

TRUE FREEDOM THROUGH TRUE ART:

The Negro Spiritual's Unique Contribution to Classical Literacy in America

by Elvira Green

Ms. Elvira Green is the founder of the Spiritual Renaissance Singers of Greensboro, North Carolina. She has sung as a mezzo-soprano on operatic, concert, and musical theatre stages around the world for more than forty years. We present here her edited remarks as prepared for presentation on Nov. 17, 2019 at the Schiller Institute Conference, "The Future of Humanity as a Creative Species in the Universe," in Bad Soden, Germany. She opened her remarks with a poem by James Weldon Johnson. Portions of her presentation are based on James Weldon Johnson's preface to his work, The Books of the American Negro Spirituals. Subheads have been added.



Elvira Green

Johanna Clerc

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody as
"Steal away to Jesus"?
On its strains his spirit must have nightly floated
free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"?
Whose starward eye saw chariot "swing low"?
And who was he that breathed that comforting,
melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the sound or melts the heart to tears?

Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down Moses."
Mark its bars.

How like a mighty trumpet call they stir the blood.
Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds;
Such tones there were
That helped make history when time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone forgot, unfazed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting paean
Of arms—won triumphs; but your humble strings.
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew;
The songs that for your listeners' hungry hearts
sufficed
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:

You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

From whom did these songs spring—these songs unsurpassed among the folk songs of the world and in the poignancy of their beauty, unequalled? It would have been a noble achievement if the American settlers, having a common language and heritage, seeking liberty in a new land, faced with the task of conquering untamed nature, and stirred with a hope of building an empire, had created a body of folk music comparable to the Negro Spirituals.

In 1619 (400 years ago), a Dutch ship landed twenty African natives at Jamestown, Virginia. As many as had survived the passage were immediately thrown into slavery. Here they were, cut off from the moorings of their native culture, scattered without regard to their old tribal relations, having to adjust themselves to a completely alien civilization, having to learn a strange language, and, moreover, held under an increasingly harsh system of slavery; yet it was from these people that this mass of noble music sprang, this music which is America's only folk music—the finest distinctive artistic contribution she has to offer the world.

The music of “Go Down, Moses,” “Deep River,” “Stand Still Jordan,” “Walk Together Children,” “Roll Jordan Roll,” “Ride on King Jesus,” as examples, is always noble, and the sentiment of the Spirituals is always exalted. Never does their philosophy fall below the highest and purest motives of the heart. All the true spirituals possess dignity.

There are doubtless many persons who have heard these songs sung only on vaudeville or theatrical stages and have laughed uproariously at them because they were presented in humorous vein. They may have thought of them as a new sort of ragtime or minstrel song. Therefore these spirituals must be clothed in their primitive dignity to be properly appreciated and understood.

Creative Genius in Song

Although the Spirituals have been overwhelmingly accredited to the Negro as his own, original creation, there have been critics who have denied that they were original. The opinion of these critics is unsound; it is neither based on scientific nor historical inquiry, but rather on an unwillingness to concede the creation of so much pure beauty to a people they wish, even to this day, to feel to be absolutely inferior.

In Mr. James Weldon Johnson's writings, he re-

ferred to the “miracle” of the Negro Spiritual emanating from the music which the American Negro heard their masters sing; chiefly religious music. The Negro spirituals were not conceived out of an indebtedness to their white masters. The power to frame the poetic phrases that make up the titles of so many spirituals indicate the power to create the songs.

When the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured England, Scotland and Germany, spending almost eight months in Germany alone, their concerts were attended by the most musically cultured and sophisticated people, as well as the general public. Their European concerts constituted both an artistic sensation and a financial success for Fisk University, neither of which results could have been attained had their songs been mere imitations of European folk music, or adaptations of European airs.

The late Sylvia Olden Lee, the renowned exponent of the Negro Spirituals, as well as a member of the cultural advisory board of the Schiller Institute, compiled a massive catalogue of spirituals arranged by her and her contemporaries. These included Hall Johnson, Thomas Kerr, Edward Boatner, Margaret Bonds, Undine Smith Moore, John W. Work, to name a few. Sylvia, with whom I worked for several years, travelled the world as a coach, musical historian, pianist and accompanist to many renowned artists, both singers and instrumentalists. *The Memoirs of Sylvia Olden Lee, Premier African American Classical Vocal Coach*, reads like a one-on-one conversation with Mrs. Lee.

A few of the classically trained African Americans who are, and were, committed performers of the Negro Spiritual in our era include: Marian Anderson, William Warfield, Robert McFerrin, George Shirley, Leontyne Price, Kathleen Battle, and the late Jessye Noman.

Indeed, however, the Negro Spirituals' unique, most relevant contribution to classical literacy in America lends itself to an ever-widening musical opportunity in that its multi-racial and multi-ethnic “Americans” are more open to embracing this musical experience by including these songs in their choral and solo repertoire.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the National Association of Negro Musicians, an organization created by James Weldon Johnson, the author of the poem I recited as the opening of my statement. This organization was founded only two months after Johnson spoke in May of 1919 at the National Conference on Lynching. That conference was held at

Carnegie Hall. I am proud that next month a group of singers associated with the National Association of Negro Musicians will take the stage at the same Carnegie Hall to sing the “Ode to Joy” chorus of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

Johnson knew and lived the lesson of the Spirituals—human dignity is the birthright, and the province of every human soul. This was Beethoven’s conviction,

and we will celebrate that. Yet, “... Not that great German master in his dream of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars at the creation, ever heard a theme nobler than ‘Go down Moses’.”

We have always known that it is through Beauty of the soul, that one proceeds to true Freedom. That is the freedom song that is at the heart of every Negro Spiritual: The Beauty of the human soul.