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Travelin' to the Promised Land: Symbolism of the Jordan River
in African Spiritual, English Hymn, and American Folksong Selections

Spiritual songs have played an important role in musical history. The written portion of this research project will analyze the lyrics of three such songs: *Deep River*, an African spiritual; *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*, an English hymn; and *Poor Wayfaring Stranger*, an American folksong. Although the three songs come from differing cultural and geographic backgrounds, the lyrics of each piece are united in theme, illustrating the Christian's journey from earth to heaven. In each of these musical depictions, the Jordan River is found to symbolize a different concept: *deliverance*, *anticipation*, and *reunion*, respectively.

Deep River

Deep River is an African spiritual borne out of great suffering. Its primary theme is deliverance – deliverance from bondage, from burdens, and from the toiling hardship of life on earth. As a spiritual, *Deep River* is part of a unique classification of song titled “sorrow songs” due to their lyrics of anguish and pain (Thurman, 23). First references to *Deep River* exist as early as 1876, when it was mentioned in *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: With Their Songs* by J.B.T. Marsh (Shirley, 494). The Fisk Jubilee Singers, an African-American a cappella ensemble from Fisk University, specialized in performances of spirituals popular among slaves before the Civil War. While the Fisk Jubilee Singers would have performed a four-part arrangement of *Deep River*, people today are most familiar with Harry T. Burleigh's arrangement for solo voice and piano. Several arrangements have since been written, including those featured in the 1929 musical, *Showboat*, and the 1941 oratorio, *A Child of Our Time*.

Since *Deep River* is an anonymous work, the composer's intentions and circumstances must be inferred through textual analysis. The reference to the Jordan River found in *Deep*

River can be connected to an Old Testament passage of Scripture which reads, “But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest.” (Deuteronomy 12:10, NIV) This song’s allusions to the Jordan River may illustrate the desire of enslaved African-Americans to “cross over” into a promised land of freedom. Symbolism in spirituals was common (Freeman, n.p.), and *Deep River* appears to be no exception.

On Jordan’s Stormy Banks (I am Bound for the Promised Land)

Samuel Stennett, a nonconformist English Baptist minister (Hutchins, n.p), wrote the original version of this hymn, titled “The Promised Land,”.. Many of Stennett’s hymns were included in John Rippon’s volume of the finest English hymns, *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, published in 1787 (Julian, 112). Eventually, this song made it to America and was first printed in *The Southern Harmony*, a shape-note songbook. When it was published in England, it was written in a minor key. Later, in its American version, a refrain was added, and the hymn was written in the major key we know today. In its original form, this piece was a congregational hymn intended for formal worship services. In later years, it became a less formalized piece, used mainly for personal devotions or smaller social singing events.

Ultimately, this is a song of hope and anticipation. The lyrics have evangelistic undertones, especially as heard in the chorus, which asks, “Oh who will come and go with me? I am bound for the promised land.” In *On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand*, the Jordan River symbolizes a time of joyful transition, when believers will take the final steps of their journey to the shores of the Promised Land – heaven’s shores.

Poor Wayfaring Stranger

First records of this song are dated as early as 1784. Some consider *Poor Wayfaring Stranger* to be a spiritual, but it is likely an early American folksong with spiritual lyrics. While its origins are unknown, some have argued that African, Irish, or German influence can be seen in the text (Steel and Hulan, 457). Regardless of its early history, this song became a well-known American tune that was frequently sung at revival meetings. During the Civil War, the lyrics became known as the Libby Prison Hymn, due to their use by a dying, disabled soldier in Libby Prison of Richmond, VA (ibid.). Numerous singers have produced covers of the song *Poor Wayfaring Stranger*, including Burl Ives and Johnny Cash.

This piece tells the story of a wayfarer who travels through this life laden with earthly cares and troubles, looking forward to meeting his Savior, parents, and loved ones in heaven. In this piece, the Jordan River seems to symbolize restoration and reunion. *Poor Wayfaring Stranger* is a sad song, written in a minor key, but it exemplifies the peace of knowing that the end of one's earthly journey will begin a sweet heavenly reunion.

Performance Paradigm

A singer presenting these pieces should be aware of their eternity-focused subject matter. Each of the above pieces must be performed in a slightly different style, while keeping a heavenly perspective at the forefront. Indeed, these are pieces about heaven, and while heaven itself is a place of beauty and joy, the journey towards heaven presents many difficulties. Songs such as these present a raw and honest look at life, death, and the daily struggle to overcome. This life has many trials and tribulations, but for the Christian, life is culminated not in death, but in a joyful reunion with the Lord. These qualities are difficult to reproduce in musical form but should be evident through the performer's use of ornamentation,

phrasing, and dynamics. This concept requires the singer to perform with sensitivity and emotional expression appropriate to the storyline present in each piece.

Conclusion

While the stories behind each of these spiritual songs are different, their lyrics are united in their heavenly theme. *Deep River*, perhaps the most sorrowful of the three songs, depicts the concept of deliverance. *On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand* highlights hopeful anticipation. *Poor Wayfaring Stranger* describes the believer's confidence in a future reunion in heaven despite earthly struggles. Each song is equally varied in historical context. Although substantial information exists on the historical backgrounds of these spiritual pieces, further study pertaining to their modern use (i.e. in a church worship/recording setting, etc.) could prove helpful. Equally relevant to musicological research would be a theoretical examination of these pieces, examining their usage of harmony in expressing similar emotions.

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