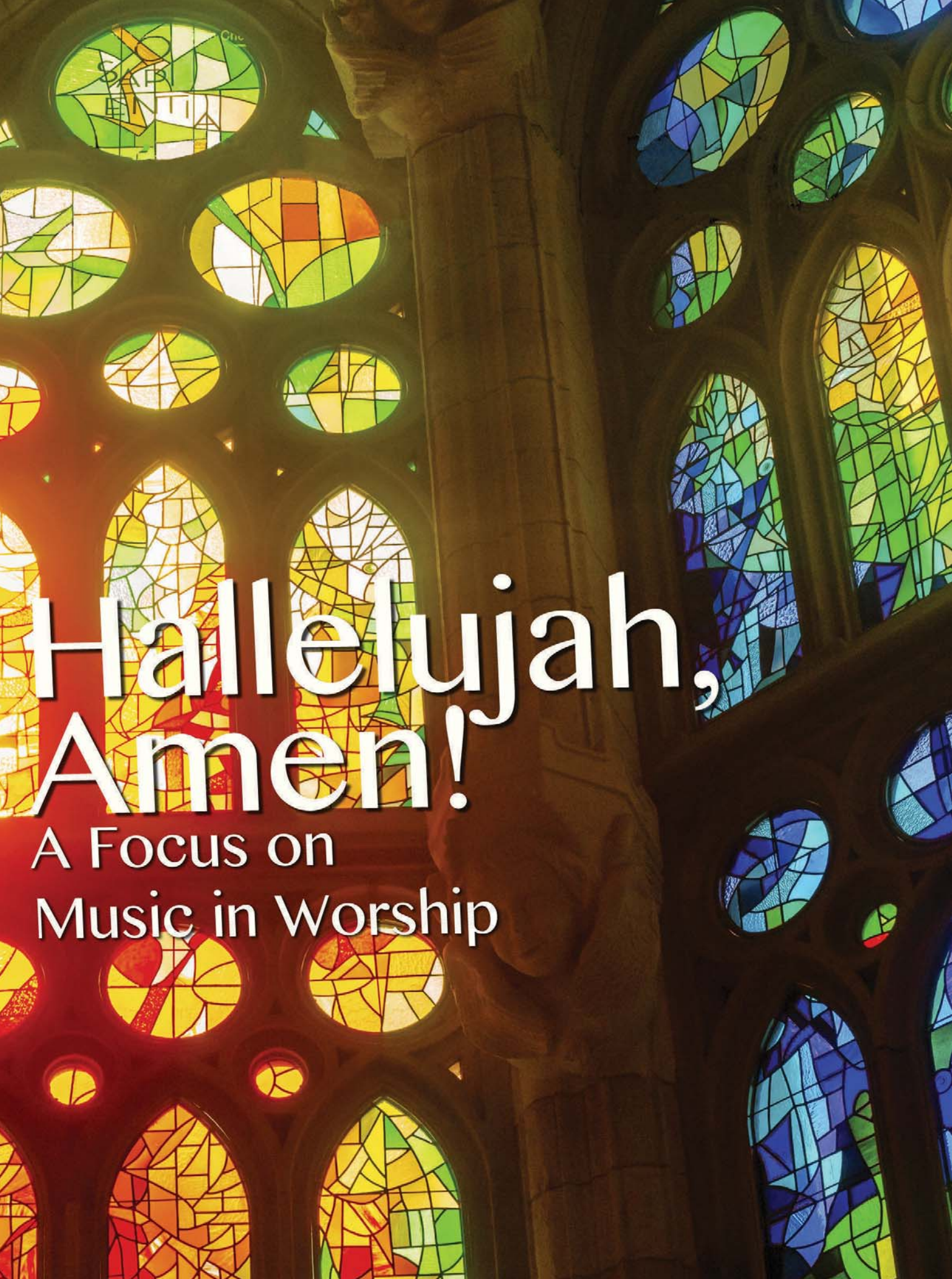

Hallelujah, Amen!

A Focus on Music in Worship


Terre Johnson

Those who grew up in the 1960s and '70s in the deep south have vivid memories of the integration of schools and society brought on by the Civil Rights Act and the Brown v. Board of Education decision. I grew up in South Georgia in a family that was strongly pro-integration. My father was an education professor and spent a year in a grant-funded project to help Georgia's rural school districts develop plans for integrating their schools successfully. My mother was a public school teacher, and as the small towns of the south developed private academies that were racially exclusive, we were among those children from white families who were determined to attend and support public schools.

It is no surprise that racial integration did not happen in our churches. And my parents were part of a group of church members who tried to get our Baptist church to open its doors to anyone who wished to worship there. The doors eventually opened, but not before their group started another church among whose founding principles were racial and gender equality.

As my formative church and school experiences became opportunities to meet and befriend people from whom I had previously been segregated, I heard the music of the black church for the first time. My classmates sang gospel and spiritual songs in school talent shows, frequently with great success and audience approval. This music was new and different and (in the verbage of that time) more soulful than our church's worship music.

As a freshman music major in a small college in Alabama, the first piece I encountered in the choral rehearsals that would eventually define my career path was William L. Dawson's "There Is a Balm in Gilead." Our conductor, a soft-spoken man who had grown up in the north, was deeply committed to the native-Alabamian treasure of the Dawson spirituals. That commitment was contagious, and we all loved the experience of these deep wells of musical and spiritual refreshment. When I attended graduate school at Auburn University I encountered Dr. Dawson at nearby Tuskegee Institute and grew in my love for these songs.

I went on to Florida State University to pursue a doctorate, where a new professor had come the previous year. At thirty years old, André Thomas was already displaying the artistry, scholarship, and charisma that have made him such a great choral conductor. And while he joined a well-known faculty that was steeped in the western European choral tradition, it was a revelation to us all to hear him teach about the slave-songs of the deep south. I loved my encounters with Negro Spirituals as they occurred with my schoolmates and in the college choirs to which I had belonged. But I began to understand them better and desired to never stop studying them when this true scholar of the art form taught about them.

As a church choir director for most of the last forty years, I have observed that among the vast canon of sacred repertoire only a small percentage of available pieces brings equal parts of aesthetic beauty, musical challenge, and spiritual inspiration. For me, achieving the stylistic, technical, and emotional demands of the spiritual repertoire as presented by great historical arrangers like Dawson, William Henry Smith, Jester Hairston, and their contemporaries, or the added challenges of the modern settings of Moses Hogan, André Thomas, and many others, is among the more difficult and worthwhile opportunities I can present to my volunteer choir.

I hope you will read with interest as Eileen Guenther describes her new book in the following article, and gives the slaves from whom these miraculous musical expressions emerged the opportunity to be heard in their own voices. The songs of the Negro Spiritual tradition are worthy of our use as congregational and choral music, and the stories of their originators make the experience of singing them infinitely more meaningful.

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Hallelujah, Amen!

Spirituals

Music of the Soil and the Soul

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Editor's Note: This article is based on the author's book *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals* (MorningStar Music Publishers, 2016)

> Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear; that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.
>
> —W. E. B. Du Bois[1]

Slavery has been called "America's original sin." It ripped apart families, communities, churches, and a nation. The number of victims of slavery will never be known, nor will the extent of its poisonous effect ever be fully recognized. Its poison afflicted an entire social, political, religious, and economic system and everyone in it: the owners (the victimizers) and the slaves (the victims). The balance of power was totally unequal and, in the gross immorality of slavery, it is the story of the victim that captures our hearts, our sympathy, our imagination, and our admiration.

The creators of Negro Spirituals were fiercely determined survivors of the largest forced migration in history. Many of the captives did not survive. Because of starvation, disease, and cruelty, fifteen to thirty percent of those enslaved died on the march from their African villages to the slave ship that would bring them to the New World. An estimated additional ten to fifteen percent did not survive the Middle Passage. Between the march and the Middle Passage, millions of Africans died. "For every 100 slaves who reached the New World, another forty had died in Africa or during the Middle Passage."[2]

Spirituals Music of the Soil and the Soul

The cruelty they endured once they had been purchased and settled on a plantation reinforced the determination to survive. The enslaved peoples' frustration and anger at the oppression, torture, and control of body, mind, and soul are reflected in their Spirituals and in their autobiographical narratives (over 200 book-length documents) and the 2,300 interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration.

The following article is based on a book about the history of the Negro Spiritual. The text from the book appears in this article as it was transmitted—sometimes in dialect, sometimes not, and the entries are reflective of the importance a subject held for the slave. There are also excerpts from specific spirituals. When considering the narratives, there are more entries relating to punishment and freedom than any other category because these subjects were foremost in the minds and memories of the slave or former slave. While the subject of punishment does not always figure significantly in the music, freedom is a prevalent subject.

The Spirituals sing of hope—hope for eternal life and hope for escape from the often diabolical control of the owner, or from the many others who controlled a slave's life such as the owner's spouse and children, overseers, slave drivers, jail-house masters, and any white person who saw the slave doing anything arbitrarily considered wrong.

Why Write about the Spirituals and Slavery?

Spirituals are among the most powerful music ever created. Spirituals are also universal; they apply to situations well outside of slavery. As psychologist and musician Arthur Jones writes, Spirituals are "available to all persons who are prepared to open themselves to the unsettling healing power that inhabits these marvelous songs of life."[3] They come out of slavery, indisputably "deeply meaningful, archetypically human experiences, relevant not only to the specific circumstances of slavery but also to women and men struggling with issues of justice, freedom, and spiritual wholeness in all times and places."[4] Indeed, they transcend their original circumstances and are "sources of wisdom and guidance in addressing current societal and psychological issues."[5]

I remember a student who started to cry as we were rehearsing the Spiritual *Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child.* When I asked him why he was crying, he said he was gay, had just "come out" to his family, and had then been told that he was consequently not welcome home at Christmas. At that moment, he truly felt like a motherless child. A recent study of older African Americans, led by Jill B. Hamilton of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Nursing, showed that at the other end of the age spectrum, individuals not only found their feelings mirrored in the music but that, like the creators of the Spirituals, "song was a coping strategy for participants experiencing stressful life events who described feelings of being comforted, strengthened, able to endure, uplifted, and able to find peace."[6]

James Lovell, a former Howard University professor and author of arguably the single most important book on Spirituals, estimated their number to be in the range of 800 to 1,000.[7] In addition to the songs tracing themes such as the life of Jesus and celebrating the liberation of iconic figures in the Hebrew Scriptures, I have identified approximately forty subjects. Some of the subjects these songs address are: resistance, accountability, community, religion, death, steadfastness in the face of adversity, creation, consolation. More Spirituals are devoted to freedom, the second coming, and heaven (basically the same songs) than to any other subject.

There is beauty and genius in these "musical products of an enslaved community's struggle with the vital human issues of life and death, hope and despair, slavery and freedom."[8] While focusing on the text helps identify themes and specific subjects, it takes the combination of melody and words to enable the full power of the Spiritual to come through, and it takes both to deliver the insight and healing that can transform a hurting world.

Spirituals: Beginnings and Their Value

Spirituals began with the chants and moans of the field, becoming more subtle and complex over time. Their creation paralleled the hold Christianity took on the slave population, with the real explosion coming after the Second Great Awakening began in 1800. In addition to using rhythms and melodies the slaves had brought from Africa, the creators heard hymns of Isaac Watts and John Wesley in white services and at camp meetings

and appropriated the characteristics of those hymns into the Spirituals. The Spirituals were not composed in the traditional sense of that word but created, with one person beginning a song and others adding to it, resulting in a song that was "owned" by the community.

Society in the American South placed little or no value on the enslaved individual. The Spiritual counters that devaluation with affirmation: "I exist, and I matter." The eminent theologian James H. Cone explained that "the essence of ante-bellum black religion was the emphasis on the somebodiness of black slaves. The content of the black preacher's message stressed the essential worth of their person."[9] One of the most important aspects of the Spiritual is that it allowed the slave to feel a sense of personal dignity in a situation where they were treated and legally defined, in the words of philosopher and theologian Howard Thurman, as "a tool, a thing, a utility, a commodity."[10] This affirmation is unequivocal: "You are created in God's image. You are not slaves…you are God's children."[11] The language of Spirituals is rich and symbolic, reflecting the slaves' African heritage. And, as Arthur Jones has observed, Spirituals have a "seemingly magical ability to speak to universal issues of the human spirit."[12]

Musical Styles

The three widely recognized types of Spirituals are:

- Slow, long-phrase melodies: *Deep River; Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*
- Songs with syncopated, segmented melodies: *Every Time I Feel the Spirit; Glory, Glory, Hallelujah*
- Call-and-response (African roots, with leader and group alternating): *Woke Up This Morning; Go Down, Moses*

Spirituals are not limited to one type of song but encompass a variety of genres: sermons-in-song, jubilees, contemplative sorrow songs, work songs, shouts. Regardless of genre, the most prevalent structure is that of call-and-response. There are certain prevailing characteristics. Many Spirituals are repetitive and easily extended. By changing only a word or phrase in each verse (*Lord, I Want to Be a Christian; Give Me that Old Time Religion*) a song could be extended to last infinitely. This was important for two reasons: work went faster and was more productive if accompanied by singing, and the relief from the boredom of manual labor—picking cotton in the fields or grinding grain in the mill—was essential.

The imagery of the text is sometimes unique (*Keep a-Inchin' Along*), and there is an eternality to the message. The religious songs are overwhelmingly based on biblical texts. Throughout, there are double meanings: Canaan might refer to heaven, a life of freedom in the North, across the Mason-Dixon Line, or in Canada, or even freedom after emancipation. Code songs might seem harmless enough to owners or overseers but could convey to the slaves a hidden meaning, such as the time of a secret meeting or the arrival of a guide to lead them to freedom.

Spirituals address a wide range of emotions, from the wrenching cry when a family is torn apart by a sale (*Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child)* to the quiet confidence of *Steal Away,* the joy of *In That Great Gettin' Up Morning,* or the outright defiance of *Go Down, Moses.* Song was the slaves' way of expressing their feelings. They sang of the present and sang of the future; they sang in the cabins and the fields, the mill and the kitchen—and the songs were of brokenness and sorrow, expectation and hope.

Melodic and Rhythmic Origins

Melodies of the music have certain modal characteristics and often use the pentatonic scale, a five-note scale utilizing notes spaced the same way as black keys on a piano. The melodies also use patterns that include the flatted third or seventh or the raised sixth. No matter how engaging the melody might be, it is the rhythm—the primary characteristic of African music—that remains the key characteristic of the Spiritual. Countless travelers and scholars have cited the relationship between Spirituals and the music heard in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the region so many slaves had called home, although that is a topic that goes beyond the scope of this particular article.

Creation process? Make no mistake about it: This is folk music! "Every Folk song, verse, and melody is the product of a folk community," said Lovell.

> When [an individual] creates the song and gives it to the group, the group generally accepts, but reserves its veto power. It may strike off portions that, in singing or in the present mood, do not fit. It may even add a phrase or a line. Over the period and range of transmission of the song it may add stanzas, and has often done so.[13]

Spirituals are "community-based." "I" often means "we." Regardless of the pronoun, whether specifically personal or communal, these songs reflect the joys or sorrows of the entire community while at the same time actually building community.

Regardless of what they are called—slave songs, plantation songs, jubilee songs, survival songs, religious songs, or sorrow songs—a single individual is never credited with creating a Spiritual that comes out of this time and place. These songs of the people were passed orally by the enslaved from person to person and community to community, just as their ancestors in Africa had done. Only after they were written down in the 1860s do those of us outside the community of origin have the means to sing them.

Context Matters

It is impossible to understand the song fully without knowing the life and experiences of the community from which it came, and as choral musicians we have an obligation to our singers and our audiences to familiarize ourselves with the context and communicate it in rehearsal and perhaps even in performance. Therefore, this book includes detailed descriptions of slave quarters, clothing, food, work expectation, and punishments, including material directly from those enslaved.

A community sings, in the words of John Lovell, "the

entire range of its deep concern."[14] Knowing the circumstances that gave rise to the songs allows us insight into the slaves' lives, their fears, their longings, their joys, and their sorrows. By more fully understanding these concerns, one gains an appreciation for the ways their concerns intersect with our own today.

Slave Life

> Let each reader put himself in the slave's place to whatever extent he can. If you are like most of your colleagues in slavery, you are not only distressed by but indignant over your slavery. On your arrival in the colonies you are sometimes exposed naked, without distinction as to sexes, to brutal examination by your purchasers. You are driven against your will to work from dark to dark. You are forced to work without any clothes…
>
> Your food and lodging are subminimal. You hear cloth and shoes referred to as Negro cloth or Negro shoes because of their sleaziness. Your stated name is rarely used; you are generally called upon in burlesque terms or in curse words. You see your closest relatives and friends sold in an instant and forever. You can be sold without being made aware of the fact until your new master comes to pick you up. You are compelled to watch the murderous beatings of your fellow slaves. One of your number was whipped because he cried when he saw his fellow slave and friend beaten to death.
>
> You would have to shut your eyes to the legal aspects of your situation, for how could you ever reconcile yourself to the fact that some man or woman owned you, held papers showing that you belonged to him for life and were forced to obey him in every respect, at the expense of being beaten or sold. You are held to strictest account, but no promise ever made to you is binding, legally or otherwise.[15]

Slaveholders took vastly different approaches to their slaves. Not every slaveholder was cruel or abusive. Most were. The distinctions were rooted in the temperament of the owner, the owner's economic and social status, the locale and size of his plantation or farm, and demands of the particular crop. What slaveholders did have in common were two simple facts: 1) They owned human beings and 2) their material success depended on those human beings working for nothing.

The influential abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass called slavery "the grand aggregation of human horrors."[16] The horrors began with a human being considered property rather than a person. Many individuals—the owner, overseer, slave driver, slave catcher and slave trader—controlled a slave's life, food, work, worship, and punishment. Slaves had no legal rights: they could not own property, marry, testify against a white or, in some cases, even against another slave. "One legal opinion held that a slave's word was assessed at the same value as 'the cry of an animal.'"[17]

A slave's name or family history received scant attention. A note might be made in the Bible of the owner recording the date a slave child was born and its name, but just as often there was simply an entry noting the owner's holding had increased by one. As non-persons, slaves took the last name of the owner. Their first names often were also issued by the owner, who might call them by the month in which they were born or purchased or by fanciful names from mythology or history.

> "Of my father, I know even less than of my mother. I do not even know his name. I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations. Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing. But I do not find especial fault with him. He was simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time." (Booker T. Washington)[18]

Furthermore, the slave could be bought, sold, leased, or given away at the pleasure of the master. And if the master was in debt, his debtor or a legal authority then

controlled the slave's future. If a slave were injured in any way (unless it was at the hand of another slave), there was no legal redress. "Not until 1821, in South Carolina, was murder of a slave made punishable by death; even then, if the deed was committed in sudden heat and passion, the penalty was a $500 fine and six months in jail."[19]

> "I knew a free man of color, who had a wife on a plantation. The patrols went to his house in the night time—he would not let them in; they broke in and beat him: nearly killed him. The next morning he went before the magistrates, bloody and dirty just as he was. All the redress he got was, that he had no right to resist a white man." (Francis Henderson)[20]

The master's need for control was without bounds, and a slave who disobeyed or even showed "attitude" was subject to brutal treatment. One Kentucky owner chopped up a slave with an axe and threw each piece of the body in the fire while warning the watching slaves this could be their fate if they disobeyed, ran away, or even spoke about the incident.[21] If a slave did something deemed punishable, there was no legal limit to what the master could do. Not surprisingly, the number of capital crimes in state statutes for slaves was much higher than those applying to white persons. There are many accounts of slaves being charged and punished for their actions but few for whites, even for killing.

> "There was a planter in the country, not far from us, whom I will call Mr. Litch. He was an ill-bred, uneducated man, but very wealthy. He had six hundred slaves, many of whom he did not know by sight. His extensive plantation was managed by well-paid overseers. There was a jail and a whipping post on his grounds; and whatever cruelties were perpetrated there, they passed without comment. He was so effectually screened by his great wealth that he was called to no account for his crimes, not even for murder." (Linda Brent)[22]

While the emotion of hatred does not often appear directly in the music, the narratives and the interviews clearly convey the slaves' hatred of those who owned them. In addition to their lack of freedom, food, and respect, they deeply resented the simple but profound fact that they were *owned.* They also resented the abundance of insults and punishments they received, often on a daily basis. "It don't seem to me that even upon the Lord's day…and now I know that there is a hereafter, it would be a sin before God to shoot him, if he were here." (John Little)[23]

> **"Singing, too, was a form of resistance. The slaves could sing what they dared not say.**

Psychological Damage

Linda Brent, the slave who went to such lengths in order to avoid becoming the mistress of her white master, felt "slavery wasn't so much a political fact as a poison, a disease."[24] Her narrative, the first by a female former slave, was also the first to focus on the psychological effects of slavery. The psychological damage inflicted on the slave was as deep as it was unrecognized. "We were all afraid of master: when I saw him coming, my heart would jump up into my mouth, as if I had seen a serpent." (Mrs. James Seward)[25]

Another ex-slave, Sarah Jackson, remembered:

> "I…did not feel safe at night: not knowing whom I might belong to in the morning. It is a great heaviness on a person's mind to be a slave. It never looked right to see people taken and chained in a gang to be driven off. I never could bear to see my own color all fastened together to go on to such a place as down the river. I used to go in the house and shut myself up—I did not know how long before it would be my own fate."[26]

Enslaved for twenty-five years before he escaped to Canada, William Grose said, after five years of freedom, "I feel like a man, while before I felt more as though I were but a brute," a recurrent theme in the narratives. He no longer feared, he said, looking a white person in the eye, answering a question, oversleeping—and he rejoiced that he had "the rights and privileges of any other man."[27]

Slave Labor and Punishment

Labor was generally organized one of two ways on the plantations: individual responsibilities or the "gang system." With the gang system, overseers and drivers were the intermediate authorities. They managed the plantation agricultural operations and saw to it that the enslaved workers were as productive as possible—by whatever means necessary. The slaveholder received the benefit of their work but did not have to care for them if they became invalids or were too old to be productive. It was not unknown for slaves to be literally worked to death.

Slaves who acquired a variety of specialized skills were able to "hire their own time" in such work. They laid railroad track, cobbled shoes, baked bread, built houses, made clothes, drove carriages, and worked in foundries. They also played numerous musical instruments, and the best musicians were in great demand to provide music at plantation celebrations. Song leaders were much in demand and might receive special privileges if they were good at choosing the right songs and setting a tempo that increased productivity.

Punishment was the overriding aspect of slave life. As Frederick Douglass declared, "There is no earthly inducement, in the slave's condition, to incite him to labor faithfully. The fear of punishment is the sole motive for any sort of industry, with him… [The slaveholder] naturally concludes the slave will be idle whenever the cause for this fear is absent. Hence, all sorts of petty deceptions are practiced, to inspire this fear."[28]

Slaves could be punished for just about anything one can think of: inadequate work performance (either in quality or in speed), drinking, gambling, selling something, insolence, the look on the slave's face, or moving too slowly, lying, stealing, talking inappropriately to whites, seeming too smart or too knowledgeable, or not having passes when off the plantation. And for running away. Punishment was sometimes capricious but always brutal, frequent, repeated, and inescapable.

> "In Alabama, I know how two plantations, of one hundred and fifty, and one hundred and thirty each, were managed, [slaves] who were whipped and slashed under the kindest overseers they had—and when they had a hard overseer, there was no peace at all. It was whip, whip, continually, old and young; nobody got too old to be clear of the lash. It seemed as if the whipping had to be done, whether the work was done or not." (Henry Gowens)[29]

While not a frequent topic in the music, no subject is addressed more often than punishment in the slave narratives and interviews; testimonies such as these fill those pages. One Spiritual that addresses punishment (along with other standard aspects of life such as the rations of food and being at the mistress's beck and call 24/7) is this one:

No more auction block for me…Many thousand gone
No more peck of corn for me…
No more driver's lash for me…
No more pint of salt for me…
No more hundred lash for me…
No more mistress' call for me…

Family Separation

The separation of family members was a constant and soul-wrenching topic of the narratives and interviews, and it even made its way into the music. Spirituals such as *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* and *Mama, Is Master Gonna Sell Us Tomorrow?* speak poignantly to what many slaves considered the worst punishment to which they could be subjected.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child….A long ways from home….
Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone….

Mama, is master going to sell us tomorrow? / Yes, yes, yes! / O, watch and pray
Going to sell us in Georgia? / Yes, yes, yes! / O, watch and pray
Farewell; mother, I must lebe you / Yes, yes, yes! / O, watch and pray
Mother don't grieve after me / No, no, no! / O, watch and pray
Mother, I'll meet you in heaven / Yes, my child! / O, watch and pray

"When the white folks brung 'em over here, they snatched 'em up and sold and traded 'em away from one another. The chilluns was took away from their pas and mas. Husbands and wives was separated and sold." (Lucy Donald)[30]

Slaves were property, although not often treated as valued property. As mere property, they could be a form of currency.

"[The slaveowner] was a drunkard and a gambler, for he had taken three different women's sons, between the ages of twelve and fourteen years, and gambled them off and came back home without them, leaving the parents in anguish. (William H. Robinson)"[31]

They were bought and sold swiftly and frequently, in order to settle a debt or fulfill the terms of a will, to punish the slave who had shown attitude or attempted escape, to punish the family, or simply because they were no longer needed.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had a profound and disastrous effect on slaves because it not only required escaped slaves to be returned to their owners but also required the entire citizenry to assist in this action. Failing to do so resulted in a fine or imprisonment. It was strictly illegal to aid the escape of a slave.

"After my escape from slavery, I married a free colored man. We were comfortably settled in the States, and were broken up by the fugitive slave law—compelled to leave our home and friends, and to go at later than middle life into a foreign country among strangers." (Slave name unknown)[32]

Religion: Visible and Invisible Worship

The majority of the songs that have come down to us are religious. The importance of the Bible (King James, 1611) as a source of texts cannot be overstated. It has often been said that there are sufficient scriptural passages captured in the Spirituals that, if the Bible were lost, the enslaved would still have had enough left in the music to more than provide for their spiritual needs. Spirituals record the liberation stories of the Old Testament in songs such as *Go Down, Moses* and *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel.* They trace the life of Jesus from birth (*Go Tell it on the Mountain*) to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (*Ride on, King Jesus*) to his crucifixion (*Were you*

There?) to his resurrection (*He Rose*). There are others such as *My God is a Rock* and *Oh, He Raise-a Poor Lazarus* that record acts in the ministry of Jesus.

The question of religion was a thorny one. If the owners felt that baptism would result in freedom for a slave, or if they feared that the slave might be exposed to some of the liberation passages from the Bible, then they did not permit religious involvement. However, if it meant slaves might become more obedient as a result of their conversion, that is, if they took to heart the sermons focusing on a text like "servants, obey your master," then the owners permitted exposure to religion. Slaves often attended worship with their masters, sitting in the slave gallery or standing outside listening through the windows.

More lenient owners might even allow their slaves to hold their own worship in a church on the plantation under the scrutiny of a white overseer. The services that most fed the souls of the slaves were ones they conducted themselves, often in secret. In these services, frequently held in the woods far away from the main house, they could form their own responses to the owners' hypocrisy, their own version of God's promise of freedom, and their own sense of community. They incorporated Bible verses along with snippets of the hymns they had heard. But always, they created their own music. However, they risked severe punishment if caught.

"Any meetings of slaves 'under pretense of divine worship' might be dispersed and the slaves could receive twenty-five lashes on the bare back without trial. After Nat Turner's uprising in 1831, the Virginia legislature passed a hard bill prohibiting any Negro-ordained, licensed, or otherwise—from holding religious or other assemblies at any time. To hold or attend such a meeting called for thirty-nine lashes."[33] No wonder Spirituals reflect the need for secrecy in worship or prayer.

The invisible church—the church where slaves worshipped in secret—was fueled by the music, claims Wyatt Tee Walker, pastor and author. "Nearly all the Spirituals are derivatives of biblical themes, but heavy emphasis fell upon those themes where by supernatural means God delivered the faithful from impossible circumstances."[34] As Morehouse Glee Club Music Director Wendell Whalum said, the music expressed "the gamut of human experience" with "the constant theme…of freedom."[35]

Spirituals and slave religion have been said to focus on the "compensatory" aspect of the enslaved person's life; that is, thinking "we can put up with anything here on earth because we will have our reward in heaven." At the same time, according to Benjamin Mays, a son of former slaves who became president of Morehouse College, Spirituals "affirm a complete trust in God to make right in the next world what was done wrong in this world… The Spirituals provided an emotional security for oppressed slaves during turbulent times. Since slaves had no economic or political security in this world, they put their trust in Jesus whom they believed would make everything all right."[36]

Code Songs and Resistance: Singing What They Could Not Say

There is a long list of ways that slaves resisted their masters: slowing down work, poisoning the owner's family, starting fires, pretending to be pregnant, faking disability when on the auction block, self-mutilation, suicide, mothers killing their babies so they wouldn't have to grow up as slaves. Escape was a primary form of resistance, but it was not without its challenges. Where

should they go? Whom could they trust for information or directions? Would they be turned in for the promised reward? Where would they find food? What would happen to their families if they ran away?

Singing, too, was a form of resistance. The slaves could sing what they dared not say. Singing *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* had multiple possibile interpretations. It could signal the impending arrival of a conductor on the Underground Railroad to lead them to freedom or it might signal an upcoming time for worship or a meeting to plan an insurrection. It would be heard by the slaveholder as an innocent song while the intended meaning was clear to those in the enslaved population. Several songs, including *Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass* and *Let Us Break Bread Together* ("Let us praise God together on our knees"), have been associated with resistance meetings.[37] Likewise, *Steal Away* may have signaled a secret meeting. It is the one song with which the name of a possible composer has been attached: it may have been composed by Nat Turner, but at the very least, it has been connected with him since his uprising in 1831. In addition, *Go Down, Moses* was connected with both Harriet Tubman and Denmark Vesey.

The resistance encoded in *Wade in the Water* has multiple facets, perhaps more than any other single song. First, waterways were boundaries between the freedom and enslavement (such as the Ohio River); slaves escaping often walked besides rivers or creeks and moved to the water when dogs were heard barking in the distance to make it harder to track their scent. It references healing (the pool of Bethesda as recorded in the New Testament in John 5), and confidence that God would, indeed, "trouble the waters" and ultimately the slaves would be free when they would be reunited with their friends (in heaven, or in freedom—*If you get there before I do…tell all my friends I'm comin' too* they sang.)

Meanings were fluid, changing according to the situation at the time as interpreted by the singer and by the community. While *Follow the Drinking Gourd* is embedded with a map for escape, others are less specific but nonetheless held meaning for the singers. Sometimes particular songs were avoided entirely in the presence of white authority. In one of many testimonies on this subject, Elijah Green explains: "One song I know I used to sing to the slaves when Master went away, but I wouldn't be so fool as to let him hear me."[38] Secrecy in these matters was essential for the slaves' survival. When former slave Robert Smalls was asked whether master knew anything of the secret life of the slaves, he replied, "No, sir; one life they show their masters and another life they don't show."[39]

Some songs were more explicit than others. For instance, the later stanzas of *Go Down, Moses* contain the lines, "No more shall they in bondage toil…let them come out with Egypt's spoil." One can hardly be much more explicit than that!

The unlocking of the "biblical code" in the music is not difficult: Egypt, Babylon, or hell referenced the land of enslaved people or specifically being sold "South." Pharaoh or Satan signified slave owners or, indeed, anyone who mistreated the slave. The slaves referred to themselves as the Israelites. Patrollers were Pharaoh's army. Jesus or King Jesus referred to anyone who had the slave's interest at heart. Obtaining freedom was crossing over the Jordan River, which might actually be a reference to the Ohio River. The Promised Land might refer to Africa, the North, Canada, Canaan, or heaven.

Conclusion

The value of knowing—*in their own words*—the context that gave birth to the Spirituals, their meanings, and the potential for connecting to life in the twenty-first century is incalculable to those who sing and conduct.

> Entwined in the rhythm of that freedom song were the perceptive musings of Olaudah Equiano, the questions of the child Broteer, and the sweet probing rhymes of Phillis Wheatley. That ode of unleashed joy celebrated the unquestioning fury of Denmark Vesey, Gabriel, Nat Turner, and John Brown. Each joyous lyric told the story of the visionaries Richard Allen, David Walker, and Jarena Lee.
>
> The newly liberated slaves sang for themselves, for their new country, and for the thousands

upon thousands of Africans ripped from the clutches of home. They sang for those who surrendered to the water during the passage, for those who refused to eat, for those who died chained below the decks of a creaking ship. And they sang for the survivors, who lived through the indignities of torn families, numbing labor, and the dreaded auction block.

No song ever held so much.[40] CJ

NOTES

[1] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 192.

[2] "The Middle Passage," Digital History.com

[3] Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), xi.

[4] Ibid., 47.

[5] Ibid., xiv.

[6] Jill B. Hamilton et al., "You Need a Song to Bring You Through": The Use of Religious Songs to Manage Stressful Life Events, *The Gerontologist* 55 no. 6 (2015): 961-971.

[7] John Lovell Jr., "The Social Implications of the Negro Spirituals," *The Journal of Negro Education* 8 no. 4 (October 1939): 634-643.

[8] Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I've Seen: the Big Book of Negro Spirituals* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 2003), ix.

[9] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 16.

[10] Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1975), 13.

[11] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* 17.

[12] Jones, *Wade in the Water,* 13.

[13] Lovell, *Black Songs: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1986), 134

[14] Ibid., 129.

[15] Ibid., 142.

[16] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 423.

[17] Lovell, *Black Songs,* 154.

[18] Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), 2.

[19] Lovell, *Black Songs,* 155.

[20] Benjamin Drew, ed., *Refugees from Slavery: Autobiographies of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 110.

[21] Lovell, *Black Songs,* 155.

[22] Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* L. Maria Child, ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1973), 45–46.

[23] Drew, 139.

[24] Yuval Taylor, ed., *Growing Up in Slavery: Stories of Young Slaves as Told by Themselves* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2005), 118.

[25] Drew, *Refugees from Slavery,* 29.

[26] Ibid., 125.

[27] Ibid., 59.

[28] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* 266.

[29] Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000), 96.

[30] Andrew Waters, ed., *Prayin' to Be Set Free* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2002), 167.

[31] William H. Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit or, Fifteen Years in Slavery. Reminiscences of My Early Life While in Slavery,* 3rd ed. (Eau Claire, Wis.: James H. Tifft Publishing Printer, 1913), 28.

[32] Drew, *Refugees from Slavery,* 21.

[33] Lovell, *Black Songs,* 149.

[34] Wyatt Tee Walker, "*Somebody's Calling My Name": Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1992), 32.

[35] Ibid., 34.

[36] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* 17.

[37] Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), 27-29.

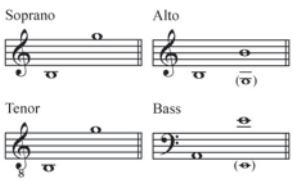
[38] Yetman, *Voices from Slavery,* 149.

[39] Chenu, *The Trouble I've Seen,* 120.

[40] Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith, *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 371.

Sacred Music Choral Reviews

When Jesus Wept
William Billings (1746-1800: 1770)
Text: Perez Morton
(1751-1837: 1770)
Arr. and alt. by Gwyneth Walker
(b. 1947: 2016)
SATB with div., Piano and
Percussion or Organ with optional
Brass and Percussion (4:00)
ECS Publishing ECS 7034
(Full Score ECS 7528)
e-address: www.ecspublishing.com



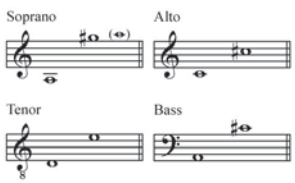
William Billings' canon *When Jesus Wept* has long been a favorite of choirs of every level of accomplishment. Gwyneth Walker provides a new, emotionally moving setting that utilizes the original canon material yet still succeeds in placing the material into a new wineskin.

Walker's arrangement includes the addition of an achingly haunting refrain, "my son, my son," evoking Thomas Weelkes's *When David Heard.* This refrain tolls lamentation throughout, in union with the optional timpani. The piano accompaniment paints a weeping *obligato* that underpins Billings's beautiful melody. The transformation of the original triple meter time signature to common time completes the new structure.

The relentless forward rolling motion of the accompaniment succeeds in driving the dramatic tension of the choral texture. Walker's phrases overlap antiphonally between the upper and lower voices, entering stretto-like with increasing urgency, culminating at the mid-point of the piece in a dissonant, unaccompanied cluster chord that paints the "falling tear" text like blurred vision. The momentum restarts with a texture similar to the opening, though the upper voices now accompany the men's canon in a mournful hum. The hum eventually shifts to the "my son" text and comes to dominate the choral material, again driving the piece toward a climax of fortissimo dissonance accompanied by the full instrumental complement. The choir concludes the piece, again on the text "the falling tear," with an appropriately cascading minor scale canon.

Performance demonstration:
http://www.canticledistributing.com/audioplayer.php?n=7034.mp3

This Is My Father's World
Arr. Elaine Hagenberg
(b. 1979: 2016)
text: Maltbie D. Babcock
(1858-1901: 1901)
SATB, Piano, Violin (4:00)
Hinshaw Music
HMC2494
e-address: www.hinshawmusic.com



Elaine Hagenberg begins her arrangement of Maltbie Babcock's famous hymn *This Is My Father's World* conventionally, with a light upper-octave piano accompaniment that gently dialogues with a lovely violin solo. The opening simplicity of the famous TERRA BEATA tune, however, gives way later to clever, lush harmonies, highlighted by a fantastic key change during a phrase elision in the middle of the piece and an unexpected shift to the relative minor just a few bars later.

The piece soars with eloquence and ingenuity yet remains accessible. The bass and tenor ranges, in particular, are limited to a sing-able *tessitura,* which will lend itself well to the amateur church ensemble.

Sacred Music Choral Reviews

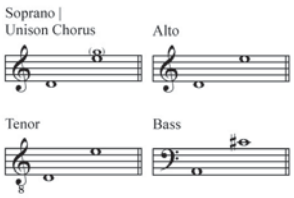
Hagenberg's well-crafted choral writing, however, includes enough vocal interplay and subtlety to satisfy the more accomplished choir as well.

The solo violin, present throughout, is an essential part of this piece's success, though it requires a player with some skill. The counter-melodies in the violin, along with an almost orchestral piano, weave above, underneath, and through the beautiful choral texture. The solo violin part is included in the choral octavo—a nice bonus!

The piece ends with a sparkling, circular echo on the words "and heaven and earth be one," utilizing alternating dissonance and consonance, finally culminating in a satisfying unison tonic, symbolizing earth reaching up to heaven.

Performance demonstration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfWjey9tQS0

Antiphonal Processional
Hal H. Hopson (b. 1933: 2016)
Text: John 12:13 and Edward H. Plumptre (1821-1891: 1865)
SATB and unison choir, organ, handbells, optional brass, timpani, congregation (3:10)
Choristers Guild CGA1485
e-address: www.choristersguild.org/



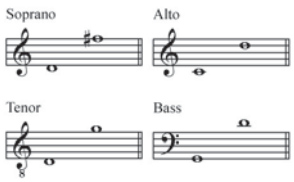
Hal Hopson provides a new tune and multi-use festival setting of Edward Plumptre's hymn *Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart,* to be sung on Palm Sunday or Advent #1, with alternate texts provided for General Use or Christ the King Sunday.

As the title suggests, Hopson recommends a number of different acoustic arrangements for the multiple performing forces. Despite the scope of those forces, the arrangement is very accessible. The versatility and multiple available configurations are the basis for the success of this work. This piece is certainly appropriate for a large ensemble, though the composer suggests that it may be sung with only organ, and the treble choir replaced with adult sopranos if needed, for the smaller choir.

Opening antiphonal statements of "hosanna!" and a brass introduction give way to a unison first verse over a thickly orchestrated texture. Verse two introduces a busier choral setting with staggered entrances, symbolizing the "answering echoes" in the text. Verse three is reserved for the unison treble choir, followed by an extended florid brass and organ fanfare interlude. The congregation joins the chorus and instruments on verse four. Hopson provides a descant for the upper voices during this final verse. On the demonstration recording, the unison trebles join the sopranos, though it seems perfectly acceptable for directors to have the children continue singing the unison hymn tune along with the congregation, particularly if the high G is prohibitive. The edition includes an optional choral and instrumental *coda,* and a reproducible bulletin insert for congregational use.

Performance demonstration:
http://www.choristersguild.org/store/cga1485-antiphonal-processional/6893/

I Will Pray and Sing
Jocelyn Hagen (b. 1980: 2016)
Text: 1 Cor. 14:15, Rom 8:26-27, Eph. 3:14-19
SATB with descant, piano (3:40)
Jubal House Publications JH-1220 (distributed by Hal Leonard)
e-address: www.halleonard.com



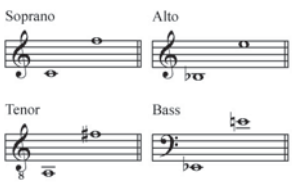
Jocelyn Hagen's new anthem, *I Will Pray and Sing,* reflects upon the nature of prayer and song. The piece opens with a homophonic texture, reminiscent of Anglican chant, oscillating between a compound meter texture and the occasional duplet. This rhythmic pendulum serves both to mirror exactly the syllabic stress of the text while also calling to mind prayer traditions in which rocking back and forth is a prominent practice. Hagen employs a beautiful descant solo over this chant.

The peaceful opening abruptly transforms over a suddenly active and expansive accompaniment into an exploration of intercessory prayer. Hagen transitions back to the opening material by briefly fragmenting the original homophony amongst the voices before settling back into the original swaying mantra of the opening.

The third and final passage features harmonic, rhythmic, and textural transformation in the music. Hagen employs staggered Lydian scale entrances in the choir, which make the return to the lowered fourth shortly afterward satisfying. She sets up an interior climax highlighted by a modulation back to the original key, and rising counterpoint in the upper voices culminating on the word "heights." Hagen completes the piece with a repetition of the opening choral chant, though lingers at the end on an unresolved plagal cadence—fitting commentary on the efficacy of unending prayer.

Performance demonstration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WAA2GQYweQ

Azamer bishvokhin:
A Shabbat zemer
(*I Will Sing with Praises*)
Attr. to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811)
Text: Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572)
Arr. by Joshua Jacobson (b. 1948: 2002)
SATB with div., piano (8:00)
ECS Publishing ECS 5742
e-address: www.ecspublishing.com



Rabbi Isaac Luria's medieval Aramaic poem was written to be sung at the Sabbath table. The original melody has not survived, though this new arrangement combines the text with a melody attributed to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, an important Hassidic teacher. Influenced by *Kabbalah* traditions, the text portrays the Sabbath as a bride and the singers as the "bridesmen." The poem includes imagery that is celebratory and mystical, and includes language depicting physical intimacy as metaphor. The edition includes a helpful transliteration of the Aramaic and both a literal English translation and a poetic, rhymed performance translation, all courtesy of the arranger, Joshua Jacobson.

Jacobson works through the lengthy text with a consistent and concise bell-like piano and frequent choral *divisi,* creating a warm, romantic texture. Through timely modulations, unaccompanied sections, and tasteful chromaticism, Jacobson brings new devotional life to both this text and melody.

The setting is strophic, with only a few instances of echoed repetition between the voices. To create contrast and interest between the sixteen stanzas, Jacobson reimagines the accompaniment throughout, almost like a theme and variation, and employs frequent choral "ahs," providing a fluid color palette upon which to place Rabbi Nahman's melody.

Performance demonstration:
http://www.canticledistributing.com/azamer-bishvokhin.html

Timothy Michael Powell
Pulaski, Tennessee