## CHAPTER 4. MUSICAL DEVICES, INTERPRETATION, AND AWARENESS

We know that music served as "camouflage" for revolutionary ideas and escape. Songs of protest were disguised as simple work songs in the fields. Clandestine meetings were prompted only by humming a particular tune, as in *Steal Away*. These arrangements prompt us to appreciate the brave use of music as a vehicle for revolution and hope.

As those enslaved from various parts of Africa were forcibly brought over to America, separated, and sold as a labor commodity, they sought to retain their African traditions. "Booker T. Washington, in examining the roots of African and African-American music, said: 'There is a difference between the music of Africa and that of her transplanted children. There is a new note in the music which had its origin in the southern plantation, and in this new note the sorrow and sufferings which came from serving in strange land found expression.'" [40] There are certainly many unique musical elements to address in spirituals. However, since this study is focused on a particular subset of spirituals, coded message spirituals, what elements do conductors need to know about and address within that body of repertoire?

### Musical Devices & Interpretation

The musical devices employed in spiritual arrangements often illustrate (through sound) the meaning of the coded text. What musical elements are affected by the meaning—or multiple meanings—of the text? In general terms, the elements (melody, harmony, rhythm & texture) are are treated as one might expect. It's true that arrangers use melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture cleverly to advance the story of each text. However, there are more interpretive choices to be made in terms of dynamics, timbre, tempo, and diction.

Most arrangers, if they are aware of the coded text in spirituals, probably have already indicated these interpretive elements in their score markings to "paint the text." However, if

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[40] Ronald Jordan, *Praise: Amazing Stories and Insights behind the Great African American Hymns and Negro Spirituals* (Colorado Springs, CO: Honor Books, 2005), 20.

they haven't, conductors should feel free to apply their scholarship and add those elements to further enhance the meaning of the text. Furthermore, sharing the rationale behind making such decisions is not only interesting and enriching for the choir, but it will help them understand the music more completely. This is important, as Jones suggests,

> "In historical accounts of the Fisk experience, it is clear that people hearing spirituals for the first time, performed by singers who understood and felt their deep meanings, invariably found themselves touched deeply by the melodies, rhythms and lyrics of these songs. The same power that formed the basis of their effectiveness as songs of resistance, personal transformation and religious conviction appeared to contribute to the ability of the spirituals to communicate effectively in widely divergent places and circumstances."[41]

The flexibility and fluidity in the text of coded spirituals provides the same opportunity for these interpretive elements. Guenther instructs about tempo, "Tempi varied according to the location, the task, the weather, and the time of day—one tempo for rowing a boat, a different one for grinding grain, and a slower tempo in the evening."[42] For instance, in the case of *Steal Away*, if the meaning was intended to signal an escape/departure, the tempo may be slower, and more melancholy in tone. If the intended message was announcing or anticipating a secret meeting, it may be sung in hushed tones and a slightly quicker tempo. To be fair*, we don't know everything that was done at the time*, but, as artists, it is our responsibility to interpret the music in the best way we can to give an informative and inspiring performance. There is great opportunity for dramatic and exciting storytelling through the singing of these message songs. "Many of the stories and scenes in the Bible gave the Negro bards great play for their powers of graphic description. The stories are always dramatic and the pictures vivid and gorgeously colored. It might be said of them that every line is a picture."[43]

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[41] Jones, *Wade in the Water,* 125.

[42] Guenther, *In Their Own Words,* 43. Tempo is crucial. These songs, whether slow or fast, were often vehicles of movement. The conductor must not forget this. Pedagogically, it would be instructive to have the singers move as they are learning the piece rather than sitting or standing still.

[43] James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 39.

Choral legend, Alice Parker reminded choral directors at the 2017 National ACDA Conference that "the style of singing the spirituals varied from place to place; we should be open to reasonable interpretation, and include interpretative elements not written on the page." She continued, "there are no less than five "filters" between the original spiritual and the ears of an audience member: spiritual—arranger—publisher—conductor—audience."[44] I would argue for two additional steps in Parker's model: "collector and performer." The collector of each tune serves as the first lens through which the music was primarily interpreted. The performer serves as the final lens of interpretation, as their song is transmitted to the listening ears of the audience.

Connected somewhat marginally to coded message songs, is the use of dialect in spirituals. The enslaved quickly learned English after the great middle passage, but did so while still retaining the characteristics of their diverse African languages.[45] They spoke with a dialect that contained both English and African elements. Spirituals singers were aware that the slave masters could not always understand meanings through their thick dialect of their speech or singing. The clever singers used this to their advantage to further conceal the meaning of their music.

There is an ongoing conversation regarding use of dialect (and the extent to which it's done) in the performance of spirituals. Because conductors want to be respectful, some do not feel comfortable incorporating dialect at all. However, most use a "hybrid" approach, incorporating some elements of authentic diction with standardized English.

> "Over the years there has been much debate over the extent to which dialect should be preserved in performance of spirituals today, whether the use of dialect could be perceived as demeaning, *or whether its elimination could be perceived as demeaning*.

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[44] Alice Parker, *Got a Mind to Do Right: Approaching, Discussing, and Performing Spirituals Respectfully*, Interest Session, American Choral Director's Association, National Conference, Minneapolis, March 10, 2017.

[45] The enslaved came from various places in Africa, each bringing their own language to American soil. In order to communicate in their new "home," they forged their African languages with English, into a language (Gullah) that is still spoken off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. This manner of speaking—this dialect—was sometimes difficult for others to understand. It varied by region, and even by plantation. Phonetic decay, elimination of diphthongs, and altered grammar made it difficult for their masters to understand.

> The Johnson brothers, Anton E. Armstrong, André J. Thomas, and numerous others have argued for the retention of dialect as integral to the historical authenticity of the songs. Dialect has its own beauty and power. It strengthens the listener's connection to the originators of spirituals by conveying the thoughts of the originators in their original language.[46]

James Weldon Johnson confirms, "It is not necessary to be an expert in Negro dialect to sing the Spirituals, but most of them lose in charm when they are sung in straight English."[47] In the performance of spirituals, this is an important quality to celebrate and respect, as it preserves the intention and artistic spirit of the original singers. However, great care must be taken to present this dialect with scholarship and respect, rather than any attempt to caricature or parody this tradition.

Arrangers don't always agree on writing dialect in their arrangements.[48] Conductors can also take time for further study and consult an expert to help them make informed choices for their choirs, whether the dialect is included in the print music or not. Most importantly, they should be prepared to engage in conversation with the ensemble, regarding the best, and most respectful approach to the diction.

**Awareness**

It is important that conductors realize all of the important choices they need to make when programming message songs for performance. They are not all musical. They are not all about what is written on the page. So much of the appeal and importance of coded message songs is knowing the texts, the symbols and masks, the poetry, and great creativity of these folk poets. *Knowing is not enough, however*. Conductors should advance one important step further and share the stories of the coded language with their choirs and audiences, in rehearsal preparation and program or concert notes. They should look up scriptural references that serve as the basis for the text. They should be able to present concrete facts about slavery and the

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[46] Guenther, *In Their Own Words,* 37.

[47] Johnson, *The Books of American Spirituals,* 43.

[48] Early arrangements often include dialect, which is now largely perceived as demeaning. Modern arrangers typically do not, and leave the diction decisions to the conductor.

Underground Railroad so that their singers (and audiences) are informed, always learning, and *always* regarding this body of repertoire with respect and dignity. We cannot assume that singers and audiences know these important elements.

Toward that end, this study intends to provide resources for conductors, to help them build a vocabulary of coded message songs and their meanings.[49] The following chapters (6-13) highlight nine pieces that have been chosen because of their coded messages. Each piece is introduced (including a general description and arranger information), its coded language is presented (source information-if known, alternate texts, translations/connotations). Finally, a musical description and conductor's guide concludes each chapter.

Chapter 5: *Steal Away,* arr. Clayton White
Chapter 6. *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?,* arr. Moses Hogan
Chapter 7. *Keep Your Lamps!,* arr, André Thomas
Chapter 8. *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit,* arr. William Dawson
Chapter 9. *Deep River,* arr. René Clausen
Chapter 10. *Have You Got Good Religion?,* arr. Phillip McIntyre
Chapter 11. *Elijah Rock*, arr. Moses Hogan
Chapter 12. *Let Me Fly,* arr. Robert DeCormier
Chapter 13. *The Old Ship of Zion*, arr. Richard Harrison Smith

[49] Please see the Appendix B at the end of this document for this helpful information.

## CHAPTER 14. CONCLUSION

Because of their hopeful, heroic, and inspiring character, spirituals that contain coded messages are very attractive to choral conductors and singers. They sings of secrets—secrets hidden in the text—that led to freedom for countless enslaved people. When there was no opportunity for escape, these coded message songs provided something just as important for their survival: hope.

Successful choral conductors are dynamic storytellers. It is vital that conductors communicate the history of coded message songs during the preparation, rehearsal, and performance of this body of repertoire. Context would have been hugely important in properly interpreting song meanings. The time period, place, or specific circumstances that the singers encountered when these magnificent songs were created and performed would have determined the actual intended meanings.

While the clandestine nature of the Underground Railroad makes it difficult to confirm all of the claims made about the coded language imbedded in the music, as artists, it is our job to engage with and examine contextual materials in scholarly manner, and to then to expressively interpret the music, based upon that scholarship. As conductors, we must spend time researching the context and connotation of this body of repertoire. We must move beyond what we assume they know, and actively engage our singers and audiences through our own scholarship and passion. This is done on the behalf of our singers, and, more importantly, on behalf of those original plantation voices that provided us with such a rich and inspiring repertoire of song. Sharing this repertoire with singers and audiences allows choral conductors to tell a more complete story of the music of slavery, a compelling story of strength, perseverance, and hope.