

Negro in stadiums,
where the attendants
could



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Negro Spirituals, a religious folk song of American origin, particularly associated with African-American Protestants of the southern United States. The African-American spiritual, characterized by syncopation, polyrhythmic structure, and the pentatonic scale of five whole tones, is, above all, a deeply emotional song. Spirituals are really the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America.

But the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro make them at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them. Spirituals were long thought to be the only original folk music of the United States, and research into its origin centered mainly on the nature and extent of its African ancestry. Because slaves were brought to the United States from many parts of Africa, no single African musical source is clear. Elements that African music and American black spirituals have in common include syncopation, polyrhythmic structure, the pentatonic scale, and a responsive rendition of text. Almost all the first Africans who arrived in the New World were slaves. They came from several regions of the African West Coast. Their ways of living were described by slaves themselves, in some narratives.

They had to work either in plantations or in town. Slavery was an important issue facing churches, as slaves were allowed to meet for Christian services. Some Christian ministers wrote against slavery. Rural slaves used to stay after the regular worship services, in churches or in plantation praise houses, for singing and dancing. But, slaveholders did not allow dancing and playing drums, as usual in Africa. They also had meetings at secret places (camp meetings, bush meetings), because they needed to meet one another and

share their joys, pains and hopes. In rural meetings, thousands slaves were gathered and listened to itinerant preachers, and sang spirituals, for hours.

In the late 1700s, they sang the precursors of spirituals, which were called corn ditties. So, in rural areas, spirituals were sung, mainly outside of churches. In cities, about 1850, the Protestant City-Revival Movement created a new song genre, which was popular; for revival meetings organized by this movement, temporary tents were erected in stadiums, where the attendants could sing. At church, hymns and psalms were sung during services. Some of them were transformed into songs of a typical African American form: they are “ Dr Watts. The lyrics of negro spirituals were tightly linked with the lives of their authors: slaves. While work songs dealt only with their daily life, spirituals were inspired by the message of Jesus Christ and his Good News (Gospel) of the Bible, You can be saved. They are different from hymns and psalms, because they were a way of sharing the hard condition of being a slave.

Many slaves in town and in plantations tried to run to a free country, that they called my home or Sweet Canaan, the Promised Land. This country was on the Northern side of Ohio River, that they called Jordan. Some negro spirituals refer to the Underground Railroad, an organization for helping slaves to run away. The Spirituals are spiritual. Conscious artistry and popular conception alike should never rob them of this heritage, untrue to their tradition and to the folk genius to give them another tone. That they are vulnerable of both crude and refined secularization is no excuse. Even though their own makers worked them up from the “ shout” and the rhythmic elements of the sensuous dance, in their finished form and basic

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emotional effect all of these elements were completely sublimated in the sincere intensities of religious seriousness. To call them Spirituals and treat them otherwise is a travesty.

Emotionally, African slave songs were far from simple. They are not only spread over the whole length of human moods, with the traditional religious overtone skillfully insinuated in each instance, but there is further a sudden change of mood in the single song, baffling to formal classification.

Emotional themes relate these songs to the folk activities that they motivated, classifying them by their respective song-types. From this point of view we have essentially four classes, the almost ritualistic prayer songs or pure Spirituals, the freer and more unrestrained evangelical "shouts" or camp-meeting songs, the folk ballads so overlaid with the tradition of the Spirituals proper that their distinctive type quality has almost been unnoticed until lately, and the work and labor songs of strictly significant character. Indeed, in the pure Spirituals one can trace the broken fragments of an evangelical folk liturgy, with confession, exhortation, "mourning," conversion and "love-feast" rejoicing as the general stages of a Protestant folk-mass. It is not a question of religious content or allusion, for the great majority of the Negro songs have this more delicate question of caliber of feeling and type of folk use. The distinctiveness of the Spirituals after all and their finest meaning resides in their musical elements.

The characteristic beauty of the folk song is harmonic, in distinction to the more purely rhythmic stress in the secular music of the Negro, which is the basis of "ragtime" and "jazz"; while regarding the one as the African component in them, and the other as the modifying influence of the religious

hymn. In the United States the rhythmic element, though still dominant, has ceded measurably to the melodic, the dance having given way to religious worship, sensual bodily movement to emotional expression. The actual mechanics of the native singing, with its syllabic quavers, the off-tones and tone glides, the improvised interpolations and, above all, the subtle rhythmic phrase balance, has much to do with the preservation of the vital qualities of these songs. In the process of the art development of this material the Negro musician has not only a peculiar advantage but a particular function and duty. Maintaining spiritual kinship with the best traditions of this great folk art, he must make himself the recognized vehicle of both its transmission and its further development.

Negro folk song is not midway its artistic career as yet, and while the preservation of the original folk forms is for the moment the most pressing necessity, an inevitable art development awaits them, as in the past it has awaited all other great folk music. The complaint to be made is not against the art development of the Spirituals, but against the somewhat hybrid treatment characteristic of the older school of musicians. One of the worst features of this period has been the predominance of solo treatment and the loss of the vital sustained background of accompanying voices. In spite of the effectiveness of the solo versions, especially when competently sung by Negro singers, it must be realized more and more that the proper idiom of Negro folk song calls for choral treatment.

The young Negro musicians, Nathaniel Dett, Carl Diton, Ballanta Taylor, Edward Boatner, Hall Johnson, Lawrence Brown and others, while they are doing effective solo settings, are turning back gradually to the choral form.

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Musically speaking, only the superficial resources in this direction have been touched as yet; just as soon as the traditional conventions of four-part harmony and the oratorio style and form are broken through, we may expect a choral development of Negro folk song that may equal or even outstrip the phenomenal choral music of Russia. With its harmonic versatility and interchangeable voice parts; Negro music is only conventionally in the four-part style, and with its skipped measures and interpolations it is at the very least potentially polyphonic. It can therefore undergo without breaking its own boundaries, intricate and original development in directions already the line of advance in modernistic music. Indeed one wonders why something vitally new has not already been contributed by Negro folk song to modern choral and orchestral musical development.

And if it be objected that it is too far a cry from the simple folk spiritual to the larger forms and idioms of modern music, let us recall the folk song origins of the very tradition which is now classic in European music. Up to the present, the resources of Negro music have been tentatively exploited in only one direction at a time, melodically here, rhythmically there, harmonically in a third direction. A genius that would organize its distinctive elements in a formal way would be the musical giant of his age. Such a development has been hampered by a threefold tradition, each aspect of which stands in the way of the original use of the best in the Negro material. The dominance of the melodic tradition has played havoc with its more original harmonic features, and the oratorio tradition has falsely stereotyped and overlaid its more orchestral choral style, with its intricate threading in and out of the voices. Just as definitely in another direction has the

traditional choring of the orchestra stood against the opening up and development of the Negro and the African idioms in the orchestral forms.

Gradually these barriers have been broken through. Negro music very probably has a great contribution yet to make to the substance and style of contemporary music, both choral and instrumental. If so, its thematic and melodic contributions and the borrowings of rhythmical suggestions are only precluding experiments that have proclaimed the value of the Negro musical idioms, but have not fully developed them. When a body of folk music is really taken up into musical tradition, it is apt to do more than contribute a few new themes. For when the rhythmic and harmonic basis of music is affected, it is more than a question of superstructure, the very foundations of the art are in process of being influenced.

Appreciating it as music of the past, we must nurture and welcome its contribution to the music of tomorrow. Words/ Pages : 1, 616 / 24