unique, as simply humming the melody prompted action from those that recognized its meaning. This particular arrangement of *Steal Away* is scored for SATB chorus by Dr. Clayton White (b.1942).

Clayton White, retired Professor of Music and Department Chair at Community College of Philadelphia, is a recognized expert on African-American music and has published over one hundred compositions and arrangements.⁵¹ Not only is Dr. White a scholar on the subject of spirituals, but he also conducts the “Clayton White Singers,” a professional chorus that specializes in the choral performance of spirituals. His collection, “Tryin’ to Get Ready,” contains thirty arrangements of spirituals, including this one.

Steal Away is an “escape song.”⁵² At first glance, it seems as if it is a musical meditation that expresses the deep longing to die and go to Jesus in heaven. This was a common theme in spirituals. W.E.B DuBois (1869-1963) affirms this in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “The Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next; the avenging Spirit of the Lord enjoining patience in this world, under sorrow and tribulation until the Great

⁵⁰ Clayton White, “Steal Away,” in *Tryin’ to Get Ready* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2006), 79.

⁵¹ GIA Publications, “Artists: Clayton White,” GIA Publications, April 13, 2018, <https://www.giamusic.com/store/artists/clayton-white>.

⁵² An escape song, also used synonymously with “signal song” is a piece of music sung in order to communicate secretly and prompt action for escape from the plantation. Sometimes it was a plea for assistance, and other times, it was a farewell to loved ones and friends.

Day when He should lead His dark children home,—this became his comforting dream.”⁵³ Certainly, the enslaved clung to this dream of being free from earthly bondage. It offered them needed consolation and hope when everything associated with their earthly experience was full of anguish, sorrow, and suffering.

As stated in Chapter 3 (Collections, Communication, and Coded Text), spirituals’ coded messages frequently retained double and even triple meanings, offering varying levels of specificity in regards to their message. This is why coded musical communication was so effective. The meaning was determined by the context (of the singing) and the intent of the singer. While an enslaved worker was singing, “Steal Away,” he could have been singing about a longing for heaven; conversely, he could also have been providing either a signal for a secret meeting, or to escape the plantation altogether. Those listening that were not privy to these multiple meanings (slave masters, plantation owners) largely ignored the singing, thinking that the songs were about longing for heaven.

Coded Text

Steal Away appears in *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*,⁵⁴ one of the four primary collections of spirituals mentioned by André Thomas (b.1952) in his book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual*.⁵⁵ Additionally, it also appears in John Work’s collection, *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular*⁵⁶ and also Edward Boatner’s *The Story of the Spirituals*,⁵⁷ both important secondary

⁵³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. First published in 1903. (New York, NY: Fine Creative Media, 2003), 141.

⁵⁴ J.B.T. Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 181.

⁵⁵ Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’*, 13-19.

⁵⁶ Work, *American Negro Songs*, 123.

⁵⁷ Edward Boatner, *The Story of the Spirituals: 30 Spirituals and Their Origins* (Miami, FL: Belwin Mills, 1973), 115.

collections of spirituals. “This song is exceptional: it is one spiritual connected with a composer and a specific situation. Numerous sources cite Nat Turner (1800-31) as the composer.”⁵⁸

The text of Clayton White’s arrangement has only a slight variation from the primary collections, two less verses (verses 3 & 4):

3. Tombstones are bursting, poor sinner stands a trembling.
4. My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the lightning.

It is unknown why White’s arrangement only contains the first two verses.

Steal Away, as previously noted, is a renowned signal song. At first glance, the lyrics of *Steal Away* seem straight-forward. In this spiritual, the lyrics “steal away” have three possible meanings. First, beginning with most specific meaning, the song was intended to secretly call together the enslaved community to attend a meeting. “According to the old emancipated black folk that were living twenty or twenty-five years after the end of the Civil War, *Steal Away* was used as a signal spiritual to notify the slaves of a secret meeting somewhere in the swamps where they would assemble to pray to God for deliverance.⁵⁹ This relates to scripture, Matthew 6:6, “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

The meeting could be “called” for a variety of reasons: to discuss plans for escape, worship as they wished in private, or simply to maintain the sense of community to revive hope going forward.

Second, the song could also indicate that someone amongst the enslaved community was intending to make an escape soon. The music served as an indication to be on alert and offer assistance as needed. It also provided a quiet opportunity to say goodbye to loved ones and friends, obscured from the ever-listening ears of the slave masters.

Third, (the only meaning apparent to the slave masters) the song symbolized the journey from their difficult trials on earth to receiving glory in Heaven, alongside their Savior, Jesus. This was widely accepted by the slave masters, as it not only coincided with their professed

⁵⁸ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 124.

⁵⁹ Boatner, *The Story of the Spirituals*, 115.

Christian belief, but also seemed like a harmless activity that served as a happy distraction and motivator to the workers.

Steal Away is one of the most fascinating and unique of the coded message songs because the intended meaning was communicated not only through the lyrics, but also by simply humming the melody.⁶⁰ It was so well-known amongst the enslaved community that just hearing the tune could prompt action. “Whenever the meeting was to be held, the leader would hum the first phrase of the spiritual to one of the slaves and he would, in turn, hum the same phrase to another. This signal was given all day until everyone was notified. They would hum softly the good message all during the day and the slave master would never know what was going on.”⁶¹

Steal Away also contains other coded language within its lyrics. “crossing over into campground” indicates a move toward freedom (the free states, Canada, or a return to Africa) or a passage from this earthly life to Heaven. “Green trees are bending” is an interesting phrase to consider. It seems as if this phrase contained nothing secretive or subversive within its meaning, and that’s what slave masters believed. However, this simple phrase actually had a literal meaning that the slave masters just didn’t understand:

“It was some years later, when I heard Reverend Pearlie Brown sing *Steal Away*, that I really felt this story. Brown said he had learned *Steal Away* from his grandmother, who told him that it was sung whenever there was to be a meeting among the slaves. He also said that the verse of the song that had the words, “green trees a bending” referred to bush arbors the slaves created in the woods to have their praise meetings. B bending and tying bushes, they could stimulate the bushes to grow into a kind of a cove that would be a gathering place for people to come and sing and pray and do other things that were not to be shared with the plantation owners.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Jordan, *Soul Praise*, 25. “Steal Away—one of the many “signal” or message songs sung by the slaves...the lyrics of this song were not always sung. Sometimes, a slave group leader might hum the first few words to someone else in the group, who would in turn hum them to someone else. This pattern would sometimes go on all day, even within earshot of the unsuspecting master, until everyone had been made aware of a pending meeting.”

⁶¹ Boatner, *The Story of the Spirituals*, 115.

⁶² Bernice Johnson Reagon, *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 76-77.

“Green trees a bending” had another meaning, as listed by Chenu while recounting a narrative from a newly freed slave:

“Peter Randolph, a Virginia slave emancipated in 1847, told of one of these clandestine reunions. ‘Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.’”⁶³

“The trumpet sounds within a mah soul” refers to the long-awaited news of emancipation and freedom ringing through the land (like the sound of a trumpet). This simple song was very effective in communicating secrets, both in coded language, as well as what we know about the performance practice as a means of communication.

The Music

Clayton White’s arrangement of *Steal Away* is straight-forward in its approach. The piece is written in F major, using the pentatonic scale as its foundation. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of “free and expressive,” indicating great flexibility. Clayton White has offered expressive dynamic markings that are important to note. Most of the dynamic markings are *mp* and quieter, which interestingly, may relate information about the original performance intention of this piece—to quietly announce plans for a secret meeting. Singers would easily relate these dynamics to the original performance practice of the day.

White presents the refrain simply as a homophonic statement: “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.” Both Boatner and Jordan stated that the singing of this song (beginning with one singer and continuing to others) was a means of communication about a secret meeting. That approach might suggest a more imitative texture, especially with the repeated text. However, White takes a different route instead, suggesting a sense of community through retaining the homophonic texture. Actually, most arrangements of this tune are homophonically set—with the notable exception of William L. Dawson, who chose to use

⁶³ Chenu, *The Trouble I’ve Seen*, 67.

pyramid entrances to open his version. Furthermore, White conveys this “adding voices effect” through clever use of dynamics, increasing the level of each phrase by one dynamic level until reaching the phrase, “steal away home.” The following phrase is hushed back as the singers sing, “I ain’t got long to stay here.”

The verse, “My Lord, he calls me, he calls me by the thunder,” is presented by the soprano section and supported by the basses, tenors, and altos all singing long notes on a vowel (“oo”). The full SATB chorus sings powerfully, “The trumpet sounds with-in-a mah soul.” The last phrase, “I ain’t got long to stay here” borrows a bit of material from the end of the refrain, and returns to the subdued dynamics presented at the beginning.

Conductor’s Preparation & Pedagogy

Although the conductor’s preparation of this piece is relatively uncomplicated, it is rich with possibilities for expression and opportunities for learning for both the chorus and the audience. The essence of community that the homophonic singing evokes is powerful, both in the loudest call of the “trumpet with-in-a mah soul” and the hushed whisper, “I ain’t got long to stay here.” The dynamics change almost every measure, which is a wonderful artistic challenge for the singers. It is easy to memorize quickly, which then inspires singers and conductor to a higher level of communication much more quickly in the learning process.

This arrangement of *Steal Away* is not technically challenging; however, the challenge (and the satisfaction) lies in performing this music with a sense of understanding its history and performance practice. How satisfying to know the possible meanings and context contained within these simple lyrics. It would be even better to communicate this to your singers and audience through creative performance. Positioning a few solo singers around the performance hall and asking them to begin the piece by exchanging the opening motive amongst themselves would be an inspiring—and effective—way to present an authentic performance practice of *Steal Away*. After this individual exchange is complete, the arrangement could be sung as written,

hopefully providing the audience with a more complete understanding of the authentic story of this spiritual.

CHAPTER 6. DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, then why not every man?
He deliver'd Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale,
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, and why not every man?
Hallelujah!
The wind blows east and the wind blows west, it blows like the judgment day.
And ev'ry poor soul that never did pray will be glad to pray that day.
I set my foot on the Gospel ship, and the ship it begin to sail.
It landed me over on Canaan's shore, and I'll never come back anymore.
He deliver'd Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale,
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace. Tell me why not every man?⁶⁴

Introduction

For the enslaved, *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* asks the essential question of life: “Why not every man?” Although the piece is (outwardly) another bible story, the heart of the question goes much deeper. “This piece is a classic example of the double or coded meaning that is a key to understanding the lyrics and the role songs played in daily slave life. The song's creators majestically express the hope and desire that God send a deliverer to command the slave owners to let the people go.”⁶⁵ Like other spirituals that feature epic figures of the Old Testament—*Go Down, Moses, Elijah Rock, Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit— Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* offers the enslaved encouragement that since Daniel was delivered, why shouldn't they also be delivered? This song is the battle cry of the underdog.⁶⁶ “Why not every man?” is the repeated text of this piece. Although it appears as a simple question, Moses Hogan's arrangement presents it more as a demand than an inquiry. There is an expectation

⁶⁴ Moses Hogan, *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1999).

⁶⁵ Gwendolin Warren, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns & Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1999), 42.

⁶⁶ Dixon, *Negro Spirituals*, 22. “It was not only the successful exodus of Moses and the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery but also “little David's victory over the giant, Goliath, that has inspired suffering people ever since. Through all of Judeo-Christian history, powerless individuals and groups have identified with the victorious underdog and gained vicarious satisfaction in the horrifying punishments which plagued Pharaoh and the humiliating death of the bragging Goliath.”

attached to the question...an urgency that is delivered effectively and repeatedly through the rhythm that Hogan has scored.

Moses Hogan (1957-2003) “more than any other of the modern arrangers, is heralded as the composer/arranger who revitalized the performance of spirituals, publishing over seventy arrangements in his short life.”⁶⁷ At the time of his death, he was considered an expert on the a cappella arrangement and performance of the African-American spiritual. His keen insight into the spiritual was fostered both by hearing and singing music growing up in the African Baptist Church where his uncle was the choir director, as well as his substantial classical training.⁶⁸ Hogan’s settings are always rich in word painting captivating for both singers and listeners.

Coded Text

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel appears in “The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs” with text additional (in italics) to the Hogan arrangement:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, d'liver Daniel, d'liver Daniel, and why not every man?
He delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale.
He delivered the children from the fiery furnace, and why not every man?
*The moon run down in a purple stream, the sun forbear to shine,
And every star disappear, King Jesus shall be mine.*
The wind blows East and the wind blows West, it blows like the judgment day,
And every poor soul that never did pray, I'll be glad to pray that day.
I set my foot on the Gospel ship, and the ship it begin to sail,
It landed me over on Canaan's shore, and I'll never come back any more.⁶⁹

It also appears in Edward Boatner’s “The Story of the Spirituals” with varied text (in italics):

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, and why not every man?
He delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale.
He delivered the children from the fiery furnace, and why not every man?
*If you cannot sing like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus and you can say He died for all.*⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan'*, 72.

⁶⁸ Hogan attended the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Juilliard School, and Louisiana State University.

⁶⁹ Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers*, 169.

⁷⁰ Boatner, *The Story of the Spirituals*, 29.

Boatner says, “*Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?* is the slaves’ interpretation of the faith which Daniel showed while in the lion’s den (Daniel 6:22). Their being in slavery was also the same as being in the lions’ den, which they believed they would overcome by faith and prayer.”⁷¹

Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel communicates in a unique manner. In addition to specific word codes, the general message of the text delivers the message of hope and assurance that deliverance from slavery and oppression was possible for all. Simon Northup recounts in “12 Years a Slave,” “The goodness of God was manifest in my miraculous escape from the swamp. As Daniel came forth unharmed from the den of lions, and as Jonah had been preserved in the whale’s belly, even so had I been delivered from evil by the Almighty.”⁷² There are a few instances, however, where specific words are used with double meaning. The use of the “Gospel Ship” refers to a means of escape, the Underground Railroad. “Canaan” refer to the free states, Canada, or Africa. The story of Daniel, and other biblical figures is told dramatically through vivid imagery, which is fitting. Also, use of the word, “Lord” instead of Jesus had a more significant connotation, as John Lovell suggests.⁷³

The Music

Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel is thickly scored for SATB chorus (8 part divisi) and a small ensemble of three soloists. The small group is not designated as male or female, and could be either. However, with a trio of women singing, it is more easily heard against the dense fabric of the choral voices. The tonality is g minor, and the meter is 4/8. The suggested tempo is very

⁷¹ Ibid, 28.

⁷² Simon Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2013), 96.

⁷³ Lovell, *Black Song*, 234. “The Lord in the spiritual is somewhat more comprehensive than Jesus and definitely farther away. But he is power beyond all the needs of the slave. The Lord readily cuts through laws, conventions, power structures, and all other socio-political forms to make things right for those he favors, for those who return his trust. Thus, the slave creator appeals directly to the Lord when the need is great. The rescues of Daniel, Jonah, and the trio Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not ordinary acts of deliverance. But the Lord had proved He was equal to the occasion; and the slave had proved he was deserving. Thus the miraculous deliverance was inevitable.”

fast (♩ = 150), but the performance tempo should be determined according to the speed at which the choir sings with verbal and technical clarity. Similar to Moses Hogan's *Elijah Rock*, addressed later in this study, the rhythmic character of this piece is very syncopated, though the choir sings homophonically throughout. The entire piece is effectively driven by this repetitive rhythmic feature. The "lead" resides in the vocal trio throughout the piece, but during the verses, it is doubled by the chorus.

Each verse provides a different story or example of deliverance while the chorus reiterates the story of Daniel. After the final verse, Hogan stacks all of the stories consecutively in a quickly-building rhythmic sequence (m. 67-80) that culminates in the final phrase, the question (sung in unison), "Tell me why not every man?"

Conductor's Preparation & Pedagogy

Because of the repetitive nature of this arrangement, the conductor should plan to rehearse this piece in smaller "chunks" to avoid vocal fatigue in the singers, both in the featured trio as well as the chorus. Once the melodic and rhythmic figures are learned, the refrain can be easily prepared. The verses are also manageable. The most rehearsal time will likely be spent on the last page. Because of the divisi writing (8 parts), some voices are singing in the extreme parts of their range. The rhythmic figures are very syncopated and difficult on this closing page. Before singing the pitches, it would be wise to have the singers learn the rhythm while only speaking, to both save voice as well as allow the brain to focus on rhythm instead of rhythm and melody.

In terms of diction, Moses Hogan has not indicated anything out of the ordinary in the lyrics, so nothing is prescribed other than to strive for clarity, both in the sung notes, as well as entrances and rhythmic releases (which, in the choral parts, repeat over and over). Avoidance of diphthongs or "chewing" on the vowels is also recommended.

Time should be spent finding context for the various biblical stories contained within the piece. The biblical stories of Daniel, Jonah, and the Hebrew Children are dramatic and easy to

tell, as most people are at least somewhat familiar with them. Discussion of “deliverance” would be fruitful, and could include both sacred and secular topics throughout history. The dual meanings of the text connects well with the dramatic Old Testament stories, and will become more meaningful as the singers understand them. Because of this context, their singing will be more informed, leading to a better and more authentic performance.

CHAPTER 7. KEEP YOUR LAMPS

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the time is drawing nigh.
Children, don't get weary 'til your work is done.
Christian journey soon be over, the time is drawing nigh.
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the time is drawing nigh.⁷⁴

Introduction

“The time is drawing nigh.” To those enslaved to work on the plantations of the American south, these words provided hope, a means of looking forward to a day where they could be free from the bonds of slavery. Frederick Douglass noted, “This (*Keep Your Lamps*) was a favorite air, and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to the world of spirits; but in the lips of our company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.”⁷⁵

André Thomas, the arranger of *Keep Your Lamps*, is much-acclaimed for his vital role in the arrangement and performance of spirituals. A Professor of Music at Florida State University, Dr. Thomas has done much in his career to provide inspiration and information about the spiritual, both in the performance hall, as well as in his landmark book, “Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual.”⁷⁶ He is a champion for the spiritual, and a trusted resource amongst music educators and choral conductors.

⁷⁴ André Thomas, *Keep Your Lamps!* (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music Inc., 2003).

⁷⁵ Ron and Debbie Harris. *Get on Board! Underground Railroad & Civil Rights Freedom Songs*. Ron and Debbie Harris. Appleseed Records, BOO0KHYOBO, 2007, CD, Liner notes.

⁷⁶ Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’*, xiii-xv. Thomas relates his new experience singing choral arrangements of spirituals in junior high school: “I must admit, I was not fond of these settings, even through high school. As a young black man, I really didn’t identify. The text utilized dialect and it made me feel as if performing this music gave white people a chance to make fun of black people. I never really heard the message in the text; I only hear the way it sounded. We certainly weren’t allowed to speak like that in my home and it denoted ignorance in my mind. While working with famed Jester Hairston in college, my “lack of enthusiasm for this music became pretty obvious. He (Mr. Hairston) began to explain to me things about dialect, particularly the “th” sound that is written as a “d” in dialect. He then began to explain to me about the strength of my ancestors, what they had endured, and how this slave songs functioned in their lives. My embarrassment was quickly replaced with pride and admiration, and I was set on a path to learn more about the music.”

The text of *Keep Your Lamps* is based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 that waited anxiously with their lamps through the night for the coming of the bridegroom. The wise virgins had their lamps ready with plenty of provisions to see them through to the bridegroom's arrival at the designated meeting place. The foolish virgins only brought enough to get through the night. After running out of oil, they had to return home to refill their lamps. The bridegroom arrived while they were away. The message of the music? Be alert. Be ready.

Coded Text

On the surface, the parable simply offers the message to be prepared for the bridegroom, Christ. However, the deeper message is to be prepared not only for the bridegroom, but also for the opportunity to escape whenever the proper moment presented itself. This arrival could involve an agent of the Underground Railroad, or another slave seeking freedom through escape. In his composer's note in the printed score of *Keep Your Lamps*, Thomas adds, "one can only speculate that this song was sung often, when there was a possibility of deliverance."⁷⁷

Eileen Guenther offers a second interpretation of the text, quoting former slave, William W. Robinson: "They would carry with them iron lamps, with a greasy rag for a wick, and they would attach a sharp spike to the lamp to stick it in a tree. In this way they would light up the swamp, while they held their meeting."⁷⁸ The lamps may also represent those hung out to signal safe-houses on the Underground Railroad. Like *Steal Away* (discussed in Chapter 5), coded text might often refer to secret meetings (for prayer, praise, and planning) held during the night away from the plantation for fear of being caught. "Slaves could sing what they could not say, whether indicating the possibility of a conductor from the Underground Railroad coming to guide them to freedom, or simply signaling an upcoming secret meeting. Meanings were fluid, changing according to the situation at the time, as interpreted by the singer and by the

⁷⁷ Thomas, *Keep Your Lamps*, 1.

⁷⁸ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 109.

community.”⁷⁹ Of course, the text, “for this work’s almost done” could also refer to the work of the day, or the end of their earthly life.

Keep Your Lamps is found in one of the seminal collections of spirituals, “The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs by J.B.T. Marsh,” first published in 1892.⁸⁰ The text is as follows:

Keep your Lamps trimmed

Keep your lamps trimm’d and a-burning, for this work’s almost done.
Brothers, don’t grow weary, for this work’s almost done.
Preachers, don’t grow weary, for this work’s almost done.
Keep your lamps trimm’d and a-burning, for this work’s almost done.
‘Tis religion makes us happy, for this work’s almost done.
We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, for this work’s almost done.
Ev’ry round goes higher and higher, for this work’s almost done.

Although the refrain and the general message of the verses (Thomas’ arrangement) is similar to the “original,” the Marsh arrangement contains five additional verses, including a reference to “Jacob’s ladder,” a completely different spiritual. This is no surprise, as spirituals often borrow texts from one another, as a reflection of the oral tradition. If one were to arrange this spiritual with the intention of highlighting coded messages for escape, including those verses would be important, as “climbing higher and higher” on Jacob’s ladder signifies traveling north to freedom.

The Music

Keep Your Lamps is arranged for SATB voices, and is almost entirely homophonic, not surprisingly, as it clearly offers the community a message to either be ready to engage in an opportunity for freedom, or to attend a secret meeting. As is often the case in spirituals, a minor key is often used to deliver hopeful text, another clever ploy to conceal the authentic meaning of the words. This was determined by the creativity of performer, and in this case, by the arranger, Dr. Thomas. This piece is in f minor. The tempo (which almost always accompanies movement

⁷⁹ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 358.

⁸⁰ Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers*, 224.

in spirituals) is moderate (♩ = 80). Thomas recommends a feeling of 2). Interestingly, the rhythm is less syncopated than most spirituals. The syncopation consistently appears in the fourth beat of the measure, “anticipating” the next downbeat by an eighth note value.

Thomas has included a part written for conga drums. This is noteworthy. Drums were strictly forbidden on plantations, due to their unique ability to communicate across distance.

“For some time, slave masters did not realize that the drums the slaves made...were being used for communication. They thought the slaves were just making their African music. They knew these drum sounds carried far, even to the next plantation, but it didn't occur to them that the drumbeats were a sort of "Morse code" the slaves used to make plans for revolts or escapes. When it finally became clear to the slave masters that the drums were being used as a form of communication, drums were outlawed.”⁸¹

The conga part is very thinly scored, however, only providing the essential backbone of the rhythm of the piece. It provides a rather “transparent” impression to the percussion that would have made the quiet drumming at a secret meeting possible.

Conductor’s Preparation & Pedagogy

A good indicator of what to do with diction is to follow what the composer or arranger has written in the score. This particular score doesn’t indicate many changes in that regard. However, additional stylistic details (those not written on the page, as Alice Parker recommends in performance of spirituals)⁸² may be discovered by listening to Dr. Thomas conduct a recording of this piece with the 1994 South Carolina All State Choir.⁸³ He chooses to close “trimmed” to a resonant “m” sound throughout the piece. He calls for the standard English pronunciation of “burning” instead of a phonetic decay approach, “burnin.” He also adds

⁸¹ James Haskins, *Black Music in America: A History Through Its People* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987), 5.

⁸² Parker, *Got a Mind to Do Right*.

⁸³ YouTube, “Keep Your Lamps!” South Carolina All State Chorus, 1994. Accessed June 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HDQqM7TsLU>.

upward scoops on “don’t” in m. 25 and, more noticeably, on “journey” in m. 41. Additionally, he places marked accents on certain portions of the text, particularly, “til your work is done,” which repeats several times at the end of each verse.

A word of caution to the conductor regarding tempo: it is very easy to speed up the tempo in the performance of this piece. Perhaps because of the easy nature of the rhythm and repetitive text, singers want to push forward with the tempo. For this purpose, conducting in a 4 pattern may help the singers, as well as rehearsing the music on a subdivided neutral syllable, so that they are able to feel the underlying pulse of the music.

Taking into account the musical items Dr. Thomas has provided in the score as well as those that we can learn from researching his performances of his own arrangement, conductors are able to prepare an inspiring performance of this piece with their singers. Adding additional historical and poetic context regarding the multiple meanings of the text (coded message) will only further enhance an already meaningful learning of this music.

CHAPTER 8. EV'RY TIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT

Ev'ry time I feel the spirit, moving in my heart, I will pray;
Yes, ev'ry time I feel the spirit, moving in my heart, I will pray.
Upon the mountain my Lord spoke, out of His mouth came fire and smoke.
Looked all around me, it looked so fine, till I asked my Lord if all was mine.
Jordan river is chilly an' cold, it chills the body, but not the soul;
There ain't but one train upon this track, it runs to heaven an' right back.⁸⁴

Introduction

Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit, arranged by the venerable William L. Dawson (1899-1990), is a striking musical and poetic example of the stirring belief and steadfast faith of the enslaved. The strength of their conviction and hope for their deliverance from “hell on earth” inspired poetry that told of great spiritual powers. “Spirituals told biblical stories. My people loved the majesty of the Bible, the great wonders, miracles, and signs. Why serve a God who could do just ordinary things? They wanted one who showed His power and His command. So they proclaimed in song, ‘Upon the mountain where my God spoke, out of his mouth came fire and smoke’ and marveled at his creation.”⁸⁵ Indeed, this spiritual provides exciting imagery fused with a personal statement of hope.

In 1922, William L Dawson was teaching band and choir at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, MO, directing a 150 voice choir that specialized in Negro folk songs.⁸⁶ Little did he know at the time, that the folk songs he began to arrange and perform with this choir would lead to one of the most storied collections of spiritual arrangements in choral literature. He later became the director of the Tuskegee Institute of Music, quite an honor after having received his first formal education there. He continued arranging spirituals and toured internationally with

⁸⁴ William L. Dawson, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit* (Tuskegee, AL: Tuskegee Institute, 1946).

⁸⁵ Velma Maia Thomas, *No Man Can Hinder Me: The Journey from Slavery to Emancipation through Song* (New York: Crown, 2001), 14.

⁸⁶ Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan'*, 38-39.

his choir, winning great acclaim and respect for both his writing and performance. Now, his body of work is considered a landmark collection, and is performed by school and professional choirs around the world.

Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit presents a personal relationship with the Lord—and it's a filled with joy, energy and hope, spinning like the “wheel in a wheel” from Ezekiel 1:15-16. The Lord is described as breathing fire and smoke upon the mountain, quite a dramatic image! What else “breathes fire and smoke” and is a sign of deliverance to those enslaved on the plantations? The Underground Railroad—which may be represented through the poetry—we don't know for certain, but it would seem likely. The final two lines refer to two common poetic masks of escape: rivers and trains.

Coded Text

Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit appears in “Negro Folk-Songs: The Hampton Series Books,” by Natalie Curtis-Burlin.⁸⁷ The text is as follows:

O ev'ry time I feel de Spirit movin' in ma heart—I pray,
Upon de mountun ma Lord spoke, out of his mouth came fier an' smoke.
O ev'ry time I feel de Spirit movin' in ma heart—I pray.
Jordan Ribber chilly an' col', chill de body, but not de soul.
O ev'ry time I feel de Spirit movin' in ma heart—I pray.
All aroun' me looks so shine. Ask ma Lord if all was mine.
O ev'ry time I feel de Spirit movin' in ma heart—I pray.⁸⁸

It also appears with varied words (in italics) and additional verses in Ronald Jordan's book, *Soul Praise: Amazing Stories and Insights behind the Great African American Hymns and Negro Spirituals*.

Down in the valley on my knees, I asked the Lord have mercy please.
Jordan river chilly and cold, *took my body* but not my soul.
All around me looking so *fine*, I ask the Lord and know it is mine.

⁸⁷ Natalie Curtis-Burlin, *Negro Folk-Songs: The Hampton Series Books I-IV, Complete* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), 64-65. Burlin expresses her fondness for this particular spiritual, “Of all the Spirituals, this is one of the most touching in its prayerful suggestion and quiet reverence, and in the poetic imagery of its verse, couched in a few crude words, elemental in their simplicity, yet somehow conveying the grandeur of the vision of God on the mountain-top and the dazed soul beholding heaven in wonder.”

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 64-66.

St. Peter waiting at the gate, saying come on sinner, don't be late.⁸⁹

Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit contains coded language that served to mask communication about escape and freedom. Two references, in particular, achieve this goal.

“Jordan river is chilly an’ cold, it chills the body, but not the soul.
There ain’t but one train upon this track, it runs to heaven an’ right back.”

In Chapter 4, we established that the Jordan River is widely understood to represent other bodies of water, the Ohio River, Atlantic Ocean, or any other river or body of water that needed crossing to attain freedom.⁹⁰ Again, the Jordan River, located in the Middle East, would not be nearly as “chilly an’ cold” as the Ohio River, a notorious crossing point to the free states in the north.

Also, the reference to the train is key. John Lovell, in his monumental book, “Black Song: the Forge and the Flame,” describes the use of train imagery in spirituals:

“Songs about trains are a minor miracle. The railroad train did not come into America until the late 1820s; it did not reach the slave country to any great extent until the 1830s and 1840s. Even then, the opportunities of the slave to examine trains closely were limited. Yet, before 1860, many spiritual poems exploited the train, its seductive sounds, speed and power, its recurring schedules, its ability to carry large numbers of passengers at cheap rates, its implicit democracy.”⁹¹

The image of the train, running on a track to heaven would have been very exciting. Slave masters in earshot would have easily thought that these words referred to the metaphysical realm of the afterlife, as there is no earthly train to heaven. They were not about to correct the singers, either, as it was best to let them sing happily along. The enslaved knew that the words

⁸⁹ Jordan, *Soul Praise*, 41.

⁹⁰ Velma Maia Thomas, *No Man Can Hinder Me*, 26. “When slaves sang of the Jordan River, they were speaking of the Ohio River at the Atlantic Ocean. If one crossed either, he or she would know freedom.”

⁹¹ Lovell, *Black Song*, 249.

referenced a means to get to heaven on earth via the Underground Railroad.⁹² There was only one destination on this particular train—freedom.

The Music

Guenther referred to three major styles of spirituals in her book. *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit* falls into the third category, containing “syncopated, segmented, short punchy phrases. Their tempo is quick, their rhythm invites motion, and they are driven more by rhythm than melody.”⁹³

This description fits very well within her category. It is scored for SATB voices, featuring a baritone soloist on the verses. The texture of the choir is homophonic throughout, even in the supportive background beneath the soloist. The rhythm, as Guenther’s description offers, is “syncopated and punchy” in its short, quick phrases, providing the impression of excitement, joy, and sincerity.

The tonality is set in Eb major throughout the piece. The melody, in both the refrain and verses, avoids use of the 4th and 7th scale degrees, utilizing a pentatonic scale. This is often done in spirituals, as a means of reflecting and retaining a familiar “sound” of African music.⁹⁴ The expressive markings used most pervasively are accents (as well as accents with simultaneous staccato markings), emphasizing the “punchy” and joyous nature of the text. Even the humming notes underneath the soloist receive accent markings by Dawson—unusual, sure, but further evidence of both the joy and hope this song was intended to portray as well as the physical and rhythmic quality that spirituals retain. The basses and baritones receive a *Fz*

⁹² Harris, Ron and Debbie. Liner Notes. “This song is often referred to as a typical Underground Railroad song. Several of the classic Underground Railroad coded references are present including a description of the Jordan River as being ‘chilly and cold, chilling the body but not the soul,’ and ‘there ain’t but one train upon this track, running to heaven and then right back. While scholars debate whether the lyrics of certain songs truly reference the Underground Railroad, or were simply intended as religious songs, the truth is likely a combination of both (further attesting to the genius of the songs’ creators).”

⁹³ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 35. “Certain patterns characterize the melodies of spirituals. The scales tend to avoid the fourth and seventh degrees, resulting in an effective pentatonic scale. *Steal Away* beautifully illustrates this type of scale.”

marking on their hummed notes. The general effect of the music is light-hearted and charming, successfully masking the seriousness of the intent.

Conductor's Preparation & Pedagogy

The conductor's preparation of this piece is straight-forward. Dawson's writing ensures that singers of various levels of expertise are able to successfully rehearse and perform this piece. Learning notes and rhythms won't pose a serious challenge. However, the element that is "not on the page" is the utter commitment to the syncopation and expressive markings (accents). Most singers will easily grasp the nature of the piece, but will initially fail to sing with the required rhythmic intensity to make the piece sparkle with meaning and anticipation.

Conductors ought to spend time referencing and explaining the exciting text. Asking them to consider what moves them, what excites them will help singers of all faith backgrounds understand the text. Providing context in the coded language of the verses will also be exciting to singers and listeners alike. Drawing attention to these learning opportunities, explaining them with historical context, and treating them in an academic manner will build respect and appreciation for the spiritual, and the clever poets who first sang them.

CHAPTER 9. DEEP RIVER

Oh, deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.⁹⁵

Introduction

“I want to cross over into campground” was the constant hope held in the hearts of the enslaved. No matter what the conditions were on each plantation (some were worse than others), there was a hope for freedom, a desire to be in a place free from oppression and fear. This place could mean the free northern states, Canada, or a return to Africa.

Dr. René Clausen (b. 1953) grew up in California and received his formal music education at both St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a member of the music faculty at Concordia College, in Moorhead, MN, Dr. Clausen has enjoyed a long career of acclaim both for his compositions and arrangements, as well as for his direction of the Concordia Choir.

When considering songs whose text had dual meanings to the slave, *Deep River* is one that provides deep significance. “This spiritual reflects a quite different philosophy of life. The stream (river) as such is of no interest except as a marker of the border. The deep river is a constant, difficult barrier between our desert pilgrimage here and the fulfillment of all desires in the “promised land.”⁹⁶ The “river” between a slave and his freedom was wide...at times it seemed to difficult to cross because of the daily struggle on the plantation. Throughout life’s struggle, the great hope of finally joining in the “gospel feast” offered enough to sustain the hopes of the enslaved another moment, another day, another year.

⁹⁵ René Clausen, *Deep River* (Delaware Water Gap, PA: Fostco Music Press, 1990).

⁹⁶ Dixon, *Negro Spirituals*, 90.

Coded Text

Deep River appears in the primary collection, “The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs,” and contains text in addition to the standard text which Dr. Clausen used in his arrangement:

Deep river, Lord, my home is over Jordan.
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast, that promised land where all is peace?
Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
I'll go into heaven, and take my seat, cast my crown at Jesus's feet.
Oh, when I get to heav'n, I'll walk all about, there's nobody there for to turn me out.
Lord, I want to cross over into campground.⁹⁷

The additional text advances the singer's desire to get to heaven even further, listing what would happen if allowed the opportunity to cross over into campground. After getting to heaven, the singer would first be thankful, casting all possessions⁹⁸ at the feet of his deliverer. Then, with the freedom to do so, the singer would walk around freely, without fear, without oppression.

“Once the obstacle of the deep river is overcome there will be no more hindrances. For believers who were used to being excluded from the festivities, who normally led others into beautiful homes and seated them at banquets they had themselves prepared, it is a glorious promise and prospect to be invited in and to be given a seat at the heavenly banquet where everything has been prepared....”⁹⁹

Besides expressing this general desire to escape to freedom, *Deep River* may also contain an additional meaning and message. James Haskins states in his book, “Black Music in America,” that “the songs were a way for the slaves to communicate with each other—to plan meetings, to help escaped slaves, and to remind one another that there was hope for freedom.

⁹⁷ Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers*, 230.

⁹⁸ Dixon, *Negro Spirituals*, 91. “The crown and robe are very real to the singers (of spirituals), as so many spirituals testify. Taking off the crown is an act not of defiance, but of adoration, honoring the host of the ‘gospel feast.’”

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

Deep River was used to announce a meeting at the river.”¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the simple mention of a river in the spiritual might also indicate a geographical path for escape.¹⁰¹

Of course, as discussed in Chapter 4, the words of the spiritual may be accepted at face value. The singer may have been singing about death and passing on to heaven. James Lovell states, “The same pattern of interpretation will fit *Deep River*, and hundreds of other so-called death spirituals. Deliverance is often expressed in the spiritual in impersonal ways and things.”¹⁰²

The Music

Deep River is scored for SATB chorus with occasional divisi writing in each part. Interestingly, this divisi only occurs on words that have an expansive and grandiose character, such as “over” in “my home is over Jordan,” and the “promised” land of heaven. It also occurs, in the mens’ section, particularly to paint the depth of the river and suggest the breadth of the trip across the water. It is effective writing, and contains a subtlety that suggests a great depth of peace and reassurance. A soprano or tenor soloist provides the melody in m. 18-21 over the choir singing “oh.”

The meter is a gentle 4/4. The tonality is in F major, although Clausen suggests in a short note in the score that choirs may want to sing the piece 1/2 higher. The effect of the pentatonic scale used in this piece is restful, even with the wide leaps in the melody. The texture is predominantly homophonic. There are occasional animations that echo or restate the melody, providing additional harmonic interest through moving parts. This additional movement may

¹⁰⁰ James Haskins, *Black Music in America: A History Through Its People*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 6.

¹⁰¹ Gwendolin Warren. *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns & Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1999), 31. “Deep River, like most other spirituals, contains multiple levels of meaning. In this case, besides its sacred aspect, its text give it political significance as well.... Specifically, *Deep River* is a dual-coded song of the URR (Underground Railroad). It was often sung to help may out a route to freedom, possibly indicating that escape would involve crossing a river in order to avoid the tracking of patrols and dogs.”

¹⁰² Lovell, *Black Song*, 239.

also suggest the moving water. According to Guenther, *Deep River* is classified in the second stylistic category of spirituals: “long, slow phrases characterize the second musical style in which a longer arc of thought flows in the the texts of these more expansive songs. They express contemplative or sorrowful emotion, digging deep into the well of suffering and pain slaves experienced.”¹⁰³

Conductor’s Preparation & Pedagogy

The preparation and rehearsal of *Deep River* involves a deeper understanding of the text and the historical context of the piece. For whatever reason, *Deep River* is one of the most well-known spirituals. Singers—and audience members must be challenged to look more deeply into the meaning of the poetic symbolism. Since there are multiple meanings associated with this text, conductors should take care to present all of the interpretations and discuss which fits best with the arrangement being sung.

There are no tricky diction questions to solve in this arrangement if the conductor follows Dr. Clausen’s indicated text. It is written in standard English. If one chooses to employ some use of dialect, it would likely comprise of eliminating diphthongs. Take great care to consult an expert to guide your choices.

Singing with a full, rich tone is important in this piece because of the deep reflective quality of the text. As in any spirituals, this tone color should not be “manufactured” in any artificial or physically contrived manner, but only in a sincere attempt to connect with the deep meaning of the text. Guenther quotes famed Nathaniel Dett on this point, “(Dett) added that African-American choirs sound richer and fuller, not because of physiological differences, but because of a certain innate psychological capacity to react to the suggestion of the text.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 32.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 43.

CHAPTER 10. HAVE YOU GOT GOOD RELIGION?

Have you got good religion? My Lord! Cert'nly, cert'nly, cert'nly, Lord!
Have you been redeemed? My Lord! Cert'nly, cert'nly, cert'nly, Lord!
I've never been to heaven, but I've been told the streets up there are paved with gold.
The gospel plough is in our hands, good Lord, we're bound for the promised land.
Have you been baptized? My Lord! Cert'nly, cert'nly, cert'nly, Lord!
This is the year of jubilee, when Jesus set his people free.
We want no cowards in our band, praise God, we're bound for the promised land.
Give me that old time religion, cert'nly, cert'nly, cert'nly, Lord!¹⁰⁵

Introduction

“The plantation song in America, although an outgrowth of oppression and bondage, contains surprisingly few references to slavery. No race has ever sung so sweetly or with such perfect charity, while looking forward to the ‘year of jubilee.’ The songs abound in scriptural allusions, and in many instances are unique interpretations of standard hymns.”¹⁰⁶ *Have You Got Good Religion* anticipates and celebrates the long-awaited “year of jubilee.” To do this rightly, the singer asks various questions throughout the music to ensure that the listener is prepared to join in the celebration! *Have You Got Good Religion* is a “musical sermon” of sorts, an engaging and lively conversation between the “preacher” (the soloist) and the “congregation” (the choir).

Phillip McIntyre (1951-91), was former Associate Professor of Music at the University of the District of Columbia and a church musician who had been organist and choir director at churches in Washington, Richmond and Baltimore.¹⁰⁷ He received his formal musical training at Catholic University in Washington DC, including a masters of music degree in organ performance. He also served as choir director and organist at Hampton University; this

¹⁰⁵ Phillip McIntyre, “Have You Got Good Religion?” in *Three Spirituals* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1990), 4-7.

¹⁰⁶ Odum, Howard, and Guy Johnson. *Negro Workaday Songs*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1926.

¹⁰⁷ Washington Post, “Phillip McIntyre Dies,” Washington Post, 1991, accessed July 2, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1991/03/27/phillip-mcintyre-dies/91ed4eda-e21c-4e8a-9220-07767d30ca07/?utm_term=.46916bf26c85

connection is interesting, as one of the first major collections of spirituals was collected at Hampton University (see Chapter 3). In addition, Mr. McIntyre wrote much for the organ, but he also wrote a collection of vocal solos (spirituals) and several choral arrangements. Phillip McIntyre, in the foreword to his vocal solo book, states,

“The music of the Negro slave in the United States, the Negro spiritual, resulted in a human expression that is of a universal nature. These songs speak of hope, pain, suffering, joy, and other life experiences paralleled in the lives of all people. These songs do not express hatred. They do not seek revenge. They do not convey a negative attitude towards mankind. The spiritual is a simplistic musical application to a complex theological or scriptural ramification or declaration. An authenticity of the music should be sought.”¹⁰⁸

Have You Got Good Religion is the second of three pieces that appear in McIntyre’s collection, *Three Spirituals*. It is easily able to stand on its own for a performance apart from the other two pieces: *You My Bury Me in the East* and *Done Found My Lost Sheep*.

Coded Text

Have You Got Good Religion does not appear in one of the original collected sources, although it was assuredly sung in other forms. It appears under the title, *Cert’nly Lord* in several sources. Christa Dixon mentions, “It is most appropriate that it was the Jubilee singers who made this powerful ballad about the deliverance of God’s people famous, because it truly is a “jubilee” song celebrating the “year of jubilee”—the freedom from social as well as from spiritual slavery.¹⁰⁹ Eileen Guenther’s book lists additional verses and cites its use in the Civil Rights Movement. These verses were added in the modern era for the purpose of protest:

Have you been to the jail? Cert’nly, Lord.
Did they give you 30 days? Cert’nly, Lord.
Did you serve your time? Cert’nly, Lord.
Will you go back again? Cert’nly, Lord.
Will you fight for freedom? Cert’nly, Lord.
Will you tell it to the world? Cert’nly, Lord.
Do you want your freedom? Cert’nly, Lord.
Will you March for your rights? Cert’nly, Lord.

¹⁰⁸ Phillip McIntyre, *Spirituals for Church and Concert* (New York, NY: H.T. Fitzsimons Company, 1990), 2.

¹⁰⁹ Dixon, *Negro Spirituals*, 30.

Jail over bail? Cert'nly, Lord.¹¹⁰

Have You Got Good Religion contains several instances where the text has double meanings and coded messages. The call-and-response style of this spiritual, a conversation between the “preacher” and the “congregation,” provides the perfect platform to advance a good deal of text. Again, it is common (in spirituals), that talk of heaven—when not literally talking about the afterlife—refers to freedom, in the free states of the north, Canada, or Liberia, in Africa. The description of heaven as having “streets paved with gold” provides much anticipation and excitement to the listeners, urging them to make sure their souls have been converted.

The gospel plough (“the gospel plough is in our hands”) outwardly represents a simple agricultural device, but actually refers to the concept of leaving everything behind to attain freedom. In Luke 9:62, Jesus says, “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.”¹¹¹ The message was: in order to become free, the enslaved would have to sacrifice everything to reach the promised land—family, safety, all things that were familiar.

“Have you been baptized/redeemed?” Albert J. Raboteau says, in *Slave Religion*, “Baptism, the central Christian symbol of spiritual death, rebirth, and initiation, was a memorable occasion for the slaves. Accompanied by song, shouting, and ecstatic behavior, baptism—especially for the Baptists—was perhaps the most dramatic ritual in the slave’s religious life.”¹¹² Being baptized was significant in the life of the enslaved, a symbol of passage, being washed clean and starting again—symbolic of life after the bonds of slavery were loosed. Additionally, the image of baptism/water was sometimes used to offer assistance to fugitives, suggesting that they travel through the water to avoid detection. Guenther confirms, “baptism was a ritual of great importance to converted slaves. This baptismal song offers multiple levels

¹¹⁰ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 346-47.

¹¹¹ Luke 9:62, NRSVCE.

¹¹² Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), 227.

of meaning. Tubman is said to have hummed this melody as a signal for escapees to move to the water, where their scent was less likely to be picked up by pursuing dogs.”¹¹³

“This is the year of jubilee, when Jesus set his people free.” The jubilee year meant freedom—through escape or emancipation. The reference to the year of jubilee draws us into the book of Leviticus, chapter 25, which provides commentary on why the year of jubilee was so celebrated and often mentioned in the spirituals.

“Seven weeks of years shall you count—seven times seven years—so that the seven cycles amount to forty-nine years. Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month let the trumpet resound; on this, the Day of Atonement, the trumpet blast shall re-echo throughout your land. This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when every one of you shall return to his own property, every one to his own family estate.”¹¹⁴

Immediately following the mention of the jubilee year comes the statement, “We want no cowards in our band, praise God, we’re bound for the promised land.” This phrase speaks of courage—courage in the face of adversity, whether working on the plantation in brutal conditions, or as a required element for daring escape. Several sources report that Harriet Tubman carried a small revolver for the purpose of “encouragement” in case any fugitives wanted to return to their plantations after experiencing the danger of escape.¹¹⁵

The Music

Have You Got Good Religion is arranged for SATB voices and a soprano or tenor soloist. The texture of the choral parts is homophonic throughout, with only a few instances of decorative added notes to add interest. The meter is 2/4 at a quick tempo. The key is D major, and has a bright, joyous quality as an appropriate vehicle for the text. Again, we see that the

¹¹³ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 129.

¹¹⁴ Leviticus 25:8-10, NRSVCE.

¹¹⁵ Clinton, “Slavery is War.”, 195-209. “Stories from others as well as her own testimony confirm that Tubman did have a gun during her Underground Railroad treks. Further, the pistol Tubman kept concealed was not intended to fight off bounty seekers. She testified that she used her gun to prevent panicked fugitives from turning back. One person losing nerve could endanger an entire group.” Sarah Bradford, Tubman’s biographer, confirms this using Harriet’s own testimony in “Harriet Tubman, the Moses of Her People,” 19.

melody of this spiritual is based on a pentatonic scale, avoiding the 4th and 7th scale degrees, as is common among other pieces in this study (exceptions: *Elijah Rock*, *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel*, and *Keep Your Lamps*). The textural shifts between the soloist and the chorus add aural interest and provide a musical conversation for the listeners to witness and enjoy.

Eileen Guenther's aforementioned categorizations of spirituals list *Have You Got Good Religion (Cert'nly Lord)* as "the call-and-response style, where a leader sings a line or more of text, and a group responds with a refrain. Fiery in spirit, the call-and-response tempo is unusually quick. Call-and-response was a practical approach in an oral, non-literate society. It was also handy in a work-song, which might go on for hours and hours as the slaves labored."¹¹⁶ The soloist plays the part of the "preacher" in this spiritual; the choir plays the part of the congregation in this musical sermon. The preacher asks a question and the congregation answers in this enjoyable arrangement. There is much flexibility for improvisation in the solo part, but improvisation is not a requirement of the piece.

Conductor's Preparation & Pedagogy

The key component of this piece—and therefore, the conductor's preparation—is the selection and coaching of the soloist. The soloist requires strength and ease in a fairly narrow register. It may get fatiguing for some young voices, as melodic material repeats notes and intervals, near passagio points. The soloist may feel free to improvise some in the final verses, if the soloist is comfortable in that regard. It should not be done if the general performance is in any way stilted or contrived.

Regarding diction, there are a few items to address. Since the word, "Lord" occurs so much in this piece, the conductor will "cert'nly" need to address it as rehearsals begin. Most singers will sing the "r" in an "Americanized" way, so singers should be instructed to negate the sound. The words "I'm" and "my" also can be troublesome, as most American singers are accustomed to singing diphthongs with gusto. There are no diphthongs in the authentic diction

¹¹⁶ Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 31.

of spirituals. They should be eliminated and retain only the first vowel sound (ie “ahm” or “mah”).

The tempo of this piece is quick and exciting. There is great interplay of dynamics based on the meaning of the text and expressing the various “responses” of the congregation, some quietly excited, and some, rousing declamations. The tempo may be hastened at points where decrescendos occur, adding a hushed excitement to the song, waiting to hear the preacher’s next statement. Liberties may be taken with tempo (slowing down) in m. 55-60 to heighten the drama, only if the soloist is capable of sustaining breath, energy, and tone on the held note. The moments where the choir cuts out and the soloist continues are thrilling. However, in the final two measures, McIntyre indicates “no rit.” Conductors are free to try that suggestion to see if it fits with their artistic preference. Or, since it is the final combined joyous acclamation of the piece, conductors may wish to employ a slight ritardando...and know that it’s acceptable to do so.

CHAPTER 11. ELIJAH ROCK

Oh Elijah, oh Elijah. Elijah rock, oh.
Come on sister, help me to pray, tell me my Lord done pass dis way.
Elijah rock, shout, shout. Elijah rock, comin' up, Lawdy.
Elijah rock, comin' up, Lawd.
Satan ain't nothin' but a snake in the grass.
He's a conjur. He's a liar. Hallelujah, Lord.
If I could I surely would, stand on the rock where Moses stood.
Elijah Rock. Hallelujah, Jesus. Rock Elijah. Comin' up, Lawdy. Comin' up Lord.¹¹⁷

Introduction

Moses Hogan (already mentioned in Chapter 6) was fond of telling epic stories through his spiritual arrangements. We remember that highlighting monumental figures of the Old Testament is a common feature in spirituals. *Elijah Rock* presents Elijah, the fierce Old Testament prophet and miracle worker. There were several different options for slaves to learn Bible stories: from English-speaking missionaries while in Africa, from Christian church teaching (on the plantations), or from those within their own community that were able to read and write. Arthur Jones confirms in his book, *Wade in the Water: the Wisdom of Spirituals*,

“Symbolically, the stories of the Old Testament held particularly special meaning. In their African-derived spiritual cosmology, the captives constructed a life-consciousness that included ready connections to figures of the ancient past. In their spiritual imagination they lived and breathed the experiences of such biblical heroes as David, Daniel, Moses, and Joshua, all engaged actively in divinely inspired battles for freedom. To Africans in America, the stories of the Bible had obvious meaning, very much connected to the reality of their struggles as a community.”¹¹⁸

Elijah Rock is unique in that it is not narrative. It is a combination of several short statements. It recalls the image of Elijah, who was transformed and delivered because of his faith in God (2 Kings 2:11). It asks for help from a sister friend. It comments on Satan and his sneaking nature, and sin-inducing ways. It begs for a chance to be delivered, as Moses delivered the Israelites. It closes with a plea to ascend, like Elijah, “up” to the Lord. It does not attempt to string all of these separate ideas into the narrative of one figure or story.

¹¹⁷ Moses Hogan, *Elijah Rock* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1994).

¹¹⁸ Jones, *Wade in the Water*, 42.

Coded Text

The origin of *Elijah Rock* is not clear. It doesn't appear by title in any of the primary source collections of this study, yet it is one of the best-known spirituals in the spirituals canon. Because oral tradition has resulted in a "cannibalization" of songs throughout the years (borrowing and eliminating various lines of text), it is very likely a combination of two or more songs. Jester Hairston's benchmark arrangement contains the same text as the Moses Hogan arrangement, addressed in this study.

In 2 Kings 2:11, the prophet Elijah is described as ascending to Heaven in a whirlwind of flaming horses and chariot, a triumphant deliverance to heaven. Modes of transportation, such as the chariots in the spirituals, were used over and over again, and could refer to wagons, trains, and other such means to travel north to the heavenly freed states or Canada. "The chariot represents not only Elijah's transportation to heaven, but the heavenly ascent of all who are saved."¹¹⁹ "Throughout the lyrics of slave songs, there are references to many different modes of travel—realistic and otherwise. Included are chariots, trains, water, ships, and even wings. The image of sweet chariot comes directly from the story in Second Kings of the prophet Elijah being caught up by God swept away in a chariot to heaven. We know that "chariot" was coded language for train, which at the time was the most modern means of transportation."¹²⁰

There are other instances of double connotation in *Elijah Rock* that deserve mention. "Come on sister help me to pray, tell me my Lord done pass dis way" likely asks whether deliverance is at hand or close by (an agent of the Underground Railroad). The singer references Satan (the slave owner or slave master) as being "nothin' but a snake in the grass. He's a conjur. He's a liar." It was a delightful but dangerous way for the enslaved to speak ill of their masters. "If I could, I surely would stand on the rock where Moses stood." If given the chance, the

¹¹⁹ Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music USA* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1963), 39. Later in the chapter (page 42-3), Courlander states further, "It is readily evident that songs of this kind could be interpreted in more than one way by the slaves. It is a safe assumption that all Negro religious songs were understood by the slaves in the light of their own immediate condition. Every reference to crossing the Jordan could be interpreted to mean escape to the North...every reference to Elijah's chariot or the gospel train could be seen as allusion to the Underground Railroad."

¹²⁰ Jordan, *Soul Praise*, 27.

enslaved would certainly take the opportunity to escape to freedom, as Moses did. Moses fought in an epic battle for his own freedom and that of his people, the Israelites. After taking that chance, any fugitives would be “comin’ up Lawdy” to freedom.

The Music

Elijah Rock is written for SSAATTBB voices. Although there are some instances of only men, and only women, the main theme of the piece exists and remains in that divisi voicing. The women sing in as many as five parts (m. 25). The key is firmly planted in a minor. The basses and baritones emphasize this by singing repeated fifths through much of the piece.

Moses Hogan creates a texture of short phrases layered on top of one another to great effect. The addition or subtraction of these layers builds emotion and provides opportunities to transition to other ideas. The familiarity of the rhythmic layers is mesmerizing and compelling. Rhythmic complexity results from the layers of sound, but text clarity remains because Hogan opted to use repeated single words, “Elijah rock.” There is some syncopation in the tenor layer, but the sopranos and altos have pervasive syncopation, as the main vehicle for the melodic layer.

Elijah Rock not only contains inspiring messages of biblical deliverance, alluding to both Elijah and Moses in its text, but it also *sounds* like a means of deliverance in the capable and creative hands of arranger, Moses Hogan. Word painting is important in spirituals and the artists that sang them. Hogan knew this very well and set out to present the text in such a way that further illustrated the meaning through sound. In the case of *Elijah Rock*, Hogan’s arrangement sounds like a train, surely a reference to the Underground Railroad. The “train” begins with the basses and baritones, singing plodding, but steady quarter notes on “oh-E-li-jah.” Next, the tenors enter with an additional layer, seeming to gain speed through repeated sixteenth notes. One can almost sense being a passenger on that train, hearing (and feeling) the repetitive rhythmic patter that the voices create and the imagination readily accepts.

It’s true that the “train” does make a few “stops” in the music, as a departure from the rhythmic regularity discussed above. These stops always occur during the delivering of the verse

text by the women. After this is done, the train travels on, using the previous musical devices presented, in large manner, by the men. In the climactic arrival to the final station, each part is given its own rhythmic/text layer to sing, which culminates with divisi sopranos singing “ah,” above the staff, squealing to a stop. The effect is that of the “screeching” of the train on the rails as it attempts to slow down. It is very exciting to hear, and would be thrilling to sing. The final four measures of the piece paint the very experience of Elijah ascending up to heaven in his fiery chariot. Each part enters in pyramid fashion from bottom to top, raising the notes to the final chord.

Conductor’s Preparation & Pedagogy

Rehearsing and conducting *Elijah Rock* with a choir is a fulfilling experience. The moment when the choir realizes that the music depicts a train (and the Underground Railroad) is very gratifying. Successful performance of this piece requires a micro/macro strategy. The motivic elements need to be rehearsed using repetition to gain mastery. After this is achieved, these elements are layered together to form the larger picture.

The biggest concern that conductors should be aware of is vocal fatigue. Because of the repetition of the vocal parts (and tessitura), care must be taken to avoid asking too much of the voices. I would recommend adding capable voices (that have rests written) to strengthen parts if needed, rather than asking for more volume. An example of this would be in measure 9: any sopranos who would feel comfortable singing with the altos could do so, in hopes that the altos do not have to “push” the sound, which is marked forte, on a low A. This piece can be challenging for the conductor in terms of rehearsal process, building stamina, and preserving singers’ voices. It is especially demanding for the singers, in tessitura, volume, and stamina. For this reason, conductors should be cautioned before programming Hogan’s arrangement of *Elijah Rock*. Not every choir could *or should* sing this particular arrangement, despite its captivating depiction of the Underground Railroad.

In terms of artistically conducting what's not written on the page, it would be effective to begin the piece slowly and gradually work up to the indicated tempo. Tone color to match the various parts of the train sound must be carefully imagined and selected so as not to fatigue the voices. Great artistic liberty may be taken in the final two pages, as they are filled with expressive markings that range from pianissimo to fortissimo, as well as several accents and fermatas. Singers—and listeners—will enjoy the great variety that Moses Hogan's *Elijah Rock* provides. Furthermore, once learning the context of the text, they will be better able to imagine why this text was sung so many years ago.

CHAPTER 12. LET ME FLY

“Way down yonder in the middle of the fiel’, angel a-workin’ at the chariot wheel.
Not so partic’lar ‘bout workin’ at the wheel, I jus’ wan’ to see how the chariot feel.
Oh let me fly, to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.
Meet that hypocrite on the street, first thing he do is show his teeth.
Next thing he do is tell a lie. Well, the best thing to do is pass him by.
Oh let me fly, to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.
I got a mother in the Promised Land. Well, I ain’t gonna stop ‘til I shake her hand.
Not so partic’lar ‘bout shakin’ her hand, but I just wan’ to get to the Promised Land.
Oh let me fly, to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.
I heard such a rumbalin’ in the sky, I thought my Lord was passin’ by.
“Twas the good ol’ chariot drawin’ nigh, shook the earth, swept the sky.
Oh let me fly, to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.
I want wings, I want to fly, oh Lord, I wan’ to fly,
Oh won’t you let me fly to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.”¹²¹

Introduction

Angels, chariots, wings—what fantastic imagery the enslaved poet used to propel the spiritual *Let Me Fly!* The story is told from the perspective of the daily life of the enslaved. “In spirituals, “I” equals “we” in the African sensibility, where individuals are responsible for the whole community, not only for themselves. The bonds of community were palpable, as they sang songs of unshakable faith.”¹²² The suffering endured by each person was felt as a community, and singing about it helped to ease the burden a bit. It is a cheerful song, one that would certainly and easily mask the hidden messages contained within, intended for the community!¹²³

Robert DeCormier (1922-2017), trained at the Juilliard School of Music and quickly began a career teaching music in New York City. He and his wife, Louise, a singer, took an interest in American folksong, collecting and recording them in the Catskill Mountains of New

¹²¹ Robert DeCormier, *Let Me Fly* (Miami, FL: Warner Brothers Publications, 1984).

¹²² Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, 355.

¹²³ Dixon, *Negro Spirituals*, 82. “It is even plausible that unsuspecting overseers would be relieved to hear his slaves singing: it seemed as if his workers had religion on their minds again as they went about the fields singing and humming their spirituals. Little did he realize what secret messages were being conveyed from row to row.”

York.¹²⁴ DeCormier wrote in many different styles and genres in his career but is perhaps best known for his spiritual arrangements. He was also the leader for the Belafonte Folk Singers (1957-65) and the DeCormier Singers.¹²⁵ *Let Me Fly* is one of his most popular arrangements. Interestingly, he was asked to arrange a six-movement cantata, *They Call Her Moses*, celebrating Harriet Tubman's remarkable life helping people—in the 2013 performance by Bella Voce women's ensemble, Louise DeCormier (his wife) was the narrator for the performance.¹²⁶

Coded Text

Let Me Fly is also known by the title, *Now Let Me Fly*. Although a popular and well-known spiritual, it does not appear in any of the primary source collections addressed in this study. Portions of the text do appear in other spirituals. DeCormier's arrangement is likely the most popular and often-performed arrangement of this spiritual. This exuberant song contains a great amount of text—text that carries another meaning. It is unlikely, because its cheerful nature, that slave masters would suspect anything nefarious when hearing this tune sung on the plantation.

“My people signaled their discontent. One could hear it in their songs. They echoed throughout the fields where, with backs bent, fingers aching, and dreams fading, slaves planted rice, picked cotton, and hacked sugar cane to enrich their masters. Their spirituals told of the enslaved longing to be free. Their songs sent a message, filled with symbolism and metaphors, telling how and when and why they would flee.”¹²⁷

In the first line of text, two symbols are presented: the angel and the chariot. The enslaved—those converted, those redeemed—are represented by the angel working in the field who is working on the chariot wheel (working towards finding freedom). “Let me fly to Mount Zion,

¹²⁴ Wikipedia, “Robert DeCormier,” Wikipedia, accessed July 2, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_De_Cormier.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Live Culture, “Remembering Robert De Cormier: The Music and the Man,” Seven Days: Vermont's Independent Voice, 2017, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/LiveCulture/archives/2017/11/09/remembering-robert-de-cormier-the-music-and-the-man>.

¹²⁷ Thelma Maia Thomas, *No Man Can Hinder Me*, 26. “When the enslaved sang of David, Joshua, and Moses, they were singing of liberators---members of the Underground Railroad who would lead them out of bondage. When they sang of chariots, wheels, travel shoes, and ships, they were signing of modes of transportation and escape.”

Lord” is the repeated refrain of this piece. It has been well-established that Mount Zion, the Promised Land, Canaan, and Heaven all refer to freedom. This is the prevailing sentiment that binds the piece together.

The next “scene” in the life of the enslaved tells about the hypocrite. Who was the hypocrite? The slave owner? The slave master? We don’t know, but these are likely suspects, and the slave singers must have taken great pleasure of singing about these hypocrites while in their very presence.¹²⁸ There was a small sort of satisfaction that the slave singer gained through singing coded message such as this:

“The slave had often heard his master's minister talk about heaven, the final abode of the righteous. Naturally the master regarded himself as fitting into that category. On the other hand the slave knew that he too was going to heaven. There must be two heavens, no, God cannot be divided in this way. I am having my hell now---when I die I shall have my heaven. The master is having his heaven now; when he dies he will have his hell.”¹²⁹

There are multiple references to having family and friends in heaven, or the Promised Land. This partial list includes: *A City Called Heaven*, *Death's Going to Lay His Hands on Me*, *Listen to the Lambs*, *Poor Wayfarin' Stranger*, *Swing Low*, *The Old Ark's a-Moverin'*, *Wake up Jacob!*, and *When the Train Comes Along*.¹³⁰ The meaning may have been literal—that these loved ones and friends had passed away before them—but more likely, it symbolized those that had made their way to freedom. Furthermore, it’s altogether possible that once a friend or family member left the plantation to escape to the north, that those remaining had no idea if they had made the journey successfully or not. These references to their loved ones were a tribute, a repeated prayer that they had escaped slavery.

¹²⁸ In the spiritual, *I Got Shoes*, the line, “everybody talkin’ bout heaven, ain’t a goin’ there” is commonly understood to be a veiled insult to slave owners, who would righteously go to church on Sundays, and then continue to mistreat their slaves on a daily basis.

¹²⁹ Howard Thurman. *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975), 43.

¹³⁰ Lovell, *Black Song*, 307: “No one can begin to read spirituals for true meaning unless he accepts the slave's desire for freedom as his prime cause. It should be reiterated that the slave could discuss this prime cause only through symbols. Thus Death and Canaan are most often symbols of release from slavery without meaning release from life. Where Death does mean release from life, the African concepts are likely to be present or pronounced. In the dozens of songs which speak of reunion with mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and other beloved dead, these African beliefs are assuredly being perpetuated.”

Another mention of the Underground Railroad (“the good ol’ chariot rumbalin’ in the sky) leads to the final line of text in DeCormier’s arrangement: “I want wings, I want to fly, oh Lord, I wan’ to fly, Oh won’t you let me fly to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.” Chenu suggests the significance of wings in a spiritual, particularly in terms of those wishing to escape to freedom, “Travel no longer would be a problem because a pair of wings would be given.”¹³¹ The arrangement adds a flourish of activity and more importance on individual lines in this section, the closing material for the piece...a musical representation of the journey to come.

The Music

Let Me Fly is a cheerful, optimistic spiritual written for SATB divisi chorus and a baritone soloist. Two elements add to this cheerful effect, the tonality and the rhythm. G major is the tonality throughout most of the piece, until the modulation in m. 57, up a half step to Ab major. The pentatonic scale is utilized in this arrangement. The tempo is brisk (in cut time), and DeCormier indicates that the eighth notes should be sung unevenly, or “swung” through the duration of the piece. It’s impossible for us to know whether DeCormier’s interpretation accurately portrays the original performance style, but it is captivating, nonetheless. Syncopation is used pervasively in the piece.

The texture contains a bit of homophonic treatment during some verses as well as the ending of the refrain. However, most of the piece presents phrases that are in an imitative style, although they are in short, blocked phrases, echoing and exchanging motivic material between the women and men. Beginning in m. 80, the choral parts begin to receive more independent treatment, resulting in a rhythmic layering of syncopated motives on the text, “I want wings, I wan’ to fly.” The final phrase unites all choral parts with the same rhythm into the final statement of the refrain, “O let me fly to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.”

¹³¹ Chenu, *The Trouble I’ve Seen*, 213. On page 125, he writes, “The same spiritual that invites people to travel together (*Walk Together Children*) also invites the traveler to go it along to reach the Promised Land. It is an invitation to be more angel than devil,” as the opening lines of *Let Me Fly* suggest.

Conductor's Preparation & Pedagogy

The context of the lyrics is important to present to the choir as rehearsals begin. It's important that they know that this piece isn't just a happy collection of fun stories—that it presents ideas that were integral in the daily life and spiritual survival of the enslaved. Going through the text line by line, and offering the double meaning of the text and translation of those ideas will be important in the singers presenting a fully informed performance of the music.

In terms of musical preparation, most of the choir's time will be spent on the final section of the piece, as the parts become more challenging. The final two pages, in particular, will require rhythmic independence from each part, and will have to be repeated until it can be performed easily and without noticeable effort. Above all, cultivating a sincere attitude of optimism and hope through the singing is crucial for a successful performance of this piece. Even though the words held double meanings, it was this authentic and prevailing sense of hope that the enslaved clung to that sustained them through their trials: “From *Go Down Moses* to *Now Let Me Fly*, travelers on the Underground Railroad deployed the images of the Promised Land, crossing the river Jordan, and of God's activity in history to nurture a faith that helped them to circumvent the brutality and potential hopelessness of life on the plantation.”¹³²

¹³² Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “A Sacred Drama: “Exodus” and the Underground Railroad in African American Life.” In *Passages to Freedom*, ed. David W. Blight. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2006), 292.

CHAPTER 13. THE OLD SHIP OF ZION

'Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!
I'm no ways weary! I'm no ways tired! O glory hallelujah!
Just let me in the kingdom when the world ketch a fire!
'Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah! She has landed many thousands, hallelujah!
She is rollin', jes rollin'.
She is coming in the harbor, hallelujah! She will land you safe in heaven, hallelujah!
O get your ticket ready, the ship will soon be leavin'. O get your ticket ready to go.
King Jesus is her captain, hallelujah! She will never rock nor totter, hallelujah!
Just let me in the kingdom when the world ketch a fire. O glory hallelujah!
Sing hallelujah!¹³³

Introduction

The Old Ship of Zion, arranged for SATB chorus by Dr. Richard Harrison Smith (1937-2011) contains in its lyrics a significant amount of coded language that may not be apparent at first glance. In addition, Smith's arranging style enhances the meaning of this song's lyrics through both style and musical devices, including several instances of effective word painting.

Richard Smith was well-known for his masterful treatment of African American spirituals, having several of them published over his career as a composer and choral director.¹³⁴ Although born in Pennsylvania, Dr. Smith later lived in Alabama, where he was exposed to spirituals in his formative years, both in church and school.¹³⁵ Even though he had a long career of publishing compositions in many other styles of choral and instrumental music, he possessed a unique gift for arranging spirituals. In almost forty years as a choral conductor at the University of Jamestown, Jamestown, North Dakota (1959-98), his interpretation of spirituals was equally passionate and powerful in performance. *The Old Ship of Zion* continues to be one of his most recognized and revered arrangements.

¹³³ Smith, *The Old Ship of Zion*, 1-7.

¹³⁴ Richard Harrison Smith's published arrangements include: *The Old Ship of Zion* (Augsburg Publishing House); *Heav'n's Bells a Ringin'* (Augsburg Publishing House); *Lawd, I Wanna go Home* (Lorenz); *Wear a Starry Crown* (Lorenz); *In Dat Great Day* (Lorenz); *Did Mary Know?* (Lorenz).

¹³⁵ Karen Smith (Smith's daughter), email message to author, March 6, 2018.

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. It is a compelling tale, relating the story of the ship's passengers, and readying them for the journey ahead. Most people would think that this narrative is *only* about a ship; however, slave singers knew and understood another meaning.

Coded Text

As is typical of spirituals (and the word-of-mouth tradition that bore them), the text of *The Old Ship of Zion* is an amalgamation of several other pieces. The lyrics, or parts thereof, can be found in at least five other songs: *Old Ship of Zion; Hallelu, Hallelu; I Don't Feel Weary; The Old Ship of Zion; The Gospel Train*. They appear in in the landmark collections *Slave Songs of the United States (1867)*¹³⁶ and *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs (1892)*,¹³⁷ as well as in fragments and forms in other spirituals collections.

The text of each of these five pieces is as follows:

Old Ship of Zion

What ship is that a sailing, hallelujah,
do you think that she is able for to carry us all home.
'tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah.
She has landed many a thousand, and will land as many a more.
She is loaded down with angels,
King Jesus is the Captain, and he'll carry us all home.¹³⁸

Hallelu, Hallelu

Oh, one day as anoder, hallelu. When de ship is out a'sailin', hallelu.
Member walk and never tire. Member walk Jordan long road.¹³⁹

I Don't Feel Weary

I don't feel weary and noways tired, glory hallelujah.
Jest let me in the kingdom while the world is all on fire.
Gwine to live with God forever. And keep the ark a movin'.¹⁴⁰

The Old Ship of Zion

¹³⁶ Allen, Ware, and McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs*, 102.

¹³⁷ Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers*, 186.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Allen, Ware, and McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs*, 50.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 70.

Don't you see that ship a sailin' gwine over to the promised land!
She sails like she is heavy loaded.
King Jesus is her Captain.
The Holy Ghost is her pilot.¹⁴¹

The Gospel Train

She's nearing now the station, ah sinner, don't be vain;
but come and get your ticket, be ready for the train.
This train has never run off the track, she's passed through every land;
millions and millions are on board; oh, come and join the band.¹⁴²

The words are different for each song; they were collected from different singers. Knowing what we do about the collection of spirituals and the word-of-mouth tradition, we would (or should) expect variations to occur.

While the lyrics are not exactly the same, it is evident that Richard Smith's arrangement of *The Old Ship of Zion* contains elements of each of these five songs. It is unknown where Smith acquired this particular text, or whether he also arranged the lyrics. His published arrangement indicates "traditional spiritual."¹⁴³ Regardless, it remains an effective vehicle and a representative example of coded messages of the Underground Railroad.

Sometimes modes of transportation were used interchangeably to represent the Underground Railroad.¹⁴⁴ A sense of "movement" was the clue. This ambiguity makes sense from the perspective of singing slaves who were trying to conceal the real meaning of these words from their slave masters, who were undoubtedly aware of the Underground Railroad and its devastating effect on the slave owners' livelihood. It would be much more clever (and safe) to sing about a chariot or a ship than singing overtly about a train. Because of the secretive nature of the Underground Railroad, it is possible that the text in *The Old Ship of Zion* may also be referring to Harriet Tubman, the famous Underground Railroad conductor, who "landed many thousands" of fugitives into freedom during her life.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 102-3.

¹⁴² Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers*, 184.

¹⁴³ Smith, *The Old Ship of Zion*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Jordan, *Soul Praise*, 27. "Throughout the lyrics of slave songs, there are references to many different modes of travel--realistic and otherwise. Included are chariots, trains, water, ships, and even wings."

“Kingdom” is a reference to Heaven, which represents freedom (either in the freed states or Canada). The “world ketch a fire” refers to “hell,” or slavery itself—something to be escaped from. “She is rollin’, jes rollin’” symbolizes the constant movement of the people of the Underground Railroad away from slavery to freedom. In fact, the phrase, “she is coming in the harbor” announces, with increasing urgency, that the time is drawing near when passengers can board (escape). This is further underscored by the command, “O get your ticket ready, the ship will soon be leavin’, o get your ticket ready to go!” This is a clear statement—a signal, a call to action—that whoever was planning to escape had better be ready when the time comes to do so!

The Music

It is satisfying to perceive the subtle sophistication of the communication in signal songs such as *The Old Ship of Zion*; however, what is equally fascinating is the manner in which Richard Smith has arranged the music to intensify the meaning of the text. Before discussing Smith’s musical treatment of the text, I offer a brief listing of the elements of the piece. The piece begins in C major and remains there until a pivotal and powerful modulation to F major for the final verse. The pentatonic scale is used again, with one exception, a brief passing note on the flatted 7th scale degree (“the world ketch a-fire”). The tempo is swift and in 2/2 meter. The texture is primarily homophonic, with small rhythmic embellishments, generally found in the mens’ lines.

The music opens with an excited declamatory musical statement which boldly announces the arrival of The Old Ship of Zion into the harbor. The refrain is proclaimed for the first time in m. 6. from the excited perspective of the passengers, who are eager to start their journey: “I’m no ways weary! I’m no ways tired!” Smith repeats this message throughout the piece, representing a tireless persistence toward the goal of freedom. Verse 1 (m. 22) portrays a strong, steady ship through the use of steady quarter notes and animated homophony.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Animated homophony refers to music in which the texture is largely homophonic throughout the voices, but also contains slight rhythmic variations due to text underlay or desired musical style.

Beginning in m. 54, Smith's musical treatment of the text, "She is rollin', jes rollin'" paints the image of a journey just beginning, slowly at first, but quickly gaining momentum. The "rollin'" motif, written for the tenors and basses, provides a sense of moving forward. The women enter the texture two measures later singing the melody. Because the tempo is much slower in this section of the music, the character of the melody increases in both richness and grandeur, representing the arrival of this ship to freedom. "She is comin' in the harbor, hallelujah. She will land you safe in Heaven, hallelujah!" I submit that by scoring the sopranos on a wordless "hum," floating above the rest of the choral texture, Smith was symbolizing heaven.

Throughout the piece, the arranger repeats the text, "I'm no ways weary, I'm no ways tired." Fugitives attempting escape needed repeated assurance and fortitude to complete the daring trip; the journey was long, and conditions were both challenging and dangerous. Many wanted to turn back. Tubman's revolver again, offered necessary "encouragement" to any fugitives who wanted to give up. When Smith instructs choristers to sing "gradually faster and louder" in m. 77 with the text, "O glory hallelujah! Just let me in the kingdom when the world ketch afire," the singers present a musical depiction of running away through the music, faster and faster, towards the "kingdom," that is, freedom.

The most captivating instance of text painting occurs in mm. 88-95, the transitional music to the last verse. The desired effect is that of an announcement whistle, one that may be heard at a train station platform, calling for passengers to board. Dr. Smith divides the choir into five parts (SSATB) for the first time here, which creates instant power, tension, and great anticipation. The womens' voices provide most of the "train whistle" effect, and the men, not to be forgotten, sing at the top of their range, in close proximity to the sopranos and altos. The choral writing is homophonic and compact, producing an exciting sound. Ending the phrase "get your ticket ready to go" on a dominant seventh chord is pivotal. The choir lingers on this major-minor chord in a quasi-fermata, teasing our ears to anticipate the next section. It is an effective moment to experience as a listener, and thrilling to sing. This chord does not resolve in a

traditional manner (through voice leading to another four part chord); instead, Smith writes a unison note to begin the final verse, which pivots directly into the new key of F major—quite a dramatic shift from C major to symbolize the journey to freedom.

Conductor’s Preparation & Pedagogy

As a conductor, confident interpretation is key to the choir’s successful singing of the music. Alice Parker reminds us that “so much of successful performance of the spiritual is singing what’s *not* on the page.”¹⁴⁶ Richard Smith, a great admirer of Alice Parker (particularly her folk song and spiritual arrangements), knew this well. The musical devices he employs in this arrangement of *The Old Ship of Zion* paint a deep understanding of the text-music relationship in this spiritual. The music *sounds* as though it is advancing the story and character of the text. Smith’s conducting certainly demonstrated this, even though not all stylistic elements were written on the page. He was confident in his interpretation, and the both audience and choir gained a better understanding of the piece as a result.

In his musical markings, Smith briefly also addresses diction. As mentioned in chapter 4, diction is an important—and sometimes controversial—element of the spirituals genre that every conductor needs to address with clarity and respect. In *The Old Ship of Zion*, Smith directs the singers to use a hybrid diction approach, as described by Anton Armstrong in his essay, “Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song.”¹⁴⁷ Traditional English is melded with two important elements of authentic dialect: phonetic decay and management of diphthongs.

According to Armstrong, phonetic decay (dropping the strength of consonants in the middle or ends of words) is used to accurately and respectfully represent the authenticity of the pronunciation of text. In *The Old Ship of Zion*, examples include: tired/tah-uhd and coming/

¹⁴⁶ Parker, *Got a Mind to Do Right*.

¹⁴⁷ Anton Armstrong, “Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song,” in *Teaching Music through Performance in Choir*, ed. by Heather Buchanan and Matthew Mehaffey, (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005), 24-39.

comin'. These methods of phonetic decay are applied throughout Smith's arrangement in similar context. Vowels, specifically diphthongs, must also be managed carefully. The most troublesome is the first word of the piece, "I'm." Instead of pronouncing both vowel sounds [aɪ], the singer should only sing [a] and add the "m" following the vowel.¹⁴⁸ These are important decisions concerning diction must be determined well ahead of the first rehearsal of the music with the choir, to provide both clarity, respect, and attention to an authentic performance of this genre of music.

¹⁴⁸ International Phonetic Alphabet transcription used here.