Liberty University

School of Music

Songs of Sorrow, Hope, and Praise:

Toward a Historical Analysis of Negro Spirituals

A Lecture Recital/Thesis Submitted to

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by

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Abstract

Traditional Negro spirituals play a key role in America's music history. Spirituals were initially perpetuated by enslaved Africans in the American South through the oral tradition but today are available in a wide variety of choral, vocal, and instrumental arrangements. The lecture recital that accompanies this document will present seven traditional spirituals of varying themes: "Hold On," "Witness," "Deep River," "Sweet Little Jesus Boy," "Balm in Gilead," "Steal Away," and "Ride On, King Jesus." Spirituals can be described by three closely interrelated textual categories or descriptors which correspond with their original use and historical context. Songs of sorrow are those songs which relate images or stories of despair or dejection, derived from their initial use as laments. Songs of hope inspire the singer to look toward his or her heavenly destination. These songs often contained symbolic messages used to guide other enslaved people to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Finally, songs of praise contain texts that bring glory to God, either by telling stories found in Scripture or by inviting others to have a relationship with Jesus. While a few songs fall neatly into one category, most spirituals have significant overlap in areas of theme and function. Thus, it is preferable to *describe* the overarching thematic elements of spirituals, rather than attempting to *categorize* them or compartmentalize them, as some authors have done. The document that follows will address issues of historical context, textual themes, and performance practice inherent in an analysis of Negro spirituals.

Dedicated to my mother, Rebecca, who first introduced me to spirituals.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Scholars have called Negro spirituals America's only authentic musical inheritance. These songs, borne out of sorrow and suffering, span a wide range of themes, including despair, jubilance, triumph, grief, anticipation, intercession, and imprecation. According to historical records, approximately 6,000 spirituals exist today. Created by enslaved Africans in the American South, the texts of these spirituals encapsulate the cry of the human heart for the freedom that can only be found "in that Rock" – in Jesus Christ.[1]

Statement of the Problem

While there is a great deal of scholarly research on Negro spirituals, no source has succinctly categorized or described these songs according to their textual themes. Some anthologies include topical lists of the spirituals contained within (as is the case in most hymnals), but these lists include over a dozen themes, many of which overlap. While useful for those programming a concert or church service, such lists could be effectively condensed into fewer, broader categories. Additionally, some modern scholars approach spirituals through the lens of critical theory or other cultural worldviews that are not aligned with the very principles taught in the spirituals themselves. In doing this, some analysts undermine the theological messages contained in the lyrics of each song.

[1] Moses Hogan, *A Home in That Rock: A Collection of Spirituals and Songs of Faith*, recorded October 2008, B001HWG68A, 2008, 1 compact disc.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this research is to define three broad descriptors of spirituals. First, songs of sorrow are those songs which relate themes of suffering, trouble, or loss. Songs of hope contain lyrics which anticipate freedom. This thematic subsection of spirituals frequently contains songs with a double meaning. Many songs of hope were used to convey coded messages about stops on the Underground Railroad while also encouraging hearers to look toward heaven as the sojourner's ultimate destination. Finally, songs of praise may relate biblical narratives, stories, or topics. These songs comprise the most varied descriptor of the three, with texts spanning both Old and New Testament references in addition to key theological themes.

Significance of the Study

This study will do what many other qualitative studies have already done: provide a concise historical context for Negro spirituals while seeking to bring awareness to the vast repertory of these songs. However, it will do this with the goal of viewing spirituals and their historical background from the perspective of a biblical worldview, something no other source explicitly seeks to achieve. There is one article in existence which suggests a similar goal, but this article deals less with performance practice and historical tradition and more with the role of spirituals in American social life.[2] This study will also do what no other study has attempted to accomplish: it will describe spirituals according to three broad textual categories, rather than placing them into separate stylistic categories.

[2] Solomon Iyobosa Omo-Osagie, II, " 'Their Souls Made Them Whole': Negro Spirituals and Lessons in Healing and Atonemen," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 31, no.2 (2007): n.p., link.gale.com/apps/doc/A203660016/AONE?u=anon~e9a6d0e0&sid=googleScholar&xid=ed36fd18.

The study of spirituals is significant for a broad audience: church leaders, theologians, and laypeople alike can draw hope and comfort from the texts found within. Additionally, musical artists and performers can benefit from the issues of performance practice inherent in a study of spirituals. Music educators can benefit from understanding issues of authenticity and respectful representation of these historical songs. Keeping in mind their original uses, educators will be able to guide students toward a greater appreciation of and interest in Negro spirituals.

Research Question and Sub Questions

The primary research question this study seeks to answer is, "Into what textual categories, if any, can spirituals be placed, based on their initial uses and historical contexts?" Based on the scholarship that the process of inquiry revealed, several sub-questions have emerged. First, "What role, if any, do Negro spirituals play in American music history?" It is evident that much of what occurs in modern worship practice, as well as within the musical genres of jazz, blues, folk music, and gospel, has been derived in some form from the songs of enslaved Africans. If this is true, two additional questions follow, given the parameters of worldview that define this study: 1) How do the texts of Negro spirituals relate to key theological concepts? and 2) How should historical contexts inform and inspire modern performance practice?

Definition of Terms

Some researchers find the use of the term "Negro spirituals" to be problematic. There are others, however, including many black scholars, who believe that this terminology is the most accurate descriptor for these songs, since the enslaved Africans were not yet considered

"African-Americans."[3] As people who were removed from their homeland involuntarily and transported to American in abhorrent conditions, they were not given the opportunity to volitionally adopt the secondary culture the adjective "African-American" implies. Additionally, these people were not called "Negroes" in Africa; they were simply Africans. They were known among themselves according to their individual tribes, regions, and subcultures. The word "Negro" for the purposes of this paper is a historical term which describes a person with Black African heritage who lived during the period of slavery in America. The use of this terminology has been encouraged by leading African-American scholars, including Everett McCorvey, founder of the American Negro Spiritual Ensemble and member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS).[4] He specifically promotes the use of this terminology within educational contexts, as in the case of the American Negro Spiritual competition hosted biannually by NATS.

For similar reasons, this study primarily uses the terms "enslaved, "enslaved people," or "enslaved Africans" when referring to the group of people indicated above. According to Daryl Duff, a black gospel music scholar, the word "enslaved" denotes the circumstance in which these Africans found themselves, placed in slave ships and on plantations against their will. He observes, however, that there is an appropriate use of the word "slave," and this is to denote a person who voluntarily gives up his rights to him or herself.[5] Christians believe that all people, regardless of ethnicity, are fundamentally slaves – either to sin or to Christ. Paul records, "Don't

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[3] Edward Daryl Duff, interview by author, Lynchburg, VA, February 21, 2023.

[4] McCorvey, Everett. "History of the American Negro Spiritual," National Association of Teachers of Singing, https://www.nats.org/History_of_American_Negro_Spiritual.html#:~:text=The%20American%20Negro%20Spirituals%20are,America%20between%201619%20and%201860./.

[5] Duff, interview.

you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves you are slaves of the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" and, ". . . you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God . . . and the result is eternal life" (Romans 6:15, 22a., New International Version). Believers in Christ voluntarily subject themselves to God through an act of free will. Thus, in this study, the word "slaves" will be limited in its usage to quotations of outside sources or in cases where its use is historically appropriate (as in the phrase "slave songs" in the discussion below).

Another term which needs to be defined is essential to the very subject of this study: the spiritual. Some scholars, especially those writing in the late 2000s, have objected to the use of the word "spiritual," positing that this terminology supports the false concept that all enslaved Africans were converted to Christianity upon arrival in America. Lauri Ramey states that this word, "presents a skewed or partial portrait of a population, . . . because it served to artificially or fraudulently characterize enslaved Africans – whether motivated by abolitionism, evangelism, racism, naiveté, or ignorance – as a holy, pure, and sanitized group."[6] Ironically, this hesitancy to use the term "spiritual" requires such authors to come into conflict with those who oppose the use of the word "slave." Such authors prefer the term "slave songs," as this removes the religious element from their analysis. While Ramey's observation that not all enslaved people were Christians is valid,[7] this hesitancy to call spiritual songs "spirituals" seems to diminish the role that religion had in the life of enslaved peoples. Other authors have resolved this issue by labeling songs with non-sacred lyrics "secular spirituals." This label seems counterintuitive, but it does address the spiritual nature of the genre while allowing for exceptions that contain only

[6] Lauri Ramey, *Slaves Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave & McMillan, 2008), 10.

[7] Ramey, *Slave Songs*, 10.

secular texts. As this study approaches the topic from a biblical worldview, it will maintain the use of the word spiritual, as did arrangers Burleigh, Work, and Johnson. Additionally, calling these songs spirituals gives them a measure of the respect and dignity they deserve – as valid expressions of praise to God, mandated in Scripture: "Be filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:18b-19, King James Version).

Some authors who use the term "spirituals" choose to capitalize the word. The reason for this is not clear based on current research, but this study will not follow that practice. Stylistic categories and terms for other genres or forms of music (gospel, bluegrass, cantatas, folk songs, etc.) are not traditionally capitalized, so this study will maintain normative grammatical standards. If an adjective, such as "Negro," "African-American," or "American" precedes the noun, the adjective will be capitalized per standard rules of capitalization.

Finally, a note must be made regarding the difference between composers and arrangers of spirituals. Since spirituals were originally created and passed on through the oral tradition, the composers of these songs often remain unknown. The arrangers of these songs, however, are historically identifiable, as will be detailed later in the study. When people refer to spirituals as being "composed" by Burleigh or Johnson or Hogan, most mean that they were arranged by these musicians. There are a few notable exceptions, as in the case of Robert MacGimsey, an American composer who was familiar with the tradition of Negro spirituals and intentionally wrote songs (such as "Sweet Little Jesus Boy") in that style. For the remainder of this study, the word "composers" will refer to those who wrote the lyrics and melody of a song at a certain time in history. The word "arrangers" will indicate those who created settings of songs that were

received through the oral tradition or through early transcription efforts. The word "transcribers" will refer to those who attempted to record spirituals directly from the oral tradition.

The final term which deserves clarification is "dialect" (also referred to henceforth as Negro or African dialect). This word indicates the variety of diction that exists in the world of Negro spirituals. Some arrangers and transcribers, trying to be as authentic as possible, chose to record words euphonically, syllable by syllable, while others Anglicized words that would historically have been pronounced according to African linguistic traditions. When Africans were first brought to America, they came from a variety of geographical locations, each with their own unique dialect (not unlike regional accents in the United States) or language.[8] These linguistic differences together make up the concept of "dialect." Some have viewed dialectical differences between African and American English in a negative light, citing this as proof for a supposed lack of intelligence on the part of the enslaved people. This claim has been successfully refuted by André Thomas, among many others. He recalls a conversation he had with composer and arranger Jester Hairston, in which he learned that most African languages do not have a naturally occurring "th" sound.[9] This accounts for the "d" sound that sometimes is substituted for words that begin or end with a "th" combination.[10]

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[8] Brandon Waddles, "Negro Spirituals: The Music that Helped Free Enslaved African Americans," (video lecture), produced by Detroit Public Television, June 28, 2022, 1:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaskR8XVjTU.

[9] André J Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007), 89.

[10] A similar instance occurs when attempting to teach native English speakers to pronounce the Italian "rolled 'r'" sound. Subtle differences in Irish or Scottish English diction present a similar difficulty.

Summary

Negro spirituals account for a crucial part of American music history. By analyzing them respectfully and with regard for the unique issues of culture and context that arise through thorough study, one can gain a greater appreciation of this genre of music. As an embodiment of the experience of enslaved Africans in the American South,[11] these songs capture the enduring encouragement and truth found in the singing of "spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19).

[11] For the purposes of this study, the "American South" will refer to the regions commonly called "slave states" where enslavement was a legal practice during and prior to the Civil War Era.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

While there has been a resurgence in African-American studies in recent years, few scholarly sources exist that succinctly trace the history of Negro spirituals combined with theological and textual analyses. The sources that follow contribute to the body of research that exists today. Many of the following sources, while dealing with biblical songs, are not written from a biblical worldview. Thus, they will be analyzed primarily for historical content using the lens of Scripture as the ultimate guide.

Overview

Negro spirituals comprise a unique genre of folk music. As such, spirituals were typically transmitted from one singer to another through the oral tradition. They continued to be passed down through the generations, before being transcribed during the post-war era. Prior to the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved peoples in the American South, spirituals served to uplift and encourage these people in the truth of Jesus Christ while also relaying messages of future hope for physical freedom. According to the U.S. Library of Congress, spirituals constitute ". . . one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong."[12] This article provides a brief overview of the spiritual as a genre, including sections on common forms, compilations, and performing groups. It also highlights several well-known spirituals, including "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses," and "Balm in Gilead."

[12] "African American Spirituals," Library of Congress, Google, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/.

Cultural Issues

As Katrina Dyonne Thompson points out, enslaved people were made to dance and sing as a form of entertainment for plantation masters. [13] In her book, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*, she identifies the role of forced song and dance in the lives of enslaved people. This concept is reminiscent of Israel's Babylonian captivity, in which the nation was exiled from their homeland. The Psalmist records, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137: 1-4, NIV). David Stowe highlights the ironic longevity of this psalm in early American history, noting that it was well-known by the English Puritans and was an essential text during the War of Independence.[14] Its message, however, became especially poignant during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[15] As enslaved people were called on to sing a song of their homeland for their captors, they sang spiritual songs of praise.

The texts for many of these songs serve to glorify God by telling of His works, extolling His character, or offering an encouraging or evangelistic message to the listener and singer alike. Old Testament themes are particularly common in these songs of praise. One such song, "Hold On," places Noah in the context of field labor before ending with an evangelistic invitation, "Do you wanter' get to heaven? I'll tell you how: keep your hand on the gospel plow." Similarly,

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[13] Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 69.

[14] David W. Stowe, "Babylon Revisited: Psalm 137 as American Protest Song," *Black Music Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012): 96, https://doi.org/10.5406/blacmusiresej.32.1.0095.

[15] Some scholars cite the year 1619 as the "official" beginning of the slave trade, while others recognize it as beginning decades earlier.

"Witness" relates the accounts of Nicodemus and Samson, both key biblical figures who sought the Lord during times of spiritual confusion, uncertainty, or unrest. Each man is heralded as being a witness "for my Lord" as the songs relate key moments in their life stories. "Witness" closes with a resounding declaration of the Lord's power and might: "Ma' soul is a witness for ma' Lord!"

Early Context of Spirituals

According to Matthew Sabatella, spirituals were used as a "mechanism for survival."[16] Many enslaved people were removed from the western part of Africa, hailing from an amalgam of different villages, tribes, and cultural groups. Each geographical region had unique aspects of musicality which impacted the development of Negro spirituals. The call and response format was common, as singers used repeated refrains and body percussion (including handclaps, foot stomps, slapping of arms and thighs, and shuffling). [17] This collection of motions and expression is sometimes referred to as "Patting Juba."[18] Music was improvised and often featured emotional wails, shouts, or groans.[19] Dancing was also a prominent feature of African musicality and religious customs. Dancers usually formed a ring as part of a religious ritual (sometimes called the "ring shout") and would move in a circular, shuffling motion while clapping hands or Patting Juba. These familiar customs allowed enslaved people to express their cultural heritage while worshipping God and praying for freedom during their captivity.

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[16] Matthew Sabatella, "Spirituals: About the Genre," Ballad of America, accessed February 9, 2023, https://balladofamerica.org/spirituals/.

[17] Sabatella, "Spirituals."

[18] Scholars believe that Juba dance originated as a way of reproducing traditional African dance forms and sounds, without traditional African instruments.

[19] Sabatella, "Spirituals."

Some authors, observing the similarities between white and Negro spirituals, have supposed that Negro spirituals must have been derived in some form from their white counterparts. This is a difficult claim to support, however, given the history and timeline of slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction in the American South. White and Negro spirituals did coexist, but it is almost certainly Africans who crafted the new tradition of Negro spirituals in America. Novelist and anthropologist Harold Courlander observes the following in his book, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.:*[20]

> This is not to say that United States Negro music is African, but that many characteristics of African musical styles persist to this day. Some of those characteristics are melodic or rhythmic concepts. Some are to be found in the relationship between voices, and between voices and instruments. Others are in the instruments themselves, and in the use of those instruments. Still others are found in concepts of vocal and instrumental sound, in accidental conflicts with traditional Western scales, in motor actions associated with singing and dancing, and in attitudes toward music and music making.

These distinctively "African" traits, then, help researchers identify and trace the origins of the Negro spiritual as a genre. Courlander describes in detail the development of Negro music, including the folk music tradition, giving special attention to vocal versus instrumental styles. He observes the differences in ballads, worksongs, religious dances, spirituals, blues, game songs, cries and shouts, and French Creole songs. He includes lyrics for nearly fifty examples as well as historical notes about discography and performances. His research is thorough, providing an early (1960s) comprehensive analysis of Negro music in the Americas.

Storytelling is another landmark of African musicality. Spirituals often relate stories of biblical figures (David, Noah, Moses, David, Joshua, and Jesus Christ in particular) or tell stories of the sojourner's journey from earth to their heavenly home. These stories frequently contain symbolic language, relating natural objects, locations, people, or things to those that are eternal.

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[20] Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), n.p.

Prior to the Civil War era, many enslaved people were illiterate due to laws preventing slaves from gaining formal education. Thus, the stories told through spirituals served to familiarize enslaved people with biblical stories and concepts, such as freedom, redemption, justification, evangelism, grace, healing, baptism, justice, forgiveness, eternal life, and the second coming of Christ. Symbolism also played a role in enslaved peoples' journeys to freedom. The Underground Railroad refers to the system of self-emancipation by which enslaved people would journey toward freedom in the Northern states. Abolitionist "operators" on the Railroad directed enslaved people to safe houses (often owned by Quakers or those belonging to other sympathetic Christian denominations), food, wagon rides, money, or other resources necessary for survival. Blacks would journey by night and sleep during the day in barns or schoolhouses. As a secret network, no formal maps or directional systems existed. Thus, enslaved Africans would use the stories and symbolism of song to communicate important information to their fellow freedom-seekers.

Charshee Charlotte Lawrence-McIntyre's article, "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals," provides another concise summary of African musical traditions. She highlights the ancestral element of African musical praxes, observing that in Africa, music is not an individual pursuit. Instead, it is something that reflects tribal values and community building.[21] She claims that through the creation of spirituals, enslaved Africans created "the new Black Christianity."[22] While her point that African-American worship emerged from the spiritual tradition is valid, it is difficult to divide Christianity into racial categories. Black or Asian or Irish *expressions* of Christianity certainly exist, but it is important for the Christian scholar to highlight that the

[21] Charshee Charlotte Lawrence-M, "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals," *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no 4 (2016): 379, https://doi.org/10.1177/002193478701700401.

[22] Lawrence-M, "The Double Meaning of Spirituals," 381.

Gospel is the Good News of God to the entire (singular) human race, expressed differently through varying ethnicities. Labeling Christianity according to racial labels (i.e. "Black Christianity, White Christianity, etc.) may prove more divisive then helpful in today's culture. Varying ethnic expressions constitute beautiful ways of worshipping God and serve as a foretaste of eternal praise and worship in heaven. All believers – those of every tribe, tongue, and nation – will worship together in one unified eternal kingdom in the presence of Jesus Christ (see Revelation 7:9).

Enslaved people also expressed African religious traditions in their worship practices. They would meet outdoors or in small "praise houses" on the plantation grounds. These meetings (also sometimes referred to as "camp meetings" or "brush arbor meetings") were typically clandestine, as rules often prohibited enslaved Africans from gathering for worship apart from supervision by their captors. Plantation owners would conduct weekly "church services" in the white English tradition which they required slaves to attend. As a response to this, enslaved people would hold their own secret "church services" in which they would dance, shout, and praise the Lord in their native musical tongues. These meetings often lasted long into the night, serving as an authentic (and cathartic) means of worship. Such gatherings were often held "down by the riverside," using wet blankets or clothing hung on trees to muffle the sounds of their praise.[23] Layered meanings in spirituals are particularly relevant here: someone singing "Steal Away" might have been singing for at least three reasons: 1) as a means of encouraging oneself, 2) as a message to fellow enslaved people that they would have a gospel meeting later that day, or 3) as a message that they were seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad. After slavery

[23] E. Daryl Duff, "Black Gospel Music" (class lecture in MUSC 313 at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, April 4, 2023).

ended in American and scholars became interested in developments in African-American worship practices, the black church became known as the "invisible institution," due in large part to their secretive meetings.[24]

Antebellum Contexts of Spirituals

While the Emancipation Proclamation secured freedom for enslaved people on January 1, 1863, and the Civil War officially ended in April 1865, change was slow in coming to many in the southern United States. Some enslaved people in Texas did not know they had been freed until messengers from the Union army came in mid-June, announcing the good news. As former slaves moved into their new roles as free men and women, they sought to create a new identity for themselves. Some fled the South, moving to the Northern states that they had longed to reach for years. Others remained on plantations, working for wages rather than as forced laborers. Due to pre-Civil War-era laws, most slaves were illiterate, meaning that many blacks also gained new skill sets and academic aspirations in the Antebellum years. One institution that supported this end was Fisk University, a historically black university, and the oldest continuing institution of higher education in Nashville, Tennessee. Founded less than a year after the end of the Civil War, Fisk University began offering classes to free blacks of all ages starting in January 1866. Most students who came to Fisk University were illiterate and poor, but the school's founders, John Ogden, Erastus Milo Cravath, and Edward P. Smith set out to teach their students with excellence and equality.

In the book *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: With Their Songs*, J. B. T. Marsh records the history and legacy of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. According to the author, the book

[24] Bob Kellemen, "The Invisible Institution," RPM Ministries, February 7, 2010, https://rpmministries.org/2010/02/the-invisible-institution/.

serves to combine two prior histories of the singing group (both written by the Reverend G. D. Pike).[25] Marsh's account includes the most comprehensive collection of biographies, songs, and historical details on the subject in existence. Marsh describes how George L. White, a professor of music at Fisk University, crafted a small (then nameless) a cappella choral ensemble during a time of institution-wide financial instability. This group of nine singers (five women and four men, divided into quartets or quintets) began their U.S. fundraising tour in October 1871. Their first appearance was in Cincinnati, Ohio, with subsequent performances in New York, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and Maryland. They were greeted with varying responses, including appreciation, hatred, and indifference. At one point, they considered ending their tour early due to the negative response they received in Columbus, Ohio. Their pastor, Henry Bennett, sought the Lord for guidance and a name for the group. He told the group he believed it was God's will that they should continue their tour. The group then adopted the name "Jubilee Singers."[26] They gained more traction and raised sufficient funds to allow the group and the university to continue. Many audience members had never heard "slave songs" performed before, having only been accustomed to hearing minstrel shows with blackface (white) musicians. The difference between the two styles of music is striking.

Many newly freed people did not wish to relive the memories of slavery by presenting these songs, but as the positive reaction of their audiences grew, they began singing spirituals as a regular part of their performances. In 1873, an eleven-member iteration of the Fisk Jubilee Singers began a tour of Great Britain and Europe. In April, they presented a concert of spirituals,

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[25] J.B.T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: With Their Songs* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880), n.p.

[26] The name is derived from the Old Testament concept of the "Year of Jubilee." According to Jewish law, every fifty years marked the Year of Jubilee, in which all slaves would be freed and debts cancelled.

including “Steal Away to Jesus” and “Go Down, Moses” for Queen Victoria. Their reviews kept improving and their monetary contributions to Fisk University grew as well, enabling the school to erect its first permanent building, Jubilee Hall (now designated as a National Historic Landmark). Despite their public fame, the Jubilee Singers were still subjected to racial prejudice during their travels. Lodging and food were often withheld from the ensemble, leading it to temporarily disband in 1878. The following year, the Jubilee Singers Choir was formed, and its members continued to travel throughout America. This ensemble is still in existence today, having been featured on many national television programs. The group’s members have presented performances at the White House in Washington, D.C., and have also been inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame and the Music City Walk of Fame.[27]

Early Transcription Efforts

Spirituals, as is the case with most songs in the folk tradition, were transmitted orally. Mothers would sing these songs of sorrow to their children. Field workers would hear others singing a familiar melody and add new words to fit their mood or condition or struggles. Songs would be repeated during clandestine worship services, with song leaders using a call-and-response pattern to indicate the flow of the song, rather than using hymnals or tunebooks. Richard Crawford, in his summative history of America’s musical heritage, writes, “the African oral heritage, with its emphasis on spontaneity, improvisation, and quick responsiveness, gave slaves a way to transcend, figuratively if not literally, the officially powerless state in which they

[27] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, n.p.

found themselves."[28] The opportunity for creative expression that spirituals afford can still be seen today in the variety of unique arrangements that exist.

In the years following the Civil War, newly freed men and women sought to leave behind as much of their past as possible. While some groups, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, found great success performing spirituals, many formerly enslaved people saw spirituals as a part of their collective "old life" – a chapter that was too painful to revisit. Others saw spirituals as an intimate, sacred part of their religious expression and did not wish to publicize the songs of their hearts. Nevertheless, transcription efforts began soon after the Civil War ended. The first official collection of transcribed spirituals, titled *Slave Songs of the United States*, was published in 1867.[29] It consists of over one hundred spirituals, "taken down by the editors from the lips of the colored people themselves," thus marking the largest transcription effort of Negro spirituals to date.[30] The songs are categorized according to region, divided into the following locales: South-Eastern Slave States, Northern Seabord Slave States, Inland Slave States, and Gulf States. Most songs consist of a single melody line written in standard musical notation (without accompaniment or harmonic indications), with additional verses of text below. Some verses of text are set syllabically under the melody, while others are written as separate stanzas. The introduction to the compendium acknowledges the difficulty in accurately transcribing music intended for oral (and aural) transmission, observing that these transcriptions are merely a "shadow of the original" songs.[31]

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[28] Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 105.

[29] William Francis Allen and Charles Pickard Ware, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Simpson & Co., 1867), n.p.

[30] Allen and Ware, *Slave Songs of the United States*, n.p.

[31] Ibid.

In *Songs of Sorrow: Lucy McKim Garrison and Slave Songs of the United States,* blues historian Samuel Charters pays homage to the role of Lucy Garrison in the publication of *Slave Songs of the United States*. As a teen, Garrison accompanied her father to the coastal region of South Carolina to assist newly freed people. During this time, she heard African songs and spirituals for the first time. She began recording the melodies and lyrics she heard, publishing the first edition of the transcriptions and arrangements in 1862. In *Songs of Sorrow,* Charters recounts her life story using letters from the war years, accounts of her courtship and marriage, and historical publications. She married Wendell Phillips Garrison (son of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison) in 1865, and by 1867 she and her husband had produced what scholars today call the first collection of Negro spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States*. As a leading figure in American ethnomusicology, Garrison stands out as a pioneer of early African-American musical studies.

The Age of Arrangers

After transcription efforts were complete, arrangers of spirituals became especially important. Many excellent arrangers lived between 1900 and 2000, including Jester Hairston, William Grant Still, John Wesley Work, Clara Ward, William Levi Dawson, Wendell Whalum, Moses Hogan, Florence Price, Nathaniel Dett, and Roland Carter. The limitations of this study do not permit a comprehensive examination of these people or the songs they arranged. A biographical analysis of arrangers of spirituals would comprise a fascinating topic for further research. This study, however, will briefly detail the lives and impact of three arrangers whose works were featured in the accompanying lecture recital: H.T. Burleigh, Hall Johnson, and Margaret Bonds.

One of the earliest arrangers of Negro spirituals was Henry Thacker (H.T.) Burleigh, who lived from 1866 to 1949. His first compilation of spirituals was published in 1911. In the years following this publication, he provided the Fisk Jubilee singers with arrangements for their performances, many of which remain to this day. Known as the "father of the concert spiritual," Burleigh's arrangements are written in the classical art music style. Some of his arrangements feature traditional Negro dialect while others do not. The arrangements of "Deep River" and "Balm in Gilead" featured in the accompanying recital were created by H.T. Burleigh.

Another arranger of spirituals, Francis Hall Johnson, was born in 1888 to an AME (African Methodist Episcopal) bishop and his wife. Trained at several prestigious musical institutions, including Julliard, Johnson was concerned that "the spiritual traditions were dying and would be lost completely when he and his contemporaries – those old enough to really remember the sound of the early spiritual performances – passed away."[32] He served as a sort of intermediary between transcribers and arrangers, attempting to record an accurate aural representation of spirituals while arranging them for solo voice and piano, sometimes setting them within the context of larger works (including a Broadway production, *The Green Pastures*). Due to his desire to authentically replicate the spiritual tradition, Johnson's arrangement frequently use traditional African dialect. This feature can be seen in his arrangements including in the accompanying recital, "Ride on, King Jesus," "Steal Away," and "Witness."

During the 1920s and 30s, African-American composers and arrangers began to gain recognition for their work. Margaret Bonds, a Chicago native and musical prodigy, graduated from Northwestern University with her master's degree in music in 1934. During her time in Chicago, she became the first African American to perform as a soloist with the Chicago

[32] Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan'*, 30.

Symphony Orchestra. She taught private lessons (one of her most notable students was American composer Ned Rorem) and continued to compose, arrange, and perform before moving to New York where she performed a solo recital at Town Hall. She was one of the first African-American female composers to gain national recognition for her compositions and arrangements. One of these, "Hold On," is featured in the accompanying recital.

Themes in Spirituals

Negro spirituals fill a unique historical-textual niche in that they recognize the inherent evil of slavery while looking toward a brighter day of freedom. Other songs (even some later black gospel, R&B, soul, or jazz styles) fall strongly on one side or the other of this evil vs. truth paradox, evoking only joy or retelling only sorrow. Negro spirituals, however, confront the dual realities of deep, immediate human suffering and eternal, inexpressible joy in Jesus Christ. Enslaved people expressed their deep sorrow over the forced labor and cruel conditions they were forced to endure, but at the same time expressed hope in "evidence of things yet unseen" (Hebrews 11:1, NIV). Few spirituals contain only one theme; indeed, scholars will be hard-pressed to identify a single emotional value or expressive characteristic with which each song (or group of songs) can be labeled. Instead, the researcher is left to observe or describe (rather than categorize) the themes inherent in Negro spirituals. The process for doing so begins by identifying a list of emotions, thematic characteristics, expressions, theological concepts, or truths that these songs evoke. By analyzing just the seven spirituals presented in the accompanying recital, one might develop the following list of primary themes and descriptive adjectives:

"Hold On": *endurance, perseverance, evangelization, encouragement, tenacity, O.T.*[33]
"Witness": *evangelization, O.T. salvation, baptism*

[33] O.T. = Old Testament; N.T. = New Testament

"Deep River": *eternal life, freedom, longing, anticipation, hope, home, symbolism*
"Sweet Little Jesus Boy": *sorrow, suffering, endurance, forgiveness, salvation, ignorance*
"Balm in Gilead": *sorrow, suffering, wholeness, freedom, eternity*
"Steal Away": *finitude, fear, suffering, hope, promise, eternity, symbolism, heaven,*
"Ride On, King Jesus": *victory, triumph, O.T., N.T., declaration, proclamation, praise*

The adjectives which characterize these songs are varied and unique: some are words of freedom and joy while others plumb the depths of grief and suffering. Nevertheless, all speak to the experience of enslaved people on a journey from captivity to freedom. As has already been discussed, it is difficult to succinctly categorize spirituals according to textual themes. Instead, the researcher must do his or her best to describe the lyrics of each song and then find similar patterns of thought and theology that are prevalent throughout the various songs. The adjectives above all fit into the following (broad) descriptors: songs of sorrow, hope, and praise. These three "categories" overlap greatly. Songs of sorrow include songs that portray grief, death, dejection, shame, weeping, and degradation, while songs of hope might point the singer (and modern audience) to heaven using words like anticipation, freedom, reunion, and perseverance. Songs of praise include texts that glorify God, usually through Scriptural themes, such as victory, joy, jubilation, triumph, the glory or goodness of God, the truth of Scripture, or the blessings of family. Everett McCorvey writes that "the songs . . . recant with dignity, resolve, and sometimes joy, their stories of life, death, faith, hope, escape, and survival."[34]

By analyzing one well-known spiritual, one can see several textual themes emerge. For instance, the following text comes from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." It describes death and suffering in a somewhat positive light, as a means to the final heavenly destination.

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Sometimes I'm up, and sometimes I'm down,
Coming for to carry me home,
But still my soul feels heavenly bound.

[34] McCorvey, Everett. "History of the American Negro Spiritual," National Association of Teachers of Singing, https://www.nats.org/History_of_American_Negro_Spiritual.html#:~:text=The%20American%20Negro%20Spirituals%20are,America%20between%201619%20and%201860./.

Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

Coming for to carry me home.

The brightest day that I can say,
Coming for to carry me home,
When Jesus washed my sins away.
Coming for to carry me home.

This spiritual could be described by numerous adjectives listed earlier in this study, including dejection (*sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down*), hope (*but still my soul feels heavenly bound*), joy (*Jesus washed my sins away*), and assurance (*a band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home*). Indeed, the "categories" of sorrow, hope, and praise are not mutually exclusive: a song's text may offer praise to God in the midst of human sorrow while expressing one's hope for heaven and true freedom. In this sense, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" serves as a type of Negro spirituals as a genre. The seven songs featured in the accompanying lecture recital each demonstrate aspects of sorrow, hope, and praise – the three descriptors which most aptly characterize the majority of Negro spirituals.

Summary

As a genre of religious folk music that reflected African musical-cultural traditions, spirituals existed to encourage enslaved Africans during their bondage. They also aided in the journey to freedom, through the means of symbolism and storytelling. While enslaved people were not eager to relive painful memories from their days of slavery, ensembles such as Fisk Jubilee Singers found great success by presenting spirituals in concert settings. It is difficult to categorize spirituals according to textual themes. Instead, scholars can identify three primary thematic descriptors that typify the texts of Negro spirituals: sorrow, hope, and praise. Each word summarizes a variety of adjectives, expressional elements, or characteristics found throughout the repertoire of spirituals.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Summary of Methodology

As a qualitative study, choosing a methodology for this recital, document, and accompanying program notes was relatively straightforward. Historical research was the primary research method, supplemented by interviews with subject matter experts (SMEs). Review of primary sources, such as early compilations, transcriptions, and arrangements of spirituals was also essential to the study.

Design

This study utilizes a historical qualitative design, meaning that the research is grounded in past practices. It seeks to inform the future while recognizing what has happened (both good and bad) in the past. A historical design that is informed by Christian worldview will recognize patterns of sin that have become part of national and world history (including slavery), while acknowledging that these historical events have indeed occurred. A biblical historical response will address all areas of history through a lens of respect, sensitivity, and honor, particularly for "the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed" (Luke 4:18, NIV).

Chapter Four: Conclusions

Limitations

The limitations of this study pertain primarily to the structure of the study itself. Because it consists of qualitative research, it does not attempt to provide statistical data regarding thematic elements in spirituals. Such a study would be difficult to execute, since so much overlap exists between thematic descriptors of spirituals. Other limitations include the availability of historical documents based on geography, time restraints impacting the availability of primary source material, length restrictions on the accompanying lecture recital and document, and elements of causality between historical texts and performance practices.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study, while providing a detailed analysis of textual themes in Negro spirituals and examining the historical setting of these pieces, does not provide a comprehensive examination of the impact of Negro spirituals in modern American music history. It serves as a starting place for textual-theological investigation and therefore does not spend a great deal of time analyzing musical form, harmonic structure, differences in dialect, or the role of spirituals in larger musical works. Any of these topics could be expanded for further research. Future researchers could also examine a specific period of spirituals (pre/post Civil War), the role of spirituals in the context of other folk styles such as bluegrass or string band music, the lives of arrangers, the lives of performers, or methods for incorporating spirituals into collegiate music curricula.

Implications for Practice

As this study highlights, Negro spirituals play a key role in American music history. From an educational perspective, spirituals can serve as an important part of music curricula.

Choral and instrumental performing groups can perform spirituals more authentically when they understand the historical and textual contexts of these songs. From a musicological standpoint, spirituals serve as the figurative “grandparents” of a variety of musical styles, including black gospel, jazz, and blues. It is incumbent upon the modern performer of spirituals to become acquainted with the historical background of this unique genre of song. In so doing, he or she will be able to present these songs in the most respectful and authentic way possible while being informed by a biblical worldview.

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