



CHAPTER 3

Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song

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For many throughout the world, the African American slave song, or the African American spiritual, as it is more commonly called, becomes one of their entrées into the world of multi-cultural music. This song form originated in the southern region of the United States during the nineteenth century and developed from the music of West Africa, where many of the slaves who were eventually brought to the New World originated. Before looking at slave songs, as we have come to know them in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we need to go back to the origins and traits of West African music.

West African Music

First of all, a very brief overview of West African civilization reveals that Africa was not the "dark continent," as it is often referred to, or the barbaric land commonly portrayed in the Tarzan movies. The heathen savage concept developed out of the slave owners' inability to understand the foreign culture; this misunderstanding allowed them to justify the exploitation of African people.

The concept of monotheism, one God, was firmly established in West African society. The early eighteenth-century missionaries found that parts of Africa already knew the Bible and the Bible stories but often incorporated it into their folklore. In fact, Christianity was already established in North Africa as early as the fourth century AD. Polytheism did exist in parts of Africa, but Western European Christians misinterpreted the Africans' respect of all aspects of nature, which was sometimes expressed as a deification of elements of nature such as trees and rivers. This point is important and must be understood because this has often been the justification for calling the African people barbaric or ignorant and thus gave credence and justification to the institution of slavery.

A close look at the role of music in West African culture reveals that music was an integral and functional part of African life, not some abstract art form. Important events like births, marriages, funerals, and simple day-to-day life activities were celebrated with music. Workers had music to aid them in accomplishing common tasks. Music was also used to spread news and gossip, satirized those in positions of power, and expressed discontent with employers and those who were in government positions. Music also accompanied the daily lives of children for playing games and other types of entertainment. In many ways, song represented the preservation of communal values, solidarity, and culture. The following quotation by Cloud and Curtis (1991) summarizes the significance of music/song for the preservation of cultural and communal values and solidarity in traditional West African culture.

It is said you can say publicly in song what you cannot say privately to a man's face. So this is one of the ways African society [took] to [maintain] a spiritually healthy community. In this way, West African music represented the preservation of communal values and solidarity. Songs provided the chance for individuals to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of environment in society by permitting the expression of deeply held feelings.

Griots, the trained musicians of West African society, were experts in storytelling, poetry, genealogy, religion, and political and social customs. These individuals, usually men, memorized and passed down the oral histories of their people through song. It is through these stories and traditions that we discover those who took on the roles of the preservers of song and story in the music and the positions of slave society. In addition to the preservation of stories and tales, "music sharing" is another slave song characteristic shared with West African song that was integral to the very form and fabric of the traditional culture.

The most common form of musical sharing is the "call-and-response," singing that allows a very spontaneous and improvised sense of choral song. One of the most famous modern day examples of this would be the B. Jester Hairston setting of *Amen*. Another example is Undine Smith-Moore's "Fare Thee Well," in which there is a soloist and/or a solo ensemble and the full chorus or ensemble response. Another distinguishing characteristic of the slave song that has its origins and roots in West African song is the use and type of rhythms and percussion. West African music is filled with polyrhythms. Drums of many sizes and timbres are used. What we often forget, especially when we look at these rhythmic patterns, is that they are often tied to the speech patterns of the native dialects. These patterns of speech, which are then translated to the rhythmic patterns in the drum, not only maintain the obvious rhythmic vitality of the piece but also send messages in many

ways, and, most importantly, create the mood for the use of body movement or dance in song.

Dance, the expressive movement of the head, torso, limbs and feet, is rooted in West African people as a very natural and instinctive part of their culture. The word "expressive" is important for the dances of the African tribes were not of the folk, social or court type of Europe. They were not based upon the technique of classical ballet. Dance and the word "expressive" refer to the idea that the dancer deals with what is felt when emotion is being experienced by the dancer himself. The beauty of black dance lies in the total lack of inhibition. Therefore, the music of West Africa, whether religious or secular, combines some element of dance to invade the emotion of the people involved. The dancers are usually accompanied on the instrument of the people, the drum. (Cloud and Curtis 1991)

In terms of movement in West African song, which later appears to some degree in slave song, we can say that part of the power and drive of African music derives from the way that African musicians play forward toward the beat. The African musician is not so much moving along with the pulse as pushing the beat to make it more dynamic. What we now commonly understand, especially with music of this form, is that the strong beats of West African music occur on beats two and four instead of beats one and three as in Western music. Additionally, African melody was built from scales that usually had between four and seven steps. What is most telling, though, is the idea and the way in which the slave and the spiritual unified a community, and this has a very strong antecedent in West African music because it is true community music. Everyone becomes involved in creating through singing, playing, or dancing; music is used to relieve the mundane aspects of life and the monotony of work; and it helps to contribute to greater efficiency by helping workers to cooperate and to alleviate fatigue or tiredness in their work. West African music was not only for the moment, but it also provided and served as a keeper of historical events and an informer of current events. Those are some very basic points about West African music and the form that it took in influencing the music of the slaves.

Evolution of the Spiritual

The creation of the spiritual came about as a response to the hardships of the slave life. We have to actually go back to the origins of the hymns that Richard Allen created in *The Hymnal* in 1801 and the founding of the AME Church and its songbook. The slave song or spiritual is truly part of an oral tradition. It must also be noted that not all slave songs are religious. Actually, there is a large genre that we have some access to but has never been

classified as choral music. The corpus of music that we know is really a small amount, but we will look at the totality. The concepts of "sacred" and "secular" didn't really exist in the West African tradition, nor in American slavery, though worldly concepts soon emerged.

The slave song that is called the spiritual shows the relationship between song and the Holy Spirit, and it is said these pieces possess a lyrical quality and express a wide range of emotions, such as elation, hope, and sorrow. The spiritual emerged through the melding of numerous elements. Slaves used the Old Testament Bible stories of faith, hope, and liberation and fit them into a musical structure that at times reflected African forms such as call-and-response and polyrhythms. They then instinctively drew from their African past and also incorporated some of the music and sounds they heard in the New World, (i.e., African tonality and scales combined with the Western seven-note scale). Slave songs provided unity for the slave community and also became an instrument of communication. These songs began to replace the drum as a means of communication after the slave owners forbade their use. Most importantly, the spiritual provided the community with a coded language for use in emergencies.

Slave Song Categories

There are five categories of the slave song. I am indebted to some research by Jester Hairston in this area.

1. **Religious spirituals:** These make very direct reference to the images of King Jesus, the devil, judgment day, and heaven; these are the preaching or teaching spirituals. Some examples include William Dawson's "King Jesus is a-Listenin'" or Moses Hogan's "My God Is So High." These are examples in which the text instructs. For example, "My God is so high, and I can't get over Him. My God is so low, and I can't get under him." These songs teach the people in basic terms about spiritual beliefs.
2. **Freedom spirituals:** These spirituals make reference to Moses, the Hebrews, and the people of Israel in the sense of deliverance. Spirituals such as "Great Day," "Go Down, Moses," and "City Called Heaven" are examples of freedom spirituals—songs that talk about earthly freedom.
3. **Escape spirituals:** These are also called the "coded spirituals" or "telegraph spirituals." They are so named because the planning for escape is very clear in the messages of the lyrics. Spirituals such as "Wade in the Water," "Steal Away," "The Drinking Gourd," and "Keep Your Lamps" are examples.

4. **The shout and hollers:** The whole idea of this category of song is to serve as instruction. It is also a part of the ring-shout tradition. One famous example of this type of spiritual is "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel." In William Dawson's setting, instructions are given on how to proceed with the dance. For example, the verse: "You better mind my brother how you walk on the cross, your foot might slip and your soul get lost" makes a very direct reference as to where the shout occurs and specific instructions on what to do while shouting. The first line of the text in this verse, "You better mind my brother how you walk on the cross," refers to the front of the church where the pews are pulled back to the side. A group of shouters forms a circle that moves counterclockwise while a group of singers forms off to the side to provide the music. The pews are pulled back at the circle's position. The next portion of the text, "your foot might slip and your soul get lost," refers to the shouters' and the church's belief that there are differences between sacred and secular dance. Secular dance takes the feet up off the ground, while sacred dance maintains contact with the earth. This may be a subcategory of slave songs that needs greater investigation. Many of the non-religious slave songs could be used for educational purposes.

5. **Work songs:** These songs were used as people worked in the fields. One example is Andre Thomas' "Goin' Up to Glory." Other songs have connotations with slave songs, such as "John Henry," which tell stories, but were used for work. This category has a rich abundance of songs that can be rediscovered and used by choirs throughout the world.

The spiritual, or slave song, is the earliest community song of the African American experience. It is one that established a link and a sense of communion between participants, and also defined a concept of God for a collective whole. It should be remembered that these songs were created by the community, not by individual composers. Not until the later nineteenth century did groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers start to share the music; only at this time did they begin to be notated.

At the turn of the century, Harry T. Burleigh and others presented slave song melodies to some of the major composers like Dvořák, and these songs gradually became part of the concert tradition. With the rise of singers such as Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and the later generation of Leontyne Price and other black artists who followed, African American spirituals became the staple not only of the concert song tradition, but eventually found their way into the world of choral music.

Issues of Performance Practice

In presenting a chapter such as this, I need to say from the outset that there is no one correct way of performing the slave song. For example, those of us involved as conductors in interpreting the music of Bach or Beethoven are influenced by a variety of situations. The same may be said of the spiritual. Some might say that modern spiritual arrangers are less authentic. For instance, there were no pianos in the fields, but some arrangers use piano within a spiritual. This does not necessarily diminish the integrity or quality of the music. In such situations, we have to look at what is being offered in terms of the preservation of the songs. What I suggest in terms of performance practice is that individuals seek to at least sing these songs with greater integrity. Authenticity can always be argued—but the music, whether it is higher art music or folk music, must be performed with integrity.

Written transcripts of how these songs were performed are unavailable. At best, people have simply developed basic assumptions about the performance. There are three key issues that have to be dealt with in performance practice:

1. Dialect and the use of it.
2. Tempo and rhythm.
3. Appropriate type of vocal timbre/color.

Before we get into these three concepts, which often are at the heart of performance practice, one again has to go back and understand the cultural function of slave songs. I think my earlier description of the categories should help people as they delve into this realm of literature.

1. Dialect and the use of it: In dealing with dialect, there is a wider question: to use or not to use? There are three schools of thought on dialect: use of standard English, a hybrid approach, or use of African American dialect. There are those who believe that a more standard English should be sung. This approach may be favored by the older generation so as to not show disrespect, and this is often done throughout the world. The second is a hybrid approach, which many contemporary conductors, composers, and arrangers use. In the hybrid approach, some of the language is more dialectal, almost vernacular in nature. The attempt is to give a flavor without expecting that all people will be able to approximate the language of the slave.

The third category is the use of dialect, which is favored by those who attempt to try to bring the greatest integrity and some aspect of authenticity to the performance. Curtis (1991) writes, "Dialect is an integral facet of the composition. It should be given the same respect which is given to foreign languages." As one who has attempted to sing the slave song with more and more use of dialect, I want to speak in greater depth about this area because

there are certain issues which need to be considered. I am indebted to Andre Thomas for his research in this work, too.

Phonetic decay: Let's use Andre Thomas' "Keep Your Lamps" as an example. "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, the time is drawing nigh" is the way the words are read in the score, and many choirs sing them with articulate, proper English pronunciation. If we apply phonetic decay to the words, we would first have to decay the final "g" in the words "in burning" and "drawing" so they are sung "burnin'" and "drawin'."

Consonants: We have to recognize that certain sounds common in the English language are absent in many of the African dialects. For example, some of the harder consonants, such as the voiced "th" in words like "the" and "there" simply did not exist in many African dialects. Rather, the use of a harder consonant or a substitute consonant eventuated—for example, "d" instead of a voiced "th." Hence the words would be sung: "Keep your lamps trimmed and burnin', de time is drawin' nigh" rather than "the time is drawin' nigh." There is also a softening of certain consonants. For example, "v" becomes "b," and "t" becomes "d." Hence, "heav'nly" sounds like "heab'nly."

Diphthongs: We also have elimination of diphthongs: "Keep your lamps trimmed and burnin', de tahme is drahwin' nah," features elimination of the diphthong, which reflects more of the speech pattern of the people of the southern United States.

Schwa [ə]: There is also more prevalent use of the schwa. For example, "heavenly Father" would be softened to "Hea-buhn-ly" and the "r" would be softened to "Fatheh."

Clipping words: Sometimes there is a clipping of certain words. For instance, the word "plantation" may be clipped to "plan'tion" or "wit-ness" may be clipped to "wi'ness" as seen in the spiritual "Witness": "Who be a wi'ness foh mah Lawd? Soul is a wi'ness foh mah Lawd."

2. Tempo and rhythm: We need to be careful not to confuse the music of the slave song with later forms that derived from it, such as ragtime, jazz, and gospel. Most often we have a problem with the concept of "swing," how people understand the idiom of swing, and how it is translated from jazz to the spiritual. Curtis (1991) says, "The swing of the spiritual is a part of the religious experience of African Americans. It is a feeling, not a notation, and in order to feel it, one must be aware of the history of the music or the time of

the struggles." The spiritual should not be confused with jazz. Consequently, editions that use the words "in a jazzy style" are misleading. It is a body-based sensation, not the sort of swing that comes out of jazz, which is a completely different type of feel. Often, spirituals are not meant to be swung as we think of swing in terms of the triplet. A clear example is the opening of Andre Thomas' "Rockin' Jerusalem."



These are meant to be even eighth notes. The point is the swing is not to be notated as the swing we know in jazz.

With regard to the rhythm of the piece, this article reflects my views. All too often I find that people take spirituals too fast, especially in certain arrangements. There are basic inner rhythms that must be considered, and when the pieces are taken as fast as some people want to, there is a misconception that the spiritual is simply music of celebration. Too often, tempo or speed is simply used as a means of reaching a sense of energy, excitement, and celebration.

We have to remember to tie the piece to its function. For example, consider a piece like "Keep Your Lamps." You may understand the essence of that music as an escape song, but it may also have been sung as the people were coming back from the fields, chained together. If you sing it fast, the music doesn't work because the people were not moving like that. But if you imagine tired, hot, physically abused people chained together leg-by-leg, this affects the tempo and the interpretation of the piece by instilling a sense of down-troddenness. The people who sang this music were down-trodden—both literally and figuratively. This issue requires the same type of attention we would give to music from the Renaissance and the Baroque. When interpreting music from these periods, we should understand the period dance forms and the types of steps used. Hence, our tempi may be vastly different than those heard on common recordings. To understand the tempo and style of an African American spiritual is a matter of being able to know the feel of the piece and understand the truth about the origins and the history of the songs. James Weldon Johnson and his brother, J. Rosemond Johnson, authors of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), have this to say in their book:

The swing of the spiritual is altogether a subtle and elusive thing. It is subtle and elusive because it is a perfect union. The religious ecstasy that manifests itself in swing embodies the whole congregation. Swing is responding to the baton of some extremely sensitive conductor....it is necessary to know the truth about their origins and history, to get in touch with the association of ideas that surround them, and to realize something of what they have meant and experienced in the people who created them. In a word, the passing of feeling in these songs in singing them was more important than any amount of mere artistic technique.

To delve into and understand the text, one must read and listen. In this day and age, this is a relatively easy task, with such wonderful resources as a compilation of tapes by Bernice Regan Johnson of *Wade in the Water* and other recordings readily available.

Understanding inflection and attitude of the spiritual: "Wade in the Water" and other spirituals are tied to an African American style of preaching, one that places great emphasis on vowels. A black preacher speaking that text wouldn't say "Wade in the water," but rather "Waaade in the water, Waaade in the water, God's a gonna trouble the waater." Part of my thesis as conductor of African American songs is to relate the words back to the preaching style, and I think that quite often this point isn't articulated enough. For example, consider the context of the words "One day when I was a-walkin' down a lone-some road." The context in which Dawson intended this music to be sung uses the imagery of old black men who sit in church and preach with the deacons, going back and forth, not a modern-day gospel interpretation.

You're telling a story! What is the context? How is it expressed? This is oral tradition. When we take a piece from oral tradition and notate it, we've already removed it one level from authenticity. With that said, we also have to be careful we don't lock it into one way of doing it.

In terms of interpretation, there is also the question "What do we do when we look at the words?" The clearest example I can think of is in the recording of William Dawson's "Soon Ah Will Be Done." For years Dawson had one concept of what that text meant. He notated it, and we've been locked into it. With all due respect, I believe those words can suggest another way. After seeing the 1959 movie *Imitation of Life* with Lana Turner, I was tremendously influenced by the closing scene when Mahalia Jackson sings at a funeral. She comes from a gospel background, and she sings this one as a lament: "Soon Ah will be done with the troubles of the world, going home to be with God." In the oral tradition, Dawson may have heard those words in a "salvatory" way, but there is another way it could be understood—as a lament, still praise but also lament.

In a recording my group made of this song, I chose to use a halfway point. The refrain is slower, more responsive to the pain of this world. The verses become a vision of being with God in the heavenly Kingdom, or at least released from the hell in which they lived—reflecting a sense of anticipation and joy. I also altered the tempo. I believe we have to look at the background of the songs, and look at the text. They have to be left open for the possibility that there is another way they can be examined. In some of these arrangements, including Dawson's and Hairston's classic arrangements, we tend to try to do call-and-response and preach, so it is clear that the tempo will be a little more emphatic. But people have to have spatial time and respond to that, too—they are listening to respond. In a preaching spiritual like "My God Is So High" I think you have to take into consideration that someone is preaching and others are responding. That's understanding the slave song as proclamation.

3. Vocal timbre/color: This is an area open for discussion and debate. When I perform music from certain periods, I try to understand how the people would have sung the music. I think one reason we have a certain style of sound for Renaissance music is that we believe most of the music was sung by boys, which implies a pure, vibrato-less sound. We also know the continental sound of boys singing is very different from that in Great Britain—so Victoria is going to sound different from Byrd. In this way, I think there are certain generalities (without being racist) that one can make in that African and African American singers tend to have a darker hue in tonal quality. So I believe that part of the idea in recreating spirituals with integrity versus authenticity, is understanding that the timbre and tone color need to be part of the equation, part of a respectful and successful interpretation of the slave song. When that is coupled with use of a dialect that reflects the speech patterns of that period, one can arrive at tone quality that seeks to enhance the singing of the slave songs.

We tend to lump all spirituals together, but field hollers really don't have religious connotations. I think the term spiritual embraces the largest corpus we know so far—it comes from songs with religious imagery. I believe (because of recordings that take this into account) that the sound of music from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is very different from music of the nineteenth century. We need to be conscious and take into consideration what type of vocal timbre and vocal color would reflect the most integrity in the interpretation of the slave song. Much of that understanding comes after listening to professional, well-trained art singers, especially African Americans, who perform the repertoire. This is where you develop a sound ideal.

I am not an ethnomusicologist. I consider my approach a "common sense" approach. Someone may come to me and argue "But Moses Hogan said..."

and I would respectfully reply, "I would imagine that was how Moses responded." Additionally I would also ask, "Do you expect that Bernstein did the same work as von Karajan or Ormandy? No, they were all gifted musicians. I also perform Andre Thomas' pieces, but I don't just take those pieces or Moses' music on face value. I play with "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord" because I have other ways of hearing that piece."

This is my personal point of view. The danger of doing a workshop is that I'll say something and people will think I'm "God." The decisions I make are based on some degree of study and trying to put the music into context so the pieces have some integrity about them. This is not a defense—it's just something on which I question Thomas. I feel he is more in the "second school," i.e., takes a hybrid approach. Some of his pieces have the dialect, others don't. He tends to do that. I think that spirituals have more relevance if you put them in the context of performance practice. There is a compelling reason for this.

Many times we have a negative reaction to using any type of dialect, and this was especially true during the period of the Civil Rights Movement. During this time, young African Americans, especially, did not want to be reminded of anything having to do with slavery. During the infancy of the Civil Rights period to the modern day, this has been a point of contention. I believe this argument all goes back to letting these songs have a flavor in their original context to some degree, and language is one way in which that can be done; it should be done. It is integral.

If I were to sing a piece in a foreign language, I would study the piece with the proper pronunciation. It is the same with spirituals. One needs to understand that the people who were brought up in West Africa were some of the most intelligent and best educated people in their countries. They were at the highest level in African society, and the fact they were able to learn a new language through assimilation bears witness to their intelligence. It is the fact that the dialect reflects their appropriation of the English language, coupled with aspects of their own mother tongue and how that was passed down, that supports the use of certain words and dialect. These people weren't ignorant—quite the opposite.

The final point I wish to emphasize is that this music has to be treated with great dignity. The programming of spirituals is integral. We often like to program this music at the end, and there is not a problem with it being at the end of the program as long as one understands that there are many other spots on the program that a spiritual could fill. It is the music of a proud and noble people; it is music that celebrates life and the power of goodness over the power of evil. I think for the people of the twenty-first century it represents an affirmation by a people who faced great adversity but never lost their dignity and that this music is a vehicle to overcome all of the atrocities and injustices of life. This music does and should serve as inspiration for all generations, for young people who understand that one can gain strength, comfort, and

inspiration from this music. And for many people, this music leads to healing, to restoration of oneself fully in body, mind, spirit, and voice.

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