

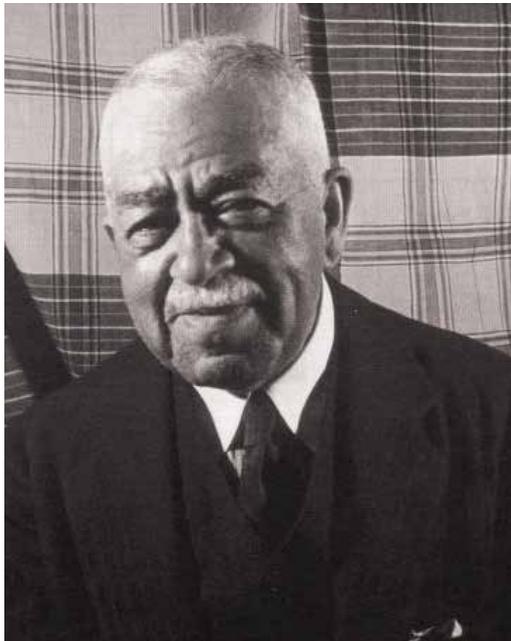
The Manhattan Project and The Spirituals

by Susan Bowen and Marcia Merry Baker

Dec. 27—The world impact of America's unique musical gift to humanity—the Negro Spiritual—was furthered directly by activities in the strategic venue of Manhattan and environs. There is much to tell, but the essence of the process can be conveyed in brief, by referring to African-American composer and singer Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949),¹ who figures prominently in the battle for Classical culture in America and internationally, and such follow-on developments as the Hall Johnson Choir in Manhattan (Harlem).

The beauty and merit of the Spirituals—the songs of humanity, arising during the terrible conditions of British imperial oppression in the United States—are, or should be, now widely known. What is important to appreciate further, is the deliberate effort made to continue this beauty and potential through Classical performance and composition, a critical part of which took place in New York City. It was there, also, that counter-efforts were concentrated, aimed at degrading the cultural identity of the entire nation, by enemies of America and mankind. In that regard, the pivotal events took place in the 1890s.

By this time, certain fundamental measures were underway after the Civil War, to preserve and extend knowledge of these Spirituals, such as setting them down in



Carl Van Vechten/The Van Vechten Trust
American composer and singer Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949)

print², and taking the songs to a larger audience through means of concerts, as was done by the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers, and soon by other ensembles.

In this context, in 1892, Harry Burleigh arrived in Manhattan from his hometown of Erie, Pennsylvania, where his parents had come to live from the South, where they had been born into slavery. Burleigh, an obvious young talent, was the recipient of a scholarship from the National Conservatory of Music, newly founded in New York City. The mission of this effort was to train musicians in principles of Classical composition and performance for the ongoing cultural advancement of the nation. The effort emphati-

cally included making use of heritage folk music, as well as entirely new compositions—as demonstrated by the masters Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and others. Johannes Brahms personally encouraged the National Conservatory of Music, and backed Antonín Dvořák to go to New York City in 1892, to teach music at the new center. Philanthropist Jeannette M. Thurber was the principal funder of the Conservatory.

Burleigh and Dvořák

A wonderful, productive collaboration ensued between Burleigh and Dvořák. It is reported that Burleigh,

1. *Burleigh and the Battle for American Classical Music*, [book review](#), *EIR* (Vol. 21, No. 22, May 27, 1994), by Susan Bowen.

2. See R. Nathaniel Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs Of The Negro: As Sung At Hampton Institute*, for an early collection of songs. (Hampton, Va.: Hampton Institute Press, 1927).

an extraordinarily fine baritone, spent many days singing to Dvořák—at Dvořák’s request, the Negro songs he knew as plantation melodies, and other tunes; for example, those said to be sung along the Underground Railway stops, which he remembered hearing as a child. Burleigh later reflected, after his last public concert in 1944, that, “Under the inspiration of Dvořák, I became convinced that the Spirituals were not meant for the colored people, but for all people.”

Burleigh went on to create beautiful settings for Spirituals as well as to compose other vocal works, and, in effect, campaign for creativity. In New York City, he created the “lecture-recital”—

a concert where his singing of the Spirituals was preceded by a presentation on each song’s background and significance, in order to elevate the audience’s understanding of what he considered to be sacred works. He sang for decades as cantor at Manhattan’s Temple Emanu-El, and St. George’s Episcopal Church, which originally came about only after Burleigh had to break the color taboo. For years, he taught and worked in Italy, as well as in Manhattan, and his music was published by Milan-based Ricordi, Verdi’s publisher. He was directly involved in internationally promoting the Italian Bel Canto school.

Dvořák went on to produce works in America that are among his most famous, reflecting the universal treasure of the Spirituals. The theme known as “Goin’ Home” (words were later put to his melody by one of his students), is a Dvořák original, often mis-thought to be a heritage Spiritual. It is featured also in his New World Symphony. Less known are the cultural bombshells he set off in New York City. In 1892 Dvořák held a fundraiser concert, dedicated to Harry Burleigh, with an all African-American chorus, and integrated orchestra, doing choral pieces, including his own adaptation of “Old Folks at Home” from Stephen Foster. Dvořák wrote a guest article in 1895, titled “Music in America” (in Harper’s *The New Monthly Magazine*), in which he reiterated his view that, for the United States, “inspiration for truly national music might be derived from the



*Composer and conductor Hall Johnson
(1888-1970)*

Negro melodies or Indian chants. I was led to take this view partly by the fact that the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water. . .”³

The impetus for advancing Classical culture was seen in follow-on initiatives, most prominently in New York City, and in certain other locations. Burleigh’s urging of a “re-birth” for the Spirituals led to the start of what later became known as the “Harlem Renaissance” Movement in Manhattan. Burleigh was in discussions with poets, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, and composers Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and James Weldon John-

son, one of the founders of the National Association of Negro Musicians (1919). Johnson and his brother Rosamund Johnson, prepared settings of Spirituals. The singer, composer Roland Hayes did major work.

Hall Johnson

In the midst of this, Hall Johnson (1888-1970), African-American composer and conductor, came on the scene in New York. He said at one point, “I felt that the work and folk songs of my people and their spirituals offered a rich and untapped field. I wanted to give that music to the world.” Originally from South Carolina, he was highly trained musically at a sequence of institutions: first, the Allen University at Columbia, S.C.; then on to the University of Pennsylvania in 1910; he next studied composition at the Juilliard School of Music in Manhattan. He settled in New York City in 1914.

In September 1925, he established the Hall Johnson Choir, which continued for the next 30 years in New York, performing in top venues, and gaining international acclaim. In 1946, Johnson additionally formed the Festival Negro Chorus of New York City, which, he said, was to “strengthen racial unity and to promote

3. “Music in America” by Antonín Dvořák, in Harper’s *New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. XC, February 1895, pp. 429-434. Reprinted in *EIR*, Vol. 20, No. 32, August 20, 1993, [Antonín Dvořák: Creating a Truly American Music](#), by Kathy Wolfe and Marcia Merry.



Members of the internationally acclaimed, Harlem-based Hall Johnson Choir singing in the film *"The Green Pastures."*

racial harmony." In 1951, Johnson and his chorus performed in Berlin at the International Festival of Fine Arts, officially representing the United States. The audiences, and even critics, were entranced.

By most accounts, Hall Johnson arranged nearly 500 songs for his choir members. He did research, taught and wrote, and coached his singers to perfection. Among the many great singers and musicians associated with Johnson's work and mission were Marian Anderson and more recently, Schiller Institute collaborators Sylvia Olden Lee and Robert McFerrin, and Schiller Institute Board Member William Warfield.

Under Assault

To complete this short account of New York City and the Spiritual, there must be added the terrible side of the history: the assault against the Negro Spiritual and Classical culture of any kind in the United States. This emanated directly from London, the seat of British imperial power, and took many forms, from racism, financial warfare, and threats, to inducement to corruption.

To begin with, the National Conservatory of Music itself was thwarted. It operated throughout its existence under pressure of all kinds. Instead, New York City became home to several points of subversion of music. Tin Pan Alley came into being, to promote the most banal, repetitive, and also racist sounds, called "popular" music. In the 1920s, this was furthered, with the advent of "entertainment radio."

In 1937, the NBC Symphony Orchestra was founded as a radio orchestra, which brought in Arturo Toscanini, the infamous conductor who played "by the notes," and not by the music. All across the country, there were pressures to close down local choral societies and opera houses, German-inspired *Lieder* circles, and local bands and orchestras. Church networks were induced to forego parts-singing and polyphony, in favor of single melody lines, and gospel.

An operation to banalize and corrupt the Spirituals was waged, offering opportunities on Broadway and in Hollywood, for "Negro" music, especially ragtime and jazz.

In 1922, Harry Burleigh wrote a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, denouncing this kind of degradation as a "growing tendency of some of our musicians to utilize the melodies of our Spirituals in fox-trots, dance numbers and semi-sentimental songs. . . ."

Instead, referring to Spirituals as "prayer-songs," he said, "These melodies are our prized possession. . . In them, we have a mine of. . . local 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. . . ."⁴

Harry Burleigh's impassioned call to beauty and meaning, speaks to us yet again today, as the intent of the Manhattan Project to re-establish the choral principle in the United States for the benefit of all mankind.

Further Reading:

- ["The African-American Spiritual and the Resurrection of Classical Art: Not Force, But Beauty, Will Change America,"](#) by Dennis Speed, Oct. 9, 1995, Schiller Institute.
- "The 'New Negro' Choral Legacy of Hall Johnson," by Marva Griffin Carter, in *Chorus and Community*, ed. Karen Ahlquist (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 2006.

4. Harry T. Burleigh to the NAACP, Nov. 10, 1922. (Found in Dennis Speed article; cited in *Further Reading*, above.)

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