

NEGRO MUSICIANS AND THEIR MUSIC¹

The unusual contribution of our American forefathers in demonstrating the power and beauty of music is a marvel of the age. Certainly this God-given talent enabled the burden bearers of America for two hundred and fifty years to march from darkness to light with an unprecedented faith. Notwithstanding the fact that the masses of slaves could neither read nor write, they left an indelible stamp upon the cultural and religious life of the South. Through documents we are enabled to know something of their aspirations and struggles, but there is no stronger medium to tell us of their affliction, doubt, despair, sorrow, hope, joy and faith than is evidenced through the transplanted African rhythm, southern melody and harmony of these spirituals and labor songs.

Inquiry into the origin of American Negro music discloses the fact that it was often created spontaneously on river barges, in fields, in box-cars, at camp meetings, in prisons, on construction crews, on the levees, anywhere and at any time that their emotional outburst saw fit to reveal itself. Was there a better way to express their despair than is evidenced in the words of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child a Long Way from Home?" Or their dislike of social and economic conditions told in the words of "Many Thousands Go?" Prohibited by law and custom from learning any other means of expression, the Negro found in music the only medium with which he could unfold his soul to the world.

No more peck of corn for me,
No more drivers lash for me,
No more pint of salt for me,
No more hundred lash for me,
No more mistress call for me.

¹ An address delivered in connection with the musical opening the celebration of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Chicago, Illinois.

Can one find a better expression of sorrow than is shown in the Negro's "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See, Nobody Knows but Jesus?" Can a stronger doubt of Christianity of those about him be better set forth than in: "Everybody Talkin' 'bout Heav'n Aint Goin' There?" Love for home is seen in "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny; There's Where the Cotton and the Corn and Taters Grow." Gratitude is expressed in "I Thank God I'm Free At Last." And supplication in "Lord, I Want to be a Christian in My Heart." Only a Christian's faith enabled them to sing "Walk Together, Children; Don't You Get Weary; There's a Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land." And finally the triumphant end of a terrible struggle is pictured in "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Coming for to Carry Me Home."

Does not this language of the emotions, bequeathed to us by our foreparents, create within us a burning desire to know something of our historical background, and hurl to us, through the years, a challenge to build on that background and take our rightful places by the side of other benefactors of mankind? Certainly this is not impossible, as proved when we review the lives of achievement led by those of Negro blood in earlier years in European environment. We might name the Chevalier de St. Georges, who was one of the first French musicians to write string quartette music; Samuel Coleridge-Taylor of London, whose most distinctive work is probably that reflecting his interest in Negro folk song; George Augustus Bridgetower of Poland, who became the friend and associate of Beethoven.

Among American composers we find Edmund Dede of New Orleans; the musical Lambert family of seven members of Louisiana; Harry T. Burleigh, one of the foremost composers of the world, who assisted D'vorak, the great Hungarian musician, in his "New World Symphony" based on the Negro folk song "Going Home;" James

Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, brothers, who, among other compositions, have given us the anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing;" R. Nathaniel Dett, a composer, who enjoys a place among world artists; William Still, a new creator, who is doing startling things in the same field; Clarence Williams, native of Louisiana, who has produced and published over one thousand compositions.

Among singers we find Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a Mississippian whose voice embraced twenty-seven notes reaching from a sonorous bass to a few notes above even Jenny Lind's highest; Anna and Emma Hyers, noted musical sisters of California; Madam Selika, world-famous singer; Roland Hayes, the great tenor of our time; Marian Anderson, the famous contralto; and Eva Taylor, the first Negro soloist over a national and international hook-up.

As pianists we find among the first Thomas Bethune or "Blind Tom," our race prodigy. Then there is Helen Hagan, who a few years ago was awarded the Sandford Scholarship from Yale, and since her return from France has delighted American audiences. Others of equal fame are Raymond Augustus Lawson, Hazel Harrison and Ethel Richardson.

Since Africans were the first to use stringed instruments, it is not surprising to find among outstanding Americans such violinists as Clarence Cameron White, Joseph Douglass, Louia Vaughn Jones, and Kemper Harreld. The four Mills Brothers, with a guitar, are making their contribution along with others.

These are a few who have achieved and are achieving, but what are we doing for the masses? We grant that music enabled our forefathers to withstand physical slavery. Do we, as their descendants, need its power and beauty? Are we economically free? Are we politically free? Will not the demonstration of these achievements convince others that we are entitled to more than we receive?

It was my pleasure a short while ago, with the assistance of principals and teachers of Lexington, Kentucky, City Schools to make a survey among one thousand, eight hundred and sixty-seven pupils, ranging from six to seventeen years of age. It was found that all were students of music appreciation classes, but only two hundred and sixty-four were students of or could play any instrumental music, while nine hundred and twelve expressed a desire to learn how to perform on some instrument.

Does not this forty-nine per cent of anxious pupils, or thirty-seven per cent of disinterested pupils concern us? We have been placed in a world of music evidenced through singing birds, whistling breezes, roaring winds, mighty woods, desert sands, rippling brooks and breaking waves. Shall we not accept our background of music as a challenge to help our children appreciate and reproduce the music surrounding them, which in turn will assist them to

“Hum, sing and play their way,
Through prejudice to a better day?”

The story is told that on the first appearance of our great tenor, Roland Hayes, before a white audience in Louisville, Kentucky, he was forced, because of prejudice, to sing from behind a curtain. His wonderful spiritual talent, and time, have removed that curtain, and Mr. Hayes is now gladly received by audiences everywhere. The phonograph and radio are curtains used today between Negro musicians, their music, and the world. Negro artists and their art are unconsciously being received, and appreciated, in hitherto unopened homes. Shall we not labor that, when television has progressed to the point where black faces can be seen through the radio as Negroes sing, bonds of sympathy and understanding shall have eliminated prejudice so that artists, regardless of color, may have an equal chance to make

their contribution to the progress of the world? Then, and not until then, shall a great world symphony be broadcast to that Eternal City, through a grand cosmopolitan organ, by the two major branches and their kindred, of the "One Human Race." The white branch, as one has imagined, representing the white keys to this great organ, shall be assisted by the black branch representing its black keys, and completing its rhythm, melody and harmony, declaring and attesting to God in the Highest that, there is "Peace on Earth and Good Will to Men."

LUCY HARTH SMITH