

Songs of Sorrow, Hope, and Praise: Toward a Historical Analysis of Negro Spirituals

Hope V. Dornfeld

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Background

- What are spirituals?
- What are the primary textual themes found in spirituals?
- What impact does this have on creative/interpretive decisions?

Spirituals Overview

- Spirituals: a type of religious folksong perpetuated by enslaved Africans in the American South.
- Eph. 5:19 (KJV) “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spirituals songs, singing, and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”
- Initially transmitted through the oral tradition.
- A variety of arrangements exist today.

Creative Process: Recital

- Hold On
- Witness
- Deep River
- Sweet Little Jesus Boy
- Balm in Gilead
- Steal Away
- Ride On, King Jesus

Common Themes in Spirituals

- Despair
- Jubilance
- Triumph
- Grief
- Anticipation
- Dejection
- Intercession
- Imprecation

Research Questions

- Primary: What textual categories can spirituals be placed into, based on their initial uses and historical contexts?
- Secondary: What role(s) do Negro spirituals have in American music history? How do their texts relate to key theological concepts? How should historical contexts inform and inspire modern performance practice?

Significance of the Study

- Seeks to bring awareness to the vast repertory of Negro spirituals
- Seeks to engage the audience's theological awareness through textual analysis
- Seeks to encourage a respectful and authentic performance paradigm for Negro spirituals

Old Testament Parallels

- Psalm 137:1-4 “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the willows we hung our harps, for there our captors requested a song; our tormentors demanded songs of joy: ‘Sing us a song of Zion.’ How can we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?”

Symbolism in Spirituals

- The Jordan River: freedom, spiritual rebirth, heaven, deliverance
- Coded meanings: “...my home is over Jordan,” “...wade in the water,” “...go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land”

Core Concepts

- David McD. Simms notes three sources of raw materials for spirituals: the Bible, the natural world, and personal experience.
- Spirituals have their foundation in the African musical tradition.
 - Rhythmic integrity, dance forms, expression

Performance Paradigm

- Use of dialect
- Arrangements
- Facial expression
- Musical-emotional expressivity

Research Results

- Spirituals can best be placed into the following thematic categories: songs of sorrow, hope, and praise
- Categories are interconnected, not exclusive
- Categories encompass the various adjectives and themes described earlier.

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