

Way Over in Beulah Lan' – Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual

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In his preface to *Way Over Beulah Lan'*, André Thomas, a conductor and composer beloved and respected by choirs around the world for his inspired teaching about the Negro Spiritual (along with a wide range of other repertoire), shares a very personal story about how he first came to understand the sacred folk melodies of the slaves. Growing up in Wichita, Kansas, he moved from a predominantly black elementary school to a junior high where he was the only black student. His natural inclinations led him to the music room, where he first encountered the choral arrangements of the spirituals. He writes:

I must admit, I was not fond of these settings, even through high school. As a young black man, I really didn't identify. This was not the black music that I knew and it certainly wasn't the music that I experienced at my church! The text utilized dialect and it made me feel as if performing this music gave white people a chance to make fun of black people. I never really heard the message in the text; I only heard the way it sounded. We certainly weren't allowed to speak like that in my home and it denoted ignorance in my mind....Being the racial minority – 2,000 white students to one...there was no place to hide.

Later, during his second year in college, an encounter with the legendary conductor, composer, arranger, and actor Jester Hairston turned him around. As one of the three black students in a choir of 75, "My lack of enthusiasm for this music was pretty obvious." But Hairston took him aside and explained how important the spirituals were in the life of the slave community, and how the dialect was not a sign of inferiority, but an accommodation for sounds that were not part of African speech. Several years later, when Thomas himself was arranging and conducting the spirituals at the University of Texas, a young black student stopped him in the parking lot after a rehearsal, saying

Dr. Thomas, that song...that song...that song makes me feel so black!" I looked at her and hugged her neck, and said, "it makes me feel black, too." I looked up and said a silent thank you, Mr. Hairston!

Way Over Beulah Lan' is an introductory handbook for conductors approaching the performance of the rich genre of Negro Spirituals (as Thomas prefers to call them) arranged for choir. While one can argue that you don't have to be French to sing Debussy or German to sing Brahms, the Negro Spiritual truly presents a unique set of interpretive challenges. Never has an experience of such suffering and injustice to a particular race of people been so closely linked to music whose undeniable melodic and poetic greatness has given it such universal and enduring appeal. The repercussions of American slavery still have very personal resonance on many levels for the descendants of both sides of that dark chapter in American history. Many white American singers today still feel more than a bit disingenuous singing the songs of those whom their

ancestors so brutally subjugated. But many American blacks, too, going back as far as the first public performances by the Historic Black College and University choirs after the Civil War, have had an uneasy relationship of their own with these songs because of their association with the manifold humiliations of the past. Yet the music has survived this awkward and ambivalent reception history to become familiar and beloved to people all over North and South America, Europe, and East Asia – though ironically, and sadly, the spirituals still remain all but unknown in many parts of black Africa itself today.

To this challenge, André Thomas brings a hard-earned perspective that is both passionate and nuanced. On the thorny issue of whether or not to use vernacular pronunciation, he notes the ambivalence of many of the great arrangers themselves based on their inconsistent notation. For decades the early “Jubilee” choirs would strive to sing the spirituals in the “Queen’s English” to differentiate themselves from the minstrel groups whose highly successful enterprise (during most of the 19th Century and well into the 20th) was based on performing songs of the slaves in black face, using vernacular dialect as a form of ridicule. (Ironically, many of these minstrel songs remain in our standard choral repertoire today, with text long since modified to convert racial ridicule into playful innocence, such as *Ching-a-ring-chaw* and *Ol’ Dan Tucker*).

In his overview of interpretive issues and in his more detailed commentary on five selected arrangements (with full scores included in the book), Thomas suggests an approach that leans toward dialect pronunciation, but without exaggeration that would draw attention to itself, striving to sound as natural as possible in order to avoid inadvertent caricature. On more than one occasion after describing the conflicting emotions that both white and black singers may bring to these issues, he counsels “just chill out, folks!” He would seem to be suggesting not that choices don’t make a difference, but that singers shouldn’t let fear of making a mistake prevent them from immersing themselves in this important music.

The author also describes four essential primary source publications for transcriptions of the spirituals, urging young arrangers to explore this wider range of songs and texts, the vast majority of which have yet to be arranged for modern choirs. He also strongly recommends listening to available recordings, especially those made by the arrangers themselves, almost forty of whom he introduces with brief biographical sketches and description of their basic stylistic approaches. The only disappointment here is that the discography doesn’t include the important series of reissued archival recordings by the British label Document Records (<http://www.document-records.com/>), which have been discussed in various US journals since the label began in the late 1990’s. Document has re-released all the early Victor recordings of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, along with numerous other historic recordings by jubilee and gospel choirs from the first four decades of the 20th Century, including previously unavailable recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir.

One of the most welcome contributions in this volume is a substantial listing of choral spiritual arrangements by most of the major and minor contributors to the genre. Most conductors and singers are familiar with Harry T. Burleigh’s *My Lord, What a Mornin’* and his book of solo arrangements, but who today has heard one of his thirty-four other choral arrangements listed here?

All of these resources and discussions alone would be enough to justify the worth of this volume for conductors both new and experienced. But Thomas also had the wisdom to invite the contributions of two colleagues who have also traveled the globe spreading the wealth of the spirituals, Judith Willoughby of Oklahoma City University and Anton Armstrong of St. Olaf College. He asks them some sensitive questions, not only about the use of dialect, but about

such issues as whether or not there is such a thing as a “black sound,” or the challenges of presenting the spirituals to choirs outside the United States.

On the issue of sound, Willoughby leans toward coloring vowels rather than coloring the voice, a subtle but well articulated distinction. She also prefers a manner of singing that “while in tune, may have more ‘edges’ than the smooth, medium-weight, float, European-cathedral sound.” Armstrong talks more about what he hears as a distinctively darker sound from African and African-American voices, representing a timbre to be emulated. Nevertheless, he prefers to use color images like “burgundy” and “ebony” with singers to avoid the kind of imitation bordering on unintentional caricature. Willoughby discusses the challenge of teaching choirs outside the US to sing with more rhythmic vitality; Armstrong talks about the challenges of overcoming the dominant role of chest singing for African-American singers who grew up singing almost exclusively in the gospel style.

Where the greatest variety of perspectives comes into play is around issues of “integrity” and “authenticity,” always loaded terms in any discussion related to folk-based material, but especially, as noted above, for the Negro Spiritual. Judith Willoughby longs for arrangements with the emotional directness and simplicity she recalls hearing from her mother’s voice in childhood – integrity is the result of an “organic marriage with the text and/or the meaning of multiple meanings of the text.” But she also embraces arrangements she calls “hybrids” containing gospel style accompaniments and voicing. A more extended discussion of the distinctions between spiritual, gospel, and jazz vocal styles by these three marvelous musicians would have been welcome here.

Anton Armstrong speaks also of respecting “the basic integrity of the spiritual/slave song,” but is more explicit about what he does *not* consider to be authentic. He calls jazz- and gospel-inflected arrangements “extraneous styles of writing,” but allows that he finds the gospel-based use of piano in arrangements by André Thomas and Moses Hogan to be “compelling” because of their “integrity of presentation.” Yet he himself also takes an interpretive cue from Mahalia Jackson’s strongly gospel-infused performance of the spiritual “Soon Ah Will Be Done” to take a much slower tempo than printed in William Dawson’s famous choral arrangement, describing some choral performances he has heard at the indicated tempo as sounding to him like “a minstrel song, almost a parody.”

Armstrong also singles out for criticism Michael Tippett’s use of spirituals as part of the chorale structure of his landmark oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, where the main subject is the persecution of Jews under Hitler. He refrains from programming these arrangements on concerts because he feels Tippett has “removed the spiritual from the cultural context, therefore removing its integrity.” Others might argue that Tippett’s use of the spiritual in the context of the full oratorio itself (which is, after all, how he intended for them to be performed) is one of the most moving examples of the universal power of the songs of the slaves to express courage and hope in the midst of despair.

But these are the kinds of passions that only a great and enduring repertoire can evoke, as each generation tries to come to terms with the message passed along from strangers in a very different time and place. Much like the music of Bach, the spirituals have survived an astounding range of stylistic treatments and mistreatments without losing their essential integrity. However, unlike Bach, the spirituals were forged collectively by means of oral transmission, through centuries of subjugation. We are fortunate that André Thomas has added an invaluable resource to our continuing exploration.