
Book Reviews

Burleigh and the battle for American Classical music

by Susan Bowen

Hard Trials: The Life and Music of Harry T. Burleigh

by Anne Key Simpson

Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., 1990

476 pages, \$49.50, hardbound

This biography of African-American composer Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949) is No. 8 of a series designed to focus attention on "significant North American composers of art and folk music from colonial times to the present." Divided into sections describing the composer's life and works, his goals and outlook, the book also includes an exhaustive catalogue of his output, from both published and recorded material, as well as some scores previously unpublished.

The book fills a gap, because very little is written about the Negro spiritual in standard music history books. Reference is made throughout to the turn-of-the-century debates around the issue of the composition of the art song, and of the spiritual as an art form. Arguments were often quite heated over the origin of the spiritual, its performance, and how to write appropriate accompaniment. The idea that black Americans would produce, perform, and participate in the great works of art, was not as acceptable to many critics and audiences as was the idea of blacks "entertaining" them.

The "Negro music" debate did not occur in a vacuum. As this century opened, a battle was raging between the proponents of the American System of Political Economy, and the advocates of the British imperial system. The conflict extended into every arena of political, economic, and cultural life. The years between 1890 and World War I saw the spawning of the Federal Reserve, the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL), and the revival of the Ku Klux Klan—all institutions created to tear down the concept of the sovereign nation-state.

Lyndon H. LaRouche, in his address to the February 1994 Schiller Institute conference, identified the cultural issues:

"When you think about music, don't think about entertainment, or some fool jiggin' on the beach. Think of the greatness of music. Think . . . of the work of Dvořák with Harry Burleigh. That was discovery! The spiritual was never the same after that, because its potentiality was *discovered* by applying principles which are the accumulated knowledge of music of centuries, embedded in that relationship and process. Think of things in that way, and then you see: Music is not entertainment. Music involves precisely, in the most demanding way, of the individual who wishes to become a professional musician, a good one, demands precisely in the most intense degree, the same kind of training and intensity as the greatest physical scientist.

"There has been a folly popularized . . . that art and science in particular, are separate things, that they have no relationship to each other. But on the contrary, the person who says that, knows nothing of either science or art. Because the same creative principle which we find emblazoned in the accomplishments of the past 600 years, which surpass everything done by mankind in the millions of years before, the principle of creativity, the same principle which marks man as in the image of God by virtue of these gifts of creative powers; that same principle is the essence of science, is the essence of music."

Dvořák and Burleigh

Antonin Dvořák, the Czech composer, was in the United States from 1892 to 1895, teaching composition and other aspects of music at the National Conservatory in New York. He had been encouraged by Johannes Brahms to extend the tradition of Classical music into the New World, and also, of course, to enrich music itself by fighting for the creative principle. In 1892, Burleigh left his native Erie, Pennsylvania after he received a scholarship to Mrs. Thurber's National Conservatory. Burleigh, a baritone with a reportedly extraordinary voice, sang at Dvořák's request, the Negro songs he knew as plantation melodies, and other melodies—for example, those said to be sung around the Underground Railroad stops—which he remembered hearing as a child.

Simpson recounts that once after Burleigh had sung "Go Down, Moses" to Dvořák, the Czech master said, "Burleigh, that is as great as a Beethoven theme." The point, of course, was to develop from that theme a lawful, Classical composition, creating out of it a beautiful work of art by means of polyphony (multiple voices). In 1944, after his last concert, Burleigh said, "Under the inspiration of Dvořák, I became convinced that the spirituals were not meant for the colored people, but for all people."

Most standard textbooks about the history of music in America have misconstrued the reality. For example, one reads in the standard texts how the "periods" of European music—the baroque, classical, romantic, and modern—also had their day in America, but that, as the United States developed its own musical identity, it took the form of the Broadway musical. Page after page of "documentation" purports

to show how these forms evolved “naturally” after the Civil War, with the touring Negro minstrel shows, variety shows (which became vaudeville), the extravaganza (including burlesque), musical comedy, and operetta forms turning into the 20th-century banalities of Broadway entertainment, big band, jazz, and rock music. Instead of the oft-repeated historic pattern through which folk music was transformed through polyphony into a new Classical idiom, the process was reversed in post-Civil War America, with Classical themes from concertos by contemporary composers such as Brahms being banalized into “tunes.” The American population was “dumbed down.”

Degradation of the spiritual

This could not have succeeded without a parallel, nasty British operation to degrade “serious” music. Starting around 1900, operas by the German Romantic Richard Strauss and the Italian *verismo* cultist Giacomo Puccini were produced in New York which were insidious parodies on the Classical operas of Mozart and Verdi. In these works, the *bel canto* singing art was reduced to sensual display of vocal acrobatics, and the dramatic content was perverted to exalt satanic heroines like Strauss’s *Salome* and Puccini’s *Tosca*. In 1906, the overt pornography of *Salome* helped turn New Yorkers against “German opera” (which had already been rotted out by Wagner’s “music”) at the very moment when the British oligarchy was on a full-scale offensive to destroy the popularity of Classical German music in the United States on the eve of World War I.

In the 1920s, Burleigh became upset over the banalization of the Spirituals, which occurred as the German-inspired lieder circles and men’s choirs vanished from the American landscape. He wrote passionately about this in a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1922, which was reprinted in full in *Courier* magazine:

“The growing tendency of some of our musicians to utilize the melodies of our spirituals for fox trots, dance numbers and sentimental songs is, I feel, a serious menace to the artistic standing and development of our race.

“These melodies are our prized possession. They were created for a definite purpose, and are designed to demonstrate and perpetuate the deepest aesthetic endowment of the race. They are the only legacy of slavery days that we can be proud of; our one, priceless contribution to the vast musical product of the United States.

“In them we have a mine of musical wealth that is everlasting. Into their making was poured the aspiration of a race in bondage whose religion—intensely felt—was their whole hope and comfort, and the only vehicle through which their inner spirits soared free. They rank with the great folk music of the world and are among the loveliest of chanted prayers.

“Now since this body of folk song expresses the soul of a race it is a holy thing. To use it and not artificialize or cheapen it calls for reverence and true devotion to its spiritual significance. Yet, these delinquent musicians contemptuously disre-

gard these traditions for personal, commercial gain.

“Skilled musicians can detect instantly the flagrant misappropriation, the amateurish perversion. There are others, the unskilled musicians and particularly our young people who cannot detect the misuse of these prayer songs, who cannot distinguish the false from the true, the makeshift from the real, the spurious from the genuine, the theatric from the spiritual, and who are thus being fed with a wrong idea, a false valuation of all our beautiful melodic inheritance—unless this pernicious trickery is stopped. . . .

“In the interests of millions of colored people who love and revere the spirituals and who believe these old melodies can be an essential factor in the cultural evolution of the race as well as a powerful stimulus to its higher artistic development—and in the interest of millions of white people who love and revere the spirituals and who believe that the ‘Negro stands at the gates of human culture with hands laden full of musical gifts,’ I earnestly solicit your help and cooperation in a determined effort to persuade our misguided friends to cease their desecrating work and to join with us in honoring and protecting from any secular or degenerate use of the Negro spirituals—the only songs in America that conform to the scientific definition of folk songs.”

Simpson’s book includes facsimiles of concert programs drawn from archives of recital halls, newspapers, universities, and individuals, which show that the idea that great Classical music could still be composed, was still alive early in this century. The programs often ordered the numbers chronologically, by composer, and almost always included new compositions by American composers seeking to compose in the Classical tradition.

Burleigh, who, aside from being a singer, described himself as an arranger of spirituals and a composer of art songs, had wanted to compose instrumental music, especially for strings, but was unable to arouse any interest (or patrons), and so resigned himself to vocal writing only. And Burleigh had much more flexibility than others in his circle, since he had steady employment as soloist at both St. George’s Church and Temple Emanuel in New York. Many of his associates had to write ragtime music, jazz, or otherwise do less than they had trained for, simply in order to eat.

In 1924, Burleigh wrote a letter on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the St. George’s Service of Spirituals—a tradition he started—which shows how he saw the long-range implications of this policy: “We talk of American composers. Why are they American? You cannot listen to their music and immediately mark it American. But you can recognize an Irish lilt or a Russian rhythm. We have not developed a distinctive national literature or art; we have not made American music. It will come, but it will take time. When it does, I think it will show the influence of the Negro spirituals. They are the only American folk music. They are the product of a homogeneous people. They have not yet affected American music. They will not, until America is willing to admit that Negroes can be artists.”