The African American Spiritual, Its Historical Significance, Performance Practice, and Specifics Regarding the Performance of
THE JOURNEY OF HARRIET TUBMAN
by Dr. Ronald M. Kean
W. E. Du Bois (1868-1963), American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist:

“Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope — a faith in the ultimate justice of things.”
1. **What IS a Spiritual?**

- **Slavery,** in what was to become the United States of America, **began in 1619.**
- The Second Great Awakening of 1800 (a Protestant religious revival) brought Christianity to enslaved Africans as a way to further control them and to justify their enslavement by cherry-picking words from the Bible.
- As a result, the enslaved were condemned to live in a society where not only the government but God seemed to sanction their enslavement. The spirituals were created out of that environment.
- Spirituals began with the chants and moans on the field by enslaved Africans who were forced to sing as they worked or face the whip (or death). An enslaved African who wasn’t singing was thought to be subversive or plotting an escape.
- After 1800, in addition to using rhythms and melodies from Africa, the enslaved Africans **incorporated hymns** of Isaac Watts and John Wesley and appropriated the characteristics of those hymns into what came to be known as the **Spiritual.**
1. *What IS a Spiritual (continued)*

- 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 spiritual is the community in rhythm, swinging to the movement of life. The meaning of the song is not contained in the bare words but in the black history that created it. **Black history is a spiritual.**
- The enslaved Africans felt the agony of being alone in a world of hardship and pain.
  - *I couldn’t hear nobody pray, I couldn’t hear nobody pray,*
  - *oh, way down yonder by myself, and I couldn’t hear nobody pray.*
  
  - *I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow. I’m in this world alone.*
  - *No hope in this world for tomorrow. I’m trying to make heaven my home.*

- It is the loss of community that constitutes the major burden. Suffering is not too much to bear if there are brothers and sisters to go down in the valley to pray with you.
  - *O brothers (sisters, children) let’s go down in the valley to pray.*
  - *By-an-by we’ll all go down in the valley to pray.*
1. *What IS a Spiritual* (continued)

- No theological interpretation of the spirituals can be valid that ignores the **cultural environment** that created them.

- The spirituals are songs about the “Souls of Black Folk” (W. E. B. DuBois), “stretching out into the outskirts of God’s eternity” and affirming that divine reality which lets you know that you are a human being – no matter what white people say.

- The Africanism in the spirituals is directly related to the **functional character of African music**. In Africa and America, black music was not an artistic creation for its own sake; it was directly related to daily life, work and play.
Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), American educator, author, orator, and advisor to presidents of the United States, was from the last generation of black American leaders born into slavery and became the leading voice of the former slaves and their descendants. He wrote of coded songs as the end of the Civil War approached:

...Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. They had sung these verses before, but they had been careful to explain that the ‘freedom’ in these songs referred to the next world...Now they gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the ‘freedom’ in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world.
Spirituals are also sometimes regarded as codified protest songs, with songs such as “Steal Away” being seen by some commentators as incitements to escape slavery. Because the Underground Railroad of the mid-nineteenth century used terminology from railroads as a secret language for assisting slaves to freedom, it is often speculated that songs like “If I Got My Ticket” may have been a code for escape. Hard evidence is difficult to come by because assisting slaves to freedom was illegal. A spiritual that was certainly used as a code for escape to freedom was “Go Down, Moses,” used by Harriet Tubman to identify herself to slaves who might want to flee north.
As Frederick Douglass, a nineteenth century abolitionist author and former slave, wrote in his book "My Bondage and My Freedom" (1855) of singing spirituals during his years in bondage: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan."
Code Songs/Songs with Double Meanings
Dr. Eileen Guenther, “In Their Own Words
(Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals)” p. 358

• The enslaved Africans could sing what they could not say. The unlocking of the “biblical code” is fairly obvious:
  • Egypt, Babylon, or Hell referenced the land of enslaved people or being sold “South.”
  • Pharaoh or Satan signified slave owners or anyone who mistreated the enslaved.
  • Israelites are how the enslaved referred to themselves.
  • 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 be the Ohio River.
  • The Promised Land might refer to Africa, the North, Canada, Canaan, or heaven.
“Goin’ Home Songs”

- The actual physical brutalities of slavery were minor in comparison to the loss of the community. That was why most of the spirituals focused on “goin’ home.” Home was an affirmation of the need for community. To be sure, the enslaved Africans wanted to make it to heaven so they could put on their “golden slippers and walk all over God’s heaven.” But most of all, they wanted to be reunited with their families which had been broken and scattered in the slave markets.
“Goin’ Home Songs” (Continued)

- **What Kind of Shoes**
  - What kind of shoes (robe, crown) are you gonna wear?
  - Golden slippers I’m bound to wear when I reach my heavenly home.
    Yes, yes, yes my Lord, I’m gwine join the heavenly choir when I reach my home.

- **Poor, Wayfaring Stranger**
  - I'm going there to see my Father and all my loved ones who've gone on
    I'm just going over Jordan, I'm just going over home.
“Goin’ Home Songs” (Continued)

• There is a surprising absence of references to enslaved owners as a special object of hate and scorn. But there are a few including…

  • *I Got Shoes*
  
    • Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven, ain’t-a gwine (going) there
    • When I get to heaven goin’ to sing and shout, there will be nobody there to turn me out.
1. **What IS a Spiritual (continued)**

- **It is the power of song in the struggle for black survival and the quest for freedom.** This is why the Spirituals focus on biblical passages that stress *God’s involvement in the liberation of oppressed people* such as Joshua, Moses, Daniel and the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace.

- It is a way of communicating hidden meaning through song.

- It is a product of “Niagaras” of tears by a people whose proud history was stolen from them.

- We will now focus on one person who came to be known as the “Moses” of her people.
What was the inspiration for composing

THE JOURNEY OF HARRIET TUBMAN?

(Spoken)
2. Presentation of “The Journey of Harriet Tubman”

Music arranged and composed by Ron Kean
Video by H. R. Kean, Produced by the Film Kind
3. What were my goals in composing and arranging this music?

1. Honor the legacy of one of America’s great heroes, Harriet Tubman.

2. Honor the many genres of contemporaneous Spirituals.

3. Shed light on the brutality and home-grown terrorism inflicted on the enslaved Africans.

4. Honor women who followed Harriet Tubman for their intelligence, courage, and vision.

5. Honor the legacy of west African spirituality and ancestor worship that is manifest in the Spirituals and in Harriet’s escape (my opinion). The history of the enslaved Africans doesn’t begin in America, it begins in Africa.
3. What were my goals in composing and arranging this music (continued)?

6. Honor the west African musical characteristics that are the musical foundation of the Spirituals.

7. Include kalimba and marimba (from the west African balafon) to embody the spirituality and naturalism of the river and the angels which is a west African trait.

8. Keep “Saturday night” out of “Sunday morning” in the arranging of the Spirituals, which is to say that I did my best to keep secular influences like finger snapping and secular dance out of these arrangements.

9. Use appropriate dialect as integral to the historical authenticity of the Spirituals.

10. Incorporate body percussion based on the “ring shout” tradition handed down from west Africa because drums were forbidden in the western hemisphere.
Style Characteristics of West African Music

1. Rhythm (A strong, regular, repeated pattern of movement or sound) is more important than *melody* (the “tune”, the meaningful organization of pitches)

2. The love of bright, buzzy sounds (bells, outdoor singing, shaken beads)

3. Ostinatos (A continually repeated musical phrase or rhythm) layered in one at a time

4. Poly-meter (combination of meters, especially 2:3)

5. Polyphonic texture (multiple independent voices)
6. Polyrhythm (combination of different rhythms)

7. Heterophonic texture (simultaneous variation of a melody)

8. Improvisation by the master drummer (in “The Journey of Harriet Tubman,” by the singer)

9. Call and Response (first the soloist, then the group responds)

10. Ecstasy (Getting “lost” in the music)
Dr. Eileen Guenther, in her publication, “In Their Own Words (Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals),” discusses many genres of spirituals.
The following genres have been assigned in modern times. They likely did not exist during the time of slavery:

- **Sorrow** – *Go Down Moses; Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen; Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child; Steal Away*

- **Alerting** – *Go Down, Moses; Wade in the Water; Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*

- **Jubilee** – *In Dat Great Gittin’ Up Mornin’; Great Day; Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham*

- **Funeral** – *Hush, Hush, Somebody’s Callin’ Mah Name; I Want to Die Easy; Same Train; Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*

- **Ring Shout** – (As published in New York Nation, 1867) After Christian worship services or in the evenings, enslaved Africans often danced and shuffled counter-clockwise in a circle, singing rhythmically as they went. This west-African genre could go on for hours, building up in ecstasy. The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shoulder, and soon brings on streams of perspiration. Frequently, a “band” of shouters stands outside the circle and sings the body of the song while clapping their hands together or on their knees.
Spirituals/Styles
Guenther, pp. 31-35

Slow, long phrase melodies

*Deep River; I Want Jesus to Walk with Me; My Lord! What a Morning; Nobody Knows the Trouble I See; Were You There?*

Songs with syncopated melodies

*Down By the Riverside: Every Time I Feel the Spirit; Give Me that Old Time Religion; I Got Shoes; Little David, Play on Your Harp;*

Call-and-response (African roots with leader and group alternating)

*Woke Up This Mornin’; Go Down Moses; Great Day; My Soul’s Been Anchored; Rockin’ Jerusalem; Sit Down, Servant; Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*
COMPARING AFRICAN/AMERICAN SPIRITUALS WITH GOSPEL MUSIC

- **SPIRITUALS**
  - Anonymous composers
  - Rural
  - 1800’s
  - Mostly Hebrew Bible
  - Escape, Freedom, Goin’ Home
  - A cappella

- **GOSPEL MUSIC**
  - Known composers
  - Urban
  - 1920’s
  - New Testament
  - Celebrating good news
  - Accompanied by instruments
In Conclusion

- **African American Spirituals** are the power of song in the struggle for black survival and the quest for freedom. Wyatt T. Walker, in his book, “Somebody’s Calling My Name (Black Sacred Music and Social Change),” p. 32, states that spirituals helped the enslaved African to develop the “spiritual resiliency to endure what they had to endure. In the community of suffering, the enslaved found life bearable through the religious faith instilled in the folk community by singing the language of faith – the spirituals.”

- **African American Spirituals** should be researched with the same standards of scholarship as one would research a Bach oratorio or cantata.

- **African American Spirituals** must be understood in their sociological context.
In Conclusion (continued)

- It is my sincere wish that the performance of **African American Spirituals** will honor those who lived in insufferable conditions and yet created this transformative music, will honor the West-African musical culture that helped to create this music, and will honor the rich cultural heritage of Africa that was stolen by our forefathers. If Americans can understand the enormity of the crime of slavery and understand how hundreds of years of dehumanization are still taking a toll on African Americans, then we can begin to build for the future and forgive.
In the words of Harriet Tubman, “I think there's many a slave holder'll get to Heaven. They don't know better. They acts up to the light they have.”

And now let's ask ourselves, what light do we have? How can we shed a light on the things that need it? Are we living up to our own lights as individuals, as people, as a nation?
Harriet Tubman (1822-1913)

- Led hundreds of fellow slaves to freedom in the North
- Civil War nurse and spy for the North who led over 700 enslaved Africans to freedom in the Raid of Combahee Ferry, South Carolina in 1862
- Woman’s suffragist
- Owned and operated a home for the aged in Auburn, New York
- In 2016, the U.S. Treasury Department announced that the countenance of Harriet Tubman would appear on a new $20 bill. The current administration has stalled this process…
African American Spirituals for Your Choir

Sight Reading and Recordings
Elijah Rock, Arr. Rollo Dillworth
SSA, Level – Easy (Time: 3‘)

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7P5uArp_Ls
- https://youtu.be/Oyrs9YsQGac
Yonder Come Day, Arr. Rollo Dillworth
SA, Level – Easy (Time: 3‘ 19”)

Every Time I Feel the Spirit, Arr. Moses Hogan
TB, Level – Easy (Time: 2‘30”)

The Storm is Passing Over, Arr. Barbara Baker
SATB, Level – Easy (Time: 4‘)

- https://youtu.be/2PN55TJCXrs?t=1m1s
- NYU Women‘s Choir, 2012
I Got Shoes, Arr. Robert Shaw and Alice Parker
SATB, Level – Moderate (Time: 2:25)

• https://youtu.be/xfx0Q6i3t5E
• Robert Shaw Chorale
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Arr. Moses Hogan
SATB, Level – Moderate (Time: 4‘30”)

- https://youtu.be/N9Sq7V29xXQ
- Moses Hogan Chorale
My Good Lord’s Done Been Here, Arr. Andre J. Thomas
SATB, Level – Moderate (Time: 3‘30”)

- https://youtu.be/tQJKyFBsF-U
- 2009 All-State Choir