

MUS 735

Discussion - Hitchcock, Chapter 5

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Shape note singing in the White churches in the middle 1800's. Watch and listen to [Songs of Appalachia: Shape Note Singing](#) and [Sacred Harp 282 "I'm Going Home"](#), then listen to the [William Billings Easter Anthem](#), then watch [Slave Songbook: Origin of the Negro Spiritual](#) and [African-American Spirituals of the Civil War: Concert](#), and discover some of the essence of the mid-late 1800's Black spiritual. Compare and contrast and comment on, these American musics that were happening at the same time in the mid 1800s. Purpose, style, language, subjects are all fair game to comment upon.

[Songs of Appalachia: Shape Note Singing](#)

This video opens to a southern church congregation rehearsing gospel music, and the first thing that struck me was that the entire congregation was singing in solfege. Solfege is such a wonderful teaching tool, and admittedly, my upbringing and education has caused me to associate solfege with the music classroom or school choir setting. It took me a second to realize what the congregation was doing.

Charles Towler discusses shape note singing, explaining that his congregation uses the seven-note system, where each pitch has a different shape. Do is a triangle, mi is a diamond, and so forth. He explains that this system makes reading music much easier for the congregation, and it really does make sense. Rather than trying to sing a minor sixth interval, the congregation member just sees the triangle shape, and they know they need to sing "do." The system certainly does have merit in that regard, and for those who do read music, they can disregard the note shapes, or use them to affirm what they are reading.

[Sacred Harp 282 "I'm Going Home"](#)

This video, while more difficult to discern, seems to show a similar rehearsal as the "Songs of Appalachia" video. In it, a church congregation is singing through a gospel song, I believe on solfege, followed immediately by text. While the first video felt more like a rehearsal, this one felt more like a performance. The entire congregation was singing very emotionally and energetically. Many of them were conducting, and the group was singing in four parts without accompaniment. The audio quality was not great, which is a shame, as I bet you could really feel the emotion of the congregation if you could hear them sing like this in person!

[William Billings Easter Anthem](#)

This music is entirely different from the first two selections. As is typical of Billings' works, this song is written for four parts with accompaniment, but it surprised me that the soprano part was doubled by a tenor voice down an octave, and the tenor part was doubled by a soprano voice up an octave. It really gives the composition an antiphonal feel at points, and it might be that I listened to this immediately following the shape-note singing examples, but on one of the listenings of this piece, as I was following the bass line, I couldn't help thinking how much easier this would be in shape-note notation, particularly with the frequency of larger intervals in that part.

[Slave Songbook: Origin of the Negro Spiritual](#)

This video highlights the story of a book of African-American spirituals, owned by Avery Clayton's mother. He is president of the Mayme A. Clayton (named after his mother) library and museum in Culver City, CA. Clayton suspected that this book, published in 1867 (two years after the end of the Civil War), might have been the first book of African-American spirituals published in the United States. He also wanted to know more information about the people who published the book, about their method and motivation. Detective Wes Cowan investigated the origins of the book and its publishers.

Cowan only recognized a handful of the more than 130 songs in the book. Many of the songs expressed a hope for redemption in the afterlife. The editors recorded the words in phonetic English, just as they would have been sung at the time. Cowan couldn't determine if it was the first book of spirituals, so he traveled to Howard University in Washington DC to speak with Dr. James Norris, Director of Music and Director of the Howard Choir. Norris was familiar with the book, and he spoke about his experience with spirituals, as his grandfather was a Baptist preacher.

To the enslaved African, spirituals were everything. They needed to sing to keep their motivation and feel human. Slave songs often had hidden messages, while portraying hope on the surface, containing messages of escape. "Roll Jordan Roll" may have described crossing the Mississippi River to escape slavery. Africans used handclapping and body percussion, as their instruments were taken away from them as they entered the United States. The work songs of these African slaves evolved into the Blues, and formed the foundation for almost every American musical form created in the 20th century (Jazz, Rock & Roll, Hip Hop, among others).

In order to find out more about the publishers of Clayton's song book, Cowan spoke with Hannonia Caldwell, now retired professor of music at California State University Dominguez Hills. She recognized Clayton's spiritual right away, and had a great deal of information on its publishers. The three individuals who published the book were abolitionists, working to destroy

the institution of slavery before and during the Civil War. Their goal in creating this song book was to document the lyrical, emotional voice of the African American of the time. Those in favor of slavery believed that slaves were property or objects, and so the abolitionists' goal was to document these songs in order to convey and affirm the humanity of the slaves. For the vast majority of Americans up to the 1860s, their only musical exposure of African Americans occurred during minstrel shows, written and performed by whites in blackface, portraying Africans as being happy in slavery.

I really appreciated watching this video, as it gave me a greater understanding of how slave songs were recorded, and a much better perspective on the lives that slaves lead in the 19th century. Even the little glimpse into the lives of slaves, and the white perception of slavery at the time was important to see, and I could see value in playing parts of this video for our students.

[African-American Spirituals of the Civil War: Concert](#)

What a treat it was to watch this performance! This concert of Civil War spirituals had so much emotional energy which would have been lost in an audio recording only. The performance opened with the Baltimore City College High School Choir, and the movement in each performer reminded me of the congregational conducting in the Sacred Harp 282 video. I have to believe that contributed to the energy of the choir here. The emotions on the faces of the singers, both in songs of hope and dramatic songs, was captivating. The ending of "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" was one of my favorite moments of the concert for this performance aspect.

Following the BCC High School Choir, Dr. James Norris directed the Howard University Chorale. The first thing I noticed was that this choir didn't use risers, but instead stood in a semi-circle around Norris. This was another powerful, emotional performance, and watching it was as moving as listening to it. While the high school choir was wonderful, you could hear a difference in refinement of this ensemble. There was more depth and a darker timbre in the sound, and I enjoyed it even more.

While the high school choir had a more natural body movement during their performance, the collegiate ensemble displayed more powerful, intentional facial expressions during their performance. The body movements conveyed in the collegiate group were clearly rehearsed, like with the work song, "I'm Going Home." I appreciated the discussion of the work song by Dr. Norris, as it helped explain its origins and use in the 19th century. I think it helped the audience to understand what they were seeing, making the performance even more powerful.