

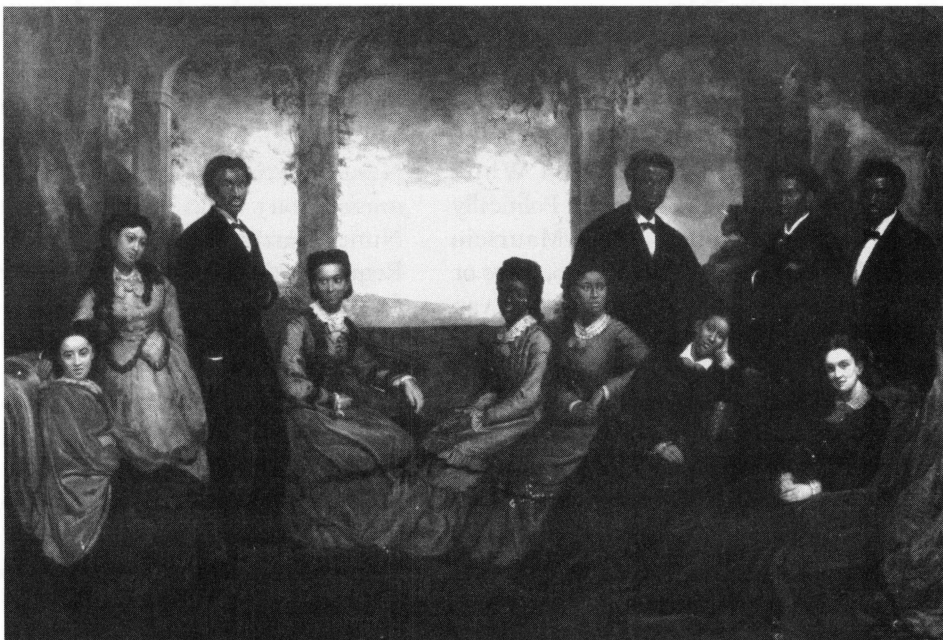
## Celebrating Black History Month

INTERVIEW / Mathew Kennedy

# The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers

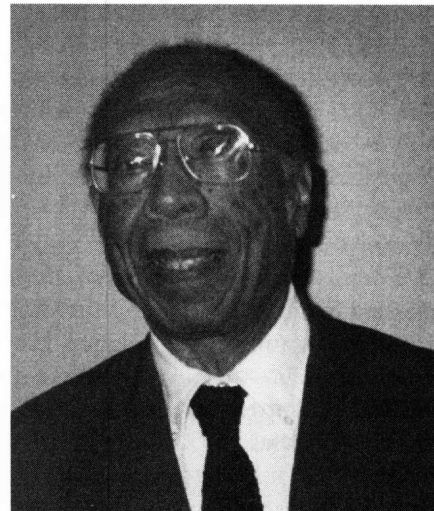
*The Fisk Jubilee Singers began as a musical institution in 1871, when newly freed slaves who were students at Fisk University in Tennessee, decided to raise money to save the school from bankruptcy by performing around the world, introducing the African-American spiritual together with Classical repertoire to the concert stage for the first time. Its members have included the great tenor Roland Hayes and baritone Robert McFerrin. Mathew Kennedy directed the group for nearly a quarter century, beginning in 1957.*

**Fidelio:** There's a very rich tradition in the founding of Fisk and the establishment of the original Jubilee Singers



*The Jubilee Singers, 1873.*

Fisk University Library



EIFNS/Lynne Speed

and their initial tours both around the United States and in Europe, which electrified the world. Could you tell us about that?

**Kennedy:** That story reads like fiction almost. The American Missionary Association had established Fisk to educate primarily the freed slaves in 1866. From the outset, in the charter, it said that this institution of higher education was open to all people, regardless of race, creed, or color.

About five years after its founding, the school found itself in financial difficulty, and the missionary association practically felt that they would have to close the school. But one of the professors, George L. White, who had become immersed in the situation, was a trained musician, and he had heard the students singing and was so impressed—especially with the songs that the students would sing, the particular kinds of songs that were new to him, so to speak—that he began to work with them and to encourage them to sing these songs.

**Fidelio:** You're referring now to the spirituals?

**Kennedy:** Yes, their native

songs, so to speak. He somewhat refined them as he worked with them. And he had the idea that he might take a group of the students on tours to raise money to save the school. He approached the administration with the idea. They were not friendly toward it, and it looked as if even the idea would die before it could get started.

But he had the faith to take some of his own funds and, without having the full permission from the University, the first group of nine students left the campus on Oct. 6, 1871. That's now a very important date in the history of the school.

They set out with the specific purpose to raise funds for the University. They ran into all kinds of problems once they left the school. The public didn't know how to receive such a student group of freed slaves. They were looked upon as minstrels. There were ups and downs in these early days.

Shortly after they started out, the great Chicago fire took place. Mr. White decided to send the small purse that had been collected from one of their early concerts, about fifty dollars, to Chicago to assist the victims of that fire.

They went on, and what turned the tide for them was a meeting of religious leaders, ministers, that was taking place in Oberlin, Ohio, in early November of that same year, 1871. They went to this meeting with the idea of singing for the assemblage. Professor White was told, you take your singers into the balcony and if there's a lull in the meeting, we'll invite them to come down and sing for us. They sat there in the balcony for a long time and no call was sent up to them to come down. But Professor White *sensed* the lull in the late afternoon to early evening and gave the signal for one of the students to begin singing "Steal Away." We are told that the audience was completely mesmerized.

As they continued to sing a few choruses of this, the place went into a uproar, and the presiding person shouted up, "White, bring your singers down." I don't know how long they sang for the group, but that was the turning of the tide.

It was Henry Ward Beecher, who was there at this meeting, through whose influence the singers began to receive invitations from all over to come and sing, and offerings were taken, very generous offerings in many places. So this was the beginning of the great success story that we know, that sent the singers to Europe, where they sang for crowned heads, to an invitation to sing at the White House, etc.

They were able, after a few years of touring, to send enough money back to the University to secure the purchase of land and build the first permanent building for



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*The Jubilee Singers, 1896.*

higher education of Negroes, as was the term used then, in the United States.

This first permanent building is a memorial to the Jubilee Singers and is called Jubilee Hall on the Fisk campus.

**Fidelio:** I understand that they raised in those first few years quite a record sum. Do you know the amount?

**Kennedy:** It was approximately \$100,000, which was a tremendous amount in those days.

**Fidelio:** Can you tell us a little bit about the programs that the Fisk Jubilee Singers would perform, both throughout the United States and in their travels in Europe?

**Kennedy:** At the outset, Professor White actually had a little difficulty in getting the students to feel comfortable about including the spirituals in the program. He was very much in favor of this, this is what he wanted the public to hear, but the students had such feelings about

*Mathew Kennedy began his work as accompanist to the Jubilee Singers in 1943, after graduating from the Juilliard School of Music. On Nov. 10, 1993, the Fisk Jubilee Singers participated in a concert tribute "To the Dignity of Man," co-sponsored by the Schiller Institute on the fourth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Lynne and Dennis Speed conducted this interview in Washington, D.C. on Feb. 22.*



Fisk University Library

*Jubilee Singers, 1940's. Mathew Kennedy is at top, right.*

these songs: they reminded them too much of the sorrow and the hardships from whence they had come, their roots.

But when these spirituals were sung, it was noted that the public received them with much more warmth and enthusiasm than the other things that were programmed, the Classics that he had had them include, and popular songs of the day.

**Fidelio:** I understand that they had received a thorough, Classical education, both in terms of Classical music, but also more generally, a Classical education in languages and so on. Perhaps you could describe a little bit about the educational program.

**Kennedy:** From what has been handed down to us, we know Fisk was attempting to follow the curriculum that was generally offered in schools of that time: Greek, Latin, sciences. The liberal education approach, as opposed to the vocational approach that in later years Tuskegee Institute presented. From the background of the teachers that came to Fisk, we know the school was directed toward Classical education.

**Fidelio:** When I visited Fisk, I looked at some of the earlier curricula, and there seemed to be quite a bit of emphasis on Bach studies, both vocal and instrumental, and also Chopin, Beethoven, and so on, together with Classical repertoire. Could you tell us what a typical concert program would have included in 1880?

**Kennedy:** It was a kind of broad sampling, using the Classical composers such as Handel and Bach. Solos were included from the students who were capable of doing such, and they also included some literary works, as recitations, making out a program that showed vari-

ety, as well as including a generous portion of spirituals.

**Fidelio:** You mentioned that recitations also were included. Are you referring to poetry, Shakespeare, drama?

**Kennedy:** Yes, and Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote many things, many of course in dialect, but some of his works were included.

**Fidelio:** Your wife's family had a close relationship with Marian Anderson. Can you tell us about that?

**Kennedy:** The close relationship developed when Miss Anderson gave her first concert in Charleston, West Virginia, which is my wife's home town. Miss Anderson was the house guest of my wife's mother, Mrs. Nida Gamble, who was also a musician. This is a long story.

In the late 1890's there was a singer named Frederick Loudoun, who was with a group that stayed in Europe, on the Continent and Great Britain, for about five years. He was not then officially associated with the Jubilee Singers, but because he had been a Jubilee Singer and because he had a group performing, the association—for the public—was the same. He was billed all over the continent as Loudoun's Jubilee Singers, and everyone just assumed that they were the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

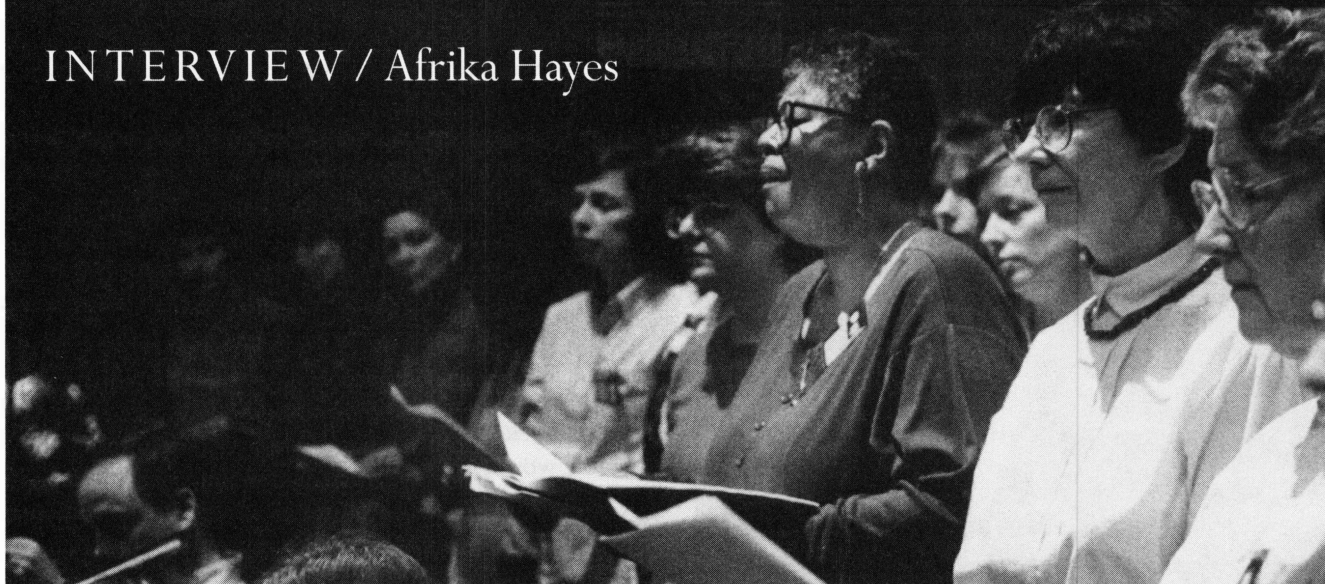
This Loudoun was related through marriage to my wife's mother. And when they were getting ready to leave for that particular tour, they needed another soprano, and the relative said to Loudoun, why not take Nida with us. This was quite something, because she was only in her late teens at the time.

So my wife's mother had this great experience of going to the Continent and staying there with her relatives as a part of this fine tradition of singing spirituals. And she kept a beautiful diary of her experiences, including standing on the sidewalk at the coronation of King George V, viewing the parade. I think it's just fantastic to see the beautiful handwriting of this teenager, as she recounted her experiences there.

Miss Anderson later became the houseguest of my wife's mother, Mrs. Gamble, there in Charleston. My wife Anne was just a young woman, and at the time she had come back to Fisk in preparation for a tour. Mrs. Gamble contacted Anne and asked her to assist in entertaining Miss Anderson. Anne went home immediately, and from that point on, a strong friendship developed, because Anne was on hand to visit with Miss Anderson, do her nails, that kind of thing, and exchange stories. In later years, we would visit Miss Anderson in Connecticut. We have a beautiful picture of our daughter on Miss Anderson's lap in her Connecticut home. She was just about a year old at the time, and we are very proud of that picture.

*Afrika Hayes performs as guest soloist with the Schiller Institute chorus in the "Laudate Dominum" from Mozart's "Vesperae solennes de confessore."*

## INTERVIEW / Afrika Hayes



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

# Growing Up with Roland Hayes

**Fidelio:** Let me ask you about your growing up with such a great teacher as your father, and how some of those early experiences affected you and your own decision to go into music, both as an educator as well as a singer.

**Hayes:** I suppose it all goes back to the time I was about two years old, the first time that I ever met Marian Anderson. She tucked me in bed; she was our house guest. I remember what a very lovely person she was.

Not only was there music around the house from various people who came to visit us, but we had statesmen that would come, and they and my parents would talk

*Afrika Hayes, soprano, is the daughter of the great tenor Roland Hayes, who pioneered the way for African-American musicians onto the Classical music stage in the United States and Europe at the beginning of this century. The son of a slave with only a sixth-grade education, Roland Hayes opened the doors for Marian Anderson, who sang with him as a child in her church in Philadelphia, and for countless other African-American artists, who benefitted from his marvelous talent and courage.*

*In addition to her singing career, Afrika Hayes teaches music in the public school system in Boston and is assisting in the preparation of a biography of her father for publication in the near future. This interview was conducted by Lynne and Dennis Speed on Feb. 22.*

and I was somewhere there listening and taking it all in, and wisely saying nothing.

As far as my musical training, I started my piano lessons at the age of three. I was composing at the age of two. Of course, I studied piano and I'm still playing the piano, for that matter. I was fortunate enough to do some accompanying for my father—at home, not on the stage. Daddy was a very exacting person, and in my piano practice, to this day, there is one section of the Chopin waltz in C#-minor I still can't play, because there was a particular incident where my fingers stumbled and my father leaned over the bannister and said, "Blue notes! Blue notes!" To this day, I cannot play that piece without stumbling on the blue notes.

I didn't seriously consider singing as a profession until I was about thirty. I had always been afraid to sing for my father, because my father was a perfectionist and the two of us were too much alike. We tried once, when I was sixteen, to take a voice lesson. He'd scream and holler and I'd scream and holler. So we decided that this was not the time to do it. So I just blithely went on with my piano and left the voice alone.

My father was not an advocate of choral singing, if you wanted to be a soloist. He and I had many heated battles about singing in the chorus, because I *love* choral singing. I always have loved choral singing. In high



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Roland Hayes, 1927. Hayes was known as the "most popular tenor after the passing of Caruso."

Hayes on European tour (bottom row, left), relaxing with friends at Bournemouth, Dorset, England, 1927.

Schomburg Center, New York Public Library



school, I was very upset because he would not allow me to join the *a cappella* chorus. My senior year I did it anyway. There was wisdom in that, as I'm bitterly learning now in my advanced years.

It was my husband who started me really singing. I was listening to the Met one Saturday afternoon, doing my rare house-cleaning. I didn't notice my husband standing in the door. I looked up and he said, "Who the hell said you couldn't sing?" I said, "I can?" He said, "Of course you can!" I said, "Oh!" So I picked up the phone and called my father and said, "Daddy, I think I should come home, there's something I want you to hear."

I had a program already prepared, because I had been doing some coaching with Rosa Ponselle. I went home and I sang this program for Daddy. And Daddy liked it. I almost dropped dead from shock. I began to go up every weekend for a coaching session, and then he said, "How would you like to do a joint concert with me?"

**Fidelio:** So at that point you were getting coaching from your father?

**Hayes:** Yes. At my ripe old age of thirty. We gave three joint concerts. I was utterly shocked, but I think maybe I'd grown up, too. I was able to accept what he had to offer, and he in his turn was able to finally get through to me. I enjoyed it very much, but still there was part of me, that wasn't me. Because, this much of me was still trying to please Daddy. This much of me hadn't found myself yet.

It wasn't actually until my father died that I was able to be completely free. I understood then what he was trying to teach me all along. I think I knew all the time, but I had to be able to feel it for myself without someone telling me. I also did not have that stigma, "Oh, this was very well dear, but . . ." I couldn't stand the "buts."

So there began my concert career. I never would become great—I was good, but I wasn't great, because I had too many other things that interested me more. I think that's fortunate. Because so many times, an entertainer puts all of her eggs in one basket, and there does come a time where she can't do it any more. Unless she has something to fall back on, what is she going to do?

Fortunately, I am able to teach. I can still act if I have to. (I enjoy acting. My husband and I appeared on the college stage in many plays. I played Amelia to his Iago; I played Antigone and he was Creon; and so on.) I play

the piano. And consequently, I know what I am trying to extend to children, who don't always understand what I want, but eventually they come through with it.

**Fidelio:** Can you say a little more about acting and Classical music and drama? Did you have an opportunity growing up to see many Shakespeare plays and Greek dramas? Because that's very rare today.

**Hayes:** I had seen them, and also I got involved with the drama department when I attended college in upstate New York. We had an excellent teacher, who was steeped in Greek mythology and knew the Greek plays. So I just took those classes and had a wonderful time. But, if you're a singer, you're an actor or actress anyway. Because you're not Afrika Hayes or Robert McFerrin; you're Amanosro, or Rigoletto, or Gilda. So you have to act; you can't be a stick standing up on the stage saying, "One, two, three, da da." That's not going to move your audience, because there's no motivation.

**Fidelio:** Everyone who has ever had an opportunity to hear your father or hear recordings of your father remarks that this voice is absolutely incredible: the longevity of the voice, the fact that he was still singing so beautifully well into his eighties. This is also now becoming a rarity in the Classical music world and the operatic tradition. Many people blow out their voices through bad training, bad technique, bad methods. Can you describe his training and how he developed the methods that he used to enable him to both sing so beautifully and to sing so beautifully with the voice preserved over the years?

**Hayes:** I think Daddy would possibly call that self-preservation. People asked him several times, what method do you use. My father said, "I don't have a method."

If you listen to the recordings, it

*Roland Hayes had a long association with Fisk University, beginning with his student days, and extending into his later years. He is shown here meeting with Fisk undergraduates.*

wasn't the voice itself, it was what he did with the voice. Artistry, to me, is more important than the most glorious voice in the world. You could have a voice like a golden bell, with nothing behind it. If I were being a very critical person, I could pick out vocal flaws that my Dad had, but you forget about that. You may not see him, but you hear the artistry, you can picture what is going on in his mind.

As far as artistry is concerned, my father was an advocate of reading. I remember being read to by both of my parents: poems, stories. This is the problem with the children today. They're not read to. So they don't grow up understanding anything except the Simpsons on TV. Or that Beevis and Butthead and that purple thing, Barney. That's not going to help a child understand what's going on in the world or what is Classic, what is not Classic, what is in good taste. Children nowadays really don't know good taste, what good taste is.

**Fidelio:** I have also heard that your father was very inspired by his mother, who, I understand, was born a slave on a plantation. Can you say something about that?

**Hayes:** I was never fortunate to have met my grandmother, because she was dead when I was born. But, from what I understand, my grandmother was a very strict, very religious person, who did not believe that my father

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should pursue a concert career, because she thought that the field of entertainment, if you want to call it that, was only for lightweight people.

She had wanted my father to become a minister, of all things. But once he set his mind to what he was going to do, there was no turning back. He always had his mother's admonition in his ear: "Remember who you are." I think this is one of the reasons that he was able to not separate himself from his roots.

Before he became really famous, one of the things that my grandmother instilled in him was his impeccable diction. He was practicing something in the next room and my grandmother said, "What's that?" He said, "I was singing, Mother." "Singing what? Don't tell me what you're singing, I want to understand what you're singing. Don't tell me what it was you were singing." That is what made him so careful of his diction. My father used to tell me, "You can't sing with a mouth full of tone. You've got to have some words."

**Fidelio:** Could you tell us about the incident in 1927, when your father sang in Germany?

**Hayes:** He was to give a concert in Berlin. But before he arrived in Berlin, a newspaper had been spread all over the city asking, how can this Black man from the cotton fields of Georgia be expected to sing our wonderful *lieder*? He will do nothing but desecrate them; he'll make a mockery of them, etc.

When he appeared on the concert stage, he was greeted with boos and hisses. He told me that he had never been so frightened in all his life, as at that moment. He just stood there. And while he was standing there, he signaled his accompanist to change the order of the program. And he began to sing "Du bist die Ruh," which was one of the favorite *lieder* of the German people at that time. He sang it so beautifully, they stopped hissing and started listening.

Now, the greatest sign

of approval at that time was the pounding of walking sticks, which all the gentlemen carried, on the floor. So halfway through the song, the pounding of the sticks started. There was so much noise, that by the time he reached the last note, it couldn't even be heard, because the audience was up on their feet already. And after that, he quietly continued with the rest of the program.

**Fidelio:** Even during the period when he was being received by heads of state, the royalty in Europe, and so on, it's my understanding that he always took time to go around also to the community, to the Black churches. There's the story of his having Marian Anderson on his program when she was a little girl, which was a great honor to her, as she describes it in her autobiography. He took time out to go to the people who perhaps couldn't afford to go to the big concert halls.

**Hayes:** My father never forgot where he came from. So many of us, unfortunately, when we have reached the top, forget about those that helped get us there.

He taught me a very valuable lesson when I was a little girl. He was giving a concert at Symphony Hall, and after the concert, I hopped back to where my father was greeting guests. A little girl had come with her mother,

## Dr. Raymond Jackson: 'We must develop the



EIFRNS/Stuart Lewis

Dr. Raymond Jackson

and my father greeted her and then the mother introduced her to me. So I looked down my short nose at her and I said, "Oh, how *do you do*." My father turned around and he said: "Don't you ever let me hear you talk like that to anyone again. These people, old, young, Black, white, whatever, are all equal. They have come to hear me perform. They are entitled to the same courtesy. And I never want to hear you talk like that again." I never forgot it. That's a lesson in humility and courtesy.

**Fidelio:** As a teacher, what do you think of the state of present music education?

**Hayes:** It's sad. I think so many schools now do not teach values in anything, whether it's music, English—maybe math and science, because everybody seems to like math and science. In many music classes, the teachers teach the children music to entertain them. The repertoire is nothing but a bunch of garbage. That is the general program in all the schools: white schools, Black schools.

I do things differently. I sneak in things, and they don't realize that they're learning something Classical. They don't realize that they might be singing something by Bach, until I tell them later. It's the duty of the teacher to expose the children. They may not like it, but they

have to take the medicine. They don't realize that they *have* to learn this, in order to grow. As I said to some students who were complaining, "I'm not here to entertain you—I'm here to educate you."

**Fidelio:** What do you think has to be done to give children the kind of exposure to the Classical music tradition that your father had?

**Hayes:** Read, read, read, read. That's the first thing. Get our children to read. Get our children to love the spoken word. Get our children to be able to transport that spoken word maybe into a singing word. The reason I think children don't like, or say they don't like, Classical music, is because they don't understand it. And how can you understand it unless you learn to read, in order to understand?

**Fidelio:** Your father had only a sixth-grade education, but he sang in Italian, French, and German. How did he do that? How many languages did he know?

**Hayes:** French, German, Italian. He could sing in Russian, but I don't think he understood it. When he went to Europe, he studied the languages. *You could do anything you wanted, if you studied.*

## spirit'

In order to see the sense of beauty that really enriches and enhances and uplifts mankind, we have to begin to see and to transmit that sense of beauty in *all* that we do, in *all* that we communicate through our own expression of art.

That will include, of course, teaching; because so much of teaching today becomes so commercial and so much a matter of intellectualism, that we sometimes lose that beautiful essence which we found in Marian Anderson and in Roland Hayes and in others of the great artists.

We can never separate music and the church, because the church certainly was the foundation for so many of these great artists. I don't know one of them that did not come out from some influence of the church. Bob McFerrin did, Marian Anderson did, Leontyne Price did, Roland Hayes did. I don't think one of us can be separated from that spirit.

I think what makes their art and our art great, is the fact that it is endowed with a spiritual content. It's not endowed with something that says "Hear me, I have something to say to you. I want to be great. I

want to make a lot of money, I want to be in the top ten on the charts, and so forth." Instead, it says, "I have a mission and a message that need to be communicated, and that message is divine."

This goes all the way back to the time of Bach. When he composed, he always composed for the glory of God. He put that at the top of his music. And I think we need to see that first and foremost, because that in turn is what transmits and translates and inspires mankind.

*Dr. Raymond Jackson, concert pianist and scholar, graduated summa cum laude from the New England Conservatory of Music and received his doctorate from the Juilliard School with the dissertation "The Piano Music of Twentieth-Century Black Americans." He has been the recipient of many national and international awards, and is currently Professor of Music and Coordinator of Applied Music Studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Jackson made this statement at a Schiller Institute music seminar on Feb. 22.*