

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 19 July 2024
10.00pm

Reginald Mobley countertenor
Baptiste Trotignon piano

Spiritual

My Lord, what a Morning
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
A Great Campmeetin'

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Because

Harry T Burleigh (1866-1949)

Jean (1903)

Spiritual

Steal Away
Save Me Lord

Solo piano improvisation

Florence Price

Sunset (1938)

Spiritual

Deep River
I got a robe
Were you there
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Bright Sparkles in the Churchyard

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'As the years go by and I understand more about this music and its origin the miracle of its production strikes me with increasing wonder. It would have been a notable achievement if the white people who settled this country, having a common language and heritage, seeking liberty in a new land ... had created a body of folk music comparable to the Negro Spirituals. But from whom did these songs spring – these songs unsurpassed among the folk songs of the world and, in the poignancy of their beauty, unequalled?'

James Weldon Johnson, from the preface to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 1925

Influenced by the surge of interest in European and American folk music at the turn of the 20th Century, composer and singer John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954) and his brother, poet and activist James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) compiled and edited two volumes of Spirituals with the hope that they 'will further endear these songs to those who love Spirituals, and will awaken an interest in many others.' The Johnson brothers were part of a larger movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, a revival of Black arts, culture and scholarship centred in New York's Harlem neighbourhood, and which spread through the cities of America's Northeast and Midwest. In the same year in which the first volume of the Johnsons's Spirituals was published, a 19-year-old entertainer named Josephine Baker sailed from New York to Paris, escaping the racial violence and segregation of the United States for a city abuzz with the sound of jazz and home to numerous Afro-Caribbean expatriate writers, poets and artists.

The year 1925 also marked 60 years since the abolition of slavery in the United States, that 'peculiar institution' which, starting in 1619, robbed Africa of millions of men, women and children. Those who survived the harrowing journey across the Atlantic found themselves in a foreign land, separated from their families, stripped of their cultural identities, forced to labour and made to adopt their captors' religious beliefs. It was out of this crucible of blood, sweat and despair that a new music of hope was forged, mixing elements of African rhythm, form and melody with the words of their adopted faith. These were not pieces smoothed into featurelessness like stones in a stream, but diamonds of song and spirit, forced by pressures of almost unfathomable harshness into something both brilliant and durable, and passed from singer to singer over generations like precious heirloom jewels.

After abolition, Black Americans sought a better life for themselves despite the systemic racism, segregation and racial violence which overshadowed many aspects of their existence. New styles of music rooted in the Black experience evolved – blues faced hardship and transformed it into music of unique emotional depth. In churches, gospel grew out of the Spiritual tradition while Dixieland, swing, stomp, ragtime and especially jazz filled

the dance halls and concert stages, themselves birthing new and enduring musical movements like funk, Motown, R&B and hip hop.

Black Americans transformed the world of art music as well. The singing of **Harry Thacker Burleigh** (1866-1949) came to the attention of Antonín Dvořák, director of the National Conservatory in New York, where Burleigh attended as a scholarship student. The Czech composer became enchanted with Spirituals, and was quoted in an 1893 *New York Herald* interview saying 'In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music'. Burleigh's Spiritual arrangements attained widespread fame in the early 20th Century. Like the work of the Johnson brothers, Burleigh set the traditional melodies to piano accompaniment in the harmonic language and style of his time, but as James Weldon Johnson would put it, not 'cut up or "opera-ated" upon'. In one sense, they were very much akin to other contemporary song collectors bringing the 'primitive' folk music of Europe or America to 'cultured' audiences. Yet even in their accessible directness, they retained the dignity, power and elegance of their roots without being whitewashed, and they quickly became recital favourites for some of America's most celebrated singers, including Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson and even Irish tenor John McCormack.

In the hands of **Florence Price** (1887-1953), both the Spiritual arrangement and the Black art song would rise to new heights. A native of Little Rock, Arkansas, Price studied piano pedagogy and organ at Boston's New England Conservatory and spent most of her professional life in Chicago. Her compositional output included symphonies, concertos, chamber works, music for piano and organ and dozens of art songs and Spiritual arrangements. Among her many gifts was the ability to write in styles ranging from Impressionism to Romanticism to jazz and popular song, all with a unique and powerful voice shaped by the Black experience. Her song 'Resignation', set to her own poetry, blends the timelessness and dignity of a Spiritual with the intimacy of a prayer. She also composed numerous songs to the poetry of Harlem Renaissance writers, notably Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, setting them in a way that paid homage to their Black roots while imbuing them with the full range and depth of contemporary musical expression. Through the work of musicians like Price and Burleigh as well as WC Handy, Thomas A Dorsey, Duke Ellington, William Grant Still and so many others, music of the Black diaspora made its way into the world's musical consciousness. This is music of a thousand brilliant facets – each one dazzling our eye, daring and challenging us to reflect on where we have been and what we can still become.

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Spiritual

My Lord, what a Morning

Traditional

My Lord, what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall.

You'll hear the trumpet sound,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.

My Lord, what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall.

You'll hear the sinner mourn,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.

My Lord, what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall.

You'll hear the Christians shout,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.

My Lord, what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

Traditional

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus,
Glory, Hallelujah!

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down;
Oh, yes, Lord;
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,
Oh, yes, Lord.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen ...

Although you see me goin' 'long so,
Oh, yes, Lord;
I have my trials here below,
Oh, yes, Lord.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen ...

One day when I was walking along,
Oh, yes, Lord;
The element opened, and the Love came down,
Oh, yes, Lord.

A Great Campmeetin'

Traditional

O, walk together, children,
Don't you get weary.
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.
Gonna mourn and never tire,
Mourn and never tire,
Praise and never tire.
O, walk together, children ...
Gonna sing and never tire,
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.
O, walk together, children ...

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Because

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Because I had loved so deeply,
Because I had loved so long,
God in His great compassion
Gave me the gift of song.

Because I had loved so vainly,
And sung with such faltering trill,
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of Death.

Harry T Burleigh (1866-1949)

Jean (1903)

Frank Lebby Stanton

Jean, my Jean, with the eyes of light,
And the beautiful soft, brown hair,
Do you know that I'm longing for you tonight
For your lips, for the clasp of your hand so white,
And the sound of your voice so dear?

Jean, my Jean, with the glances bright,
Where the smile shines through the tear,
Do you know that I'm calling to you tonight,
Where the seagulls cry like ghosts in flight
And the dark falls lone and drear?

Jean, my Jean, where the snow drifts white,
Thro' the answerless, icy air,
Ah, would to God you were here tonight,
Braiding your beautiful tresses of light,
And that I were lying there!

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Spiritual

Steal Away

Traditional

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home.
I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord. He calls me!
He calls me like the thunder!
The trumpet sounds within my soul!
I ain't got long to stay here.

Steal away, steal away ...

Green trees are bending
And sinners stand a trembling.
The trumpet sounds within my soul!
I ain't got long to stay here.

Steal away, steal away ...

Save Me Lord

Traditional

Yes, I want God's heaven to be mine;
Save me Lord, save me.
I hailed to my sister, she hailed back to me,
The last word I heard her say was
Save me Lord, save me.

I hailed to my brother, he hailed back to me,
The last word I heard him say was
Save me Lord, save me.
Yes, I want God's heaven to be mine ...

I hailed to my father, he hailed back to me,
The last word I heard him say was
Save me Lord, save me.
Yes, I want God's heaven to be mine ...

Solo piano improvisation

Florence Price

Sunset (1938)

Odessa P Elder

When the golden West reflects her beauty,
Comes to me a happy duty;
And I must write of that golden town
That beckons me when the sun goes down.

'Tis a story from the golden sky
As the clouds go sailing by.

I sit and watch for that golden town
That beckons me when the sun goes down.

I'll seek this home in the golden West
That lures me on my joyful quest,
And find new life in that golden town
That beckons me when the sun goes down.

Spiritual

Deep River

Traditional

Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into
campground.
Oh, don't you want to go, to that Gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?

I got a robe

Traditional

I got a robe, you got a robe,
All of God's children got a robe;
When I get to Heaven gonna put on my robe,
Gonna shout all over God's Heaven,
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there!

I got a shoes, you got a shoes,
All of God's children got a shoes;
When I get to Heaven gonna put on my shoes,
Gonna walk all over God's Heaven,
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there!

I got a crown, you got a crown,
All of God's children got a crown;
When I get to Heaven gonna put on my crown,
Gonna shout all over God's Heaven,
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there!

I got a harp, you got a harp,
All of God's children got a harp;
When I get to Heaven, gonna play on my harp,
Gonna play all over God's Heaven,
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there!

Were you there

Traditional

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble.
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble.
Were you there when they rolled the stone away?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child

Traditional

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home.
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
A long way from home.

Bright Sparkles in the Churchyard

Traditional

May de Lord, He will be glad of me,
In de heaven He'll rejoice.
In de heaven, once, in de heaven, twice,
In de heaven He'll rejoice.
Bright sparkles in de churchyard,
Give light unto de tomb,
Bright summer, spring's over,
Sweet flowers in de'r bloom.
My mother, once, my mother, twice,
My mother she'll rejoice.
In de heaven, once, in de heaven, twice,
In de heaven she'll rejoice.
All de day,
Oh, rock me in de cradle all de day,
Oh, mother, don't ye love yer darlin' child,
Mother, rock me in de cradle.
You may lay me down to sleep, my mother dear,
Oh, rock me in de cradle all de day.