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African-American Spirituals And the Classical Setting Of Strophic Poetry

by Dennis Speed

Work under way by members of the Schiller Institute, in collaboration with musicians versed in the tradition of the arrangement and performance of African-American Spirituals, will soon change accepted assumptions about the nature of these musical compositions. While much has been written about the African-American Spiritual, and its role in the creation of a "distinct" musical contribution by the United States to the music language-culture of the rest of the world, there exists virtually no writing on the *method of composition* employed by the greatest masters of the form, such as composer/arranger Hall Johnson, and Antonin Dvořák's collaborator and copyist Harry Burleigh. Nor has there been sufficient focus placed on the collaboration of African-American musicians with two of the greatest European Classical musician-com-

posers, Antonin Dvořák and Johannes Brahms.

Dvořák, himself a student of Brahms, traveled to the United States, in the name of aiding this country in the creation of a National Conservatory of Music. That project was aborted by a combination of the withholding of its deserved financial support by the U.S. government, and by a racist counter-reaction to Dvořák's assertion, supported by Brahms, that the basis for a "great and noble school of music" lay in the African-American Spiritual, and what Dvořák called "Indian music."

The America that Dvořák encountered in 1892, was dominated by the resurgence of the Confederacy in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and its co-thinkers in the then-emerging fields of eugenics and "ethnology," the

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Leonardo da Vinci, "Study for the Last Supper."

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latter invented in late-Nineteenth Century France. The *Zeitgeist*—the "spirit of the times"—was characterized by the deployment of what some researchers called "scientific racism," that is, the use of pseudo-science to argue the innate inferiority of one section of the human race to another. When Dvořák held Classical music concerts that featured all-African-American musicians, as well as compositions from African-American composers, those who held the sentiment, in vogue at the time, that Classical music was exemplified by, for example, the "Aryan Nation" operas of Richard Wagner (as performed at New York's Metropolitan Opera), were mightily offended. One must recall, after all, that African-Americans like Sisseretta Jones, were barred exactly at that time from the Metropolitan stage, and would remain so until 1955, when Marian Anderson and Robert McFerrin would "break the color bar."

The assertion, by Dvořák, that African-Americans were numbered among his best composition students, and Dvořák's campaign, along with National Conservatory founder Jeanette Thurber, to admit African-Americans to the school *free of charge,* in order to admit the students most qualified to contribute to the future of America's music, could not have pleased Anglo-America's racist elite less. After Dvořák's departure in 1895, although the National Association of Negro Musicians and others would attempt to keep his work alive, it would redound to the responsibility of a few dedicated people, like Dvořák collaborator Harry Burleigh, to provide examples of what might be productively accomplished.

The idea that what Burleigh and Dvořák, among others, were doing, was *external* to the development of African-American music, is a most ludicrous idea, precisely because it was their stated, conscious intention to demonstrate the *beautiful lawfulness* of the "slave compositions" known, for good reason, as "Spirituals." That the whole world might advance its musical knowledge, not only in hearing the Spirituals, but in having the groundbreaking advances in music composition discovered by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—all of whom were born well after the introduction of slavery into America in 1619—applied to improving the music and language-culture of America *through* the medium of the Spirituals, was the task set before these men. It was approached with all the rigor of a scientific experiment, precisely because it *was* a scientific experiment—one which was successful, though quickly suppressed, and ultimately aborted.

We now seek to acquaint the reader with the principles of *compositional* method, at least in a general sense, that were employed by these experimenters.

Verbal Action

In all setting of poetry, and in all language, it is the *verbal action* that is most important. No sentence can be understood without its verb, whether that verb be explicit or implicit. "I to the store" or "to the store" makes no sense. However "I *go* to the store," "I *go,*" and "*Go* to the store," all make sense.

In a Classically-set text, verbal action will be highlighted by specific ways of using the voice to emphasize meaning. After all, all verbs indicate change. Therefore, in musical composition, verbs require corresponding musical "changes" or "shifts" to demonstrate to the hearer's mind that a new idea is being conveyed.

As an example, look at Figure 1, measures 14-19, supplied from the *Messiah* aria for tenor, "Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted." We see the singer pass from his first register—the lower part of his voice—through his second or

FIGURE 1. *From "Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted,", tenor aria from Handel's "Messiah."*

To graphically represent the vocal registers: Notes which are to be sung in the first register are enclosed by a solid-shaded box (with the exception of the male voices, where an unshaded, outline box is used instead). Notes to be sung in the second register are left unmarked. Third-register notes are enclosed by an open box with a shaded outline. The male "child soprano" first register is indicated by an open box with a solid dotted outline (see footnote, page 27).

"middle register" to the third, his "high" register, on a single syllable of the verb "exalted" [measures 15-19] [for an explanation of vocal registers, see Figure on p. 38]. We see the verb, "shall be exalted," stated in four different ways in this text. In its first statement [measure 13], the singer moves from the second to the first register on "shall be." In the next measure, he moves in the opposite direction, from his first register to his second, at precisely the same location. He is instructed by the composer to vary his declamation of "shall be" accordingly. For example, "*shall* be," then "shall *be*." A third variation occurs to each of these in measure 19, where "shall be" appears in a *single* vocal register, and is not broken between the first and second. This might be declaimed "shall be." So we have the grouping "*shall* be," "shall *be*," and "shall be."

If we compare the singer's declamation of the word "exalted" in measure 13 to that in measures 15-19, we discover that not only is "exalted" longer in the second instance, but that it is, as stated above, sung over three registers, instead of only one, as in measure 13. 'Exalted' is sung differently a third time, over three vocal registers, but in one-and-a-half measures, instead of five [measures 19-20]. If we now list a grouping of the various declamations of "shall be exalted," we have:

> *shall* be exalted
> shall *be* e - x - a - l - t - e - d
> shall be *e-x-a-l-t-e-d*
> shall be *e - x - a - l - t - e - d*

The composer, Handel, has used the voice-registers of the tenor to illustrate how he wants the music of this Biblical text declaimed. In effect, he is *amplifying* the Biblical text, by breathing life into the words.

The composer is also "re-living" the original act of composition of the poem, or poetic-prose text. He starts from the meaning of the text—*but, emphatically, not the words of the text.* For example, the Old Testament line from Isaiah reads "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low." The poetic-musical text states:

> Ev'ry valley,
> ev'ry valley
> shall be exalted,
> shall be exalted,
> shall be exalted,
> shall be exalted,
> and ev'ry mountain and hill made low.

It is simultaneously the same, and utterly different. By employing the registers of the singer's voice in this way, that is, his "lower," "middle," and "higher" voice, the effect of a "vocal chorus" is achieved in the single human voice. There is no monotony (single tone) in the repetition of the phrase "shall be exalted" because of the multiple ways in which this "chorus" of the singer's voice is used.

The poetic-musical text, compared to the simple Biblical text is, therefore, only *apparently* the same. It is actually a "changing same," a "living word." That is the "trans-substantive" quality of musical composition submitted to the rigor of Classical music principles. That is also its lawfulness, because once the musician-composer has decided how the text must be declaimed, he will know what voice, and key, are most appropriate for that purpose. A bass voice, for example, could not sing this aria in this key—that of E major—and achieve the same declamation, even if the bass could reach all the notes. And, this composition, moved to a different key appropriate to the bass voice, would become completely different, much in the same way that a poem translated to another language becomes completely different than the original.

These considerations are at the heart of the African-American Spiritual. When it is considered that the Spirituals are songs composed by people in physical bondage, which songs utilize the Judaeo-Christian theological matrix as their medium of declamation, in a land where the very people who owned these singer-composers claim to have enslaved the African-American *in the name of* Christianity; when these things are considered, it becomes obvious that a Spiritual composer would have to have gone beyond the hypocritical use of Christianity's words by his slave-masters, to penetrate the true meaning of Christianity, the *theological apprehension of the which the "slave" demonstrated in the act of composition.* That is, the "Christianization" of the African-American slave—and we must remember, that many African-Americans, who were never slaves, were Christians independent of slavery—occurred, not through the actions of the slave-masters (as the Anti-Defamation League's Leonard Dinerstein would have us believe), but through the composition of the African-American Spirituals, *despite* the actions of slavemasters.

Also, that Christianization was the work of ministers, both slave and free, who composed these songs in the same way that the early Christians composed Epistles. The Spirituals *were* composed by individuals, although they were changed by others over time. Any study of their text, shows either that the Spirituals were poems, or were developed through the work of talented though perhaps untrained individuals, in the same way a minister will develop a sermon.

All of the great poems of history developed in this

FIGURE 2. *"Were You There?," setting by Hall Johnson, soprano and tenor voices.*

way. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are composed of all sorts of stories famous at the time. Boccaccio's *Decameron* is the same. Rabelais' *Gargantua* adapted an earlier folktale popular in France. Shakespeare's earliest plays, and many of the later ones, use narratives popular at the time, which were transformed by his compositional method. While these artists may be individual geniuses, the material from which their work is often taken is that which had been labored over by unknown artists and storytellers, whose work was the basis for the masterworks which followed.

Like the great oral tradition of Sanskrit in India, through which the most complex of scientific ideas were passed from generation to generation; like the oral tradition by means of which poems like the *Iliad* were transmitted; and like the oral traditions of the regions of Africa; the Spirituals were utilized to transmit "profound and impassioned ideas" (in Shelley's phrase) in the simplest of forms. But, there was also a difference with earlier oral traditions.

In America, the African-American utilized the idea of *man in the image of the living God* as the *subject* of each and every composition called a Spiritual. In this way, he made himself literate, not (other than in exceptional circumstances) through access to the written word, but in the way that the greatest of ancient cultures were developed—through the efficient transmission of the idea of the Infinite and Absolute.

This was conveyed through the medium of an unfamiliar culture, in a language that was entirely foreign to the general language-root from which he hailed. This fact demonstrates that the *generative* principle of human knowledge, the comprehension of the idea of the Absolute, is universally intelligible and practicable under the most adverse of circumstances. No matter how oppressed, the human Spirit is universally regenerative through its apprehension of the Infinite.

Figure 2 illustrates a setting of the Spiritual "Were You There?," by Hall Johnson. It is a strophic setting, that is, one in which the vocal line, and the accompaniment, are unvaried over the four verses of the poem-text.

The text is here illustrated in the key required for a tenor or soprano, and the "register shifts" for the two voices are indicated. Notice the first two notes of the

FIGURE 3. *From "Were You There?," measures 4 and 12.*

piece, at the beginning [measure 4]. A register shift creates the idea, "*Were* you there . . . ?". Compare this to the two notes on the word "Oh," in measure 12. They are the same two notes, moved up one octave. And here, again, as on the first two notes of the piece, there is a shift in register, in "voice" for both the tenor and soprano.*

There is another difference in the notes, other than the change from one octave to another. For "Oh," each note is twice as long as for "Were you . . . ?" [SEE Figure 3], a result, where, in the first instance, the shorter notes are used as an "upbeat" (that is, the "weaker" beat leading to the strong beat of the next measure, to the word "there"—"were you *there*?"); whereas, in the case of "Oh," the doubling of the length of the notes causes the ear of the listener to "note" that something different is happening. A new idea is being introduced; something different is being said than, "Were you there when they crucified . . .":

> Oh, it causes me to tremble,
> tremble, *tremble.*

In measure 17, we note that the third statement of "tremble" is placed in a different register. Also notice the use of what is called "onomatopeia"—using a word that *sounds* like what the word *says.* The reader may demonstrate this to himself by saying the two syllables "trem-ble," dwelling on the first. He will notice the slight vibration of his lips. Have you ever trembled, for example, shivered in the cold? Have your hands ever trembled? They quickly move back and forth. Compare this motion to the slight vibration of the lips in saying "tremble." That is onomatopeia.

"Were you," "Oh," and "tremble" are *singularities*—points of fundamental transition—used by the composer-arranger, as well as the singer, to poetically declaim, in

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* While it is formally true that the tenor voice does not retain the (soprano) first register shift illustrated in the first two notes, because the tenor's voice has changed from soprano to tenor during puberty, that is not the point. Not only does Johnson's musical setting avail itself of this capability; a trained tenor voice, such as that of Roland Hayes, can "re-create" that now-lost first register shift as a *poetic* device, by various technical means used to change the voice's color, to achieve a "psychological" effect that is physiologically present and demonstrable in the soprano. This poetic act will be virtually automatic on the part of a male singer trained from early youth. Finally, remember that the soprano voice, the voice of virtually all children, not only includes the lower shift, but shifts precisely where the tenor does otherwise, at the tenor's high F♯ between the second and third registers:

music, the *trans-musical thought* that is indicated by this song. For example: If one accepts, as did the composer of this Spiritual, the idea that Jesus Christ died for the sins of all mankind, then one must also accept the notion that that singular act of Redemption was experienced by all mankind through the *necessary* medium of the act of Crucifixion. The freedom of the soul through Redemption, were not possible except by this means. This is the subject of the internal dialogue of God the Father with God the Son in Gethsemane. Or, as Schiller put it, in the words of Joan of Arc in his play *The Maid of Orleans,* "brief is the pain, eternal is the joy."

The singer seeks to convey this joyful idea, in the misery of chattel slavery, to another, or to a group. A group of singers seek to convey this to a group of hearers, late at night, in a forbidden service. "Crucified my Lord," "nailed him to the tree," "laid him in the tomb"—are these not experiences that the slave has known, either literally, or metaphorically? The singer asks, "were you there?," The hearer nods in recognition. "When these things occurred, I was there. They happened to my father, to my son, to my wife, to her family; I was there, as sure as I am here."

Then the singer asks, "*Were you there when they rolled the stone away?*" The minds of his listeners have been drawn, step by step, to an inevitable conclusion.

When, after "tremble," the singer asks, in the last line of the poem, "Were you there" [measure 18], it has a different meaning. This different meaning closes the verse of each stanza of poetry. In fact, the voice of the singer drops at the end of the line, to indicate the close of the verse, giving the line a *declarative,* rather than an interrogative, quality. Now, the line becomes *ironic.* It would read, in its sung content, like a declarative sentence, if simply stated—"Were you there when they crucified my Lord"—without a question mark. Yet, it retains the form—the "guise"—of a question.

This effect is achieved by using the key-signature tone "G" for the verb "were" [measure 18]. "G" is the "home key" of the piece. Contrast this to the first "Were you," which *moves toward* a "G" from the note "D" [measure 4]. (That is what gives the first measure its "upbeat" quality.) The position of the tone "G" is exactly reversed in the two uses, and the change of this note's position is the musical device used to convey the turning of the meaning of the question "Were you there?" into a profound statement—poetically (not literally),"Oh, . . . Were you there when they crucified my Lord!!".

However, the reader should not "fixate" on the idea that "G equals a declarative statement." For example, that "G" is used in *precisely the opposite way* at another

point in the song, the second line of the poem. Compare the first and second lines [SEE Figure 4]. Compare the second line entrance of "Were" to that of "Were" in the first line. We see the tone "G" is used in the second exactly as the tone "D" is used in the first line. So, there is no magical quality to the *note* "G" that gives it the particular significance we attached to it above.

However, if we study the *interval* relationships in this piece—that is, for example, the interval of a fourth that is used at the beginning [measure 4], and then on "Oh" [measure 12], and finally again in the last line [measure 18], we can understand the difference in the use of the tone "G" that we are contending. In the second line, the interval for "Were you" is *not* a fourth, but a third [measure 8]. The interval of a fourth occurs at a point of singularity. It occurs at the song's beginning, at the register shift of the soprano. It occurs in the middle at the register shift of the soprano and tenor. It occurs at the tenor register shift from first to second register, in the final line as we indicated above. This is not the interval of the beginning of the second line, however. Therefore, the second line is different.

The fourth occurs at the tenor register shift in the

third line [measure 18]. And, it is the declamation of the "Oh" *by means* of the interval of a fourth, that establishes the meaning of the tone "G" for the piece. Notice that, throughout the entire piece, the only time that more than one note is sung on any word is on "Oh," and *that* occurs at a register shift. "Oh" is clearly the word most imbued with content, in terms of the Johnson setting.

The interval of a fourth is also used as the interval *across* poetic lines. Review again measures 4-7 and 8-11, as shown in Figure 4. As stated before, the first note of the first poetic line is "D," the second "G." That means that the poetic *lines* span the interval of a fourth. When "Oh" is sounded, we are caused to "hear" both poetic lines simultaneously, because of the use of the fourth. It is also easy for us to experience this, because the words are exactly the same in each line. This intensifies, by condensation, the poetic meaning. What was said in eight measures is now said in one. A greater "density" is achieved. This can be visually captured by reviewing, in succession, measures 4, 8, 12, and 18.

Not only a greater density, however. Let us now look at the line, "Oh, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble." This line spans all three vocal registers of both the soprano and tenor voice [measures 12-18]. (The trained tenor also has the opportunity to poetically "re-create" the lower soprano shift here, thus creating the impression of four "voices" rather than three.)

The Spiritual "I Got To Lie Down," as arranged by Hall Johnson, demonstrates another use of onomatopeia [SEE Figure 5]. Onomatopeia is here utilized to underscore a paradox, posed by the speaker/singer to himself:

I got to lie down, How shall I rise?

His query refers to the fundamental mystery of Chris-

FIGURE 5. *From "I Got To Lie Down," setting by Hall Johnson, soprano and tenor voices.*

Soprano

Tenor

FIGURE 6. *Climactic "punch-lines" of selected Spirituals.*

from "Po' Mo'ner Got a Home at Las'," tenor voice

Fall down on-a yo' knees an'-a jine de ban-a wid de an-gels.

from "Give Me Jesus," soprano voice

Give me Je sus, Give me Je sus, You may have all dis worl', Give me Je sus.

from "Deep River," tenor voice

That prom is'd land where all is peace?

from "I'm Gonter Tell God All o' My Troubles," baritone voice

I'm gon ter live so God can use me.

from "Go Down Moses (Let My People Go!)," tenor voice

Go down, Mo ses, 'Way down in E - gypt's lan',_____

tianity, the Resurrection. He repeats the question three times. Each time, it is sung differently. Refer first to the tenor registral setting:

> *I got* to lie down, How shall I rise?
> *Got* to lie down, How shall I rise?
> *I got to lie* down, How shall I rise?

The musical line falls on the imperative, "I got to lie down," and rises on the question, "How shall I rise?" This is onomatopeia, and occurs the first and third times the paradox is stated [measures 2-3 and 6-7]. Now, refer to the soprano registral setting. Look at the word "down." Note that the first time it is sung, it is declaimed on one note [measure 3], the second time, on two notes

[measure 5], and the third time, on three notes [measure 7]. This is a second use of onomateopeia. Finally, irony is used as a poetic device: the second time "How shall I rise?" is sung, "rise" does not rise, but falls [measure 5]. The paradox contained in the question, is now condensed in the irony of the verb, "rise," falling.

Sung properly, this song creates an unrelenting tension, fueled by the devices indicated in the setting of the opening refrain.

In many Spirituals, it can be demonstrated that the same condensation and increase of density occurs. Space limitations prevent us from doing more than giving examples of this. We illustrate here the "climactic" lines—what one could crudely call the "punch-lines"—of several Spirituals for this purpose [SEE Figure 6]. The

FIGURE 7. *"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," soprano and choral settings.*

Soprano voice, setting by Hall Johnson.

Choral setting.

presence of such an increased density of singularities indicates that the same sort of care in composition has been taken in those cases as in the one here illustrated.

The Many in The One

The lawful relationship between the Classical setting of the African-American Spiritual, and choral settings of the same, is illustrated in Figure 7. We compare Hall Johnson's setting of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," with a choral setting by another arranger/composer. Johnson's setting is treated for the soprano voice. In the choral version, the melody line is contained in the "alto" (better referred to as "mezzo-soprano") line, the line "second from the top" in the treble clef. Notice that the registral breaks are identical for the soprano voice of Johnson's set-

FIGURE 8. *From "I Couldn' Hear Nobody Pray."*

FIGURE 9. *From "Go Down Moses (Let My People Go!)."*

ting, and the mezzo-soprano treatment of the choral version: see "chariot" [measure 2], "swing" [measure 5], "see" [measure 10], "band" [measure 13], etc., to get an idea of this.

In a second example, "I Couldn' Hear Nobody Pray" [SEE Figure 8], the text is scored with the option that two singers, in this case two tenors, two sopranos, or a tenor and soprano, could sing it together, creating the "projected image" of a chorus (see "Oh, Lord" [measure 4], and the text marked "Verses" above the staff [measure 10]). In another variation, one singer could imitate such a chorus by singing the parts himself. Sometimes this song is performed with the piano accompaniment playing the refrain "couldn't hear nobody pray," without the "verses" "In the valley, " "On ma knees," etc.

Finally, in "Go Down Moses," we see the choral refrain fully integrated into the text itself, "Let my people go" [SEE Figure 9]. Each time the phrase is sung, it is sung in the same "voice," that is, vocal register. There is variation in every other part of the song, in words and registration, but none in the refrain. In this way, the *sameness* of the refrain is used to accentuate God's words, spoken as an ironic "choral" setting—in that the One God is speaking, not a many-voiced chorus. There is no contradiction. Often, in both Classical drama and poetry, "chorus" is a single individual (for example, Shakespeare's use of Gower at the beginning of *Troilus and Cressida*).

This also reflects the singer's role, as the "voice of

God," who uses his many "voices" and different shadings of "voices," to assemble a drama, or at least several scenes of a drama, with a full cast of characters. These characters are transformed "in a moment," or at most, a few moments, in the Classical setting of the *Lied,* or the Spiritual, through ironically-deployed poetic devices such as the refrain, onomatopeia, alliteration, and so forth. In the "Go Down Moses" example, the devices are used to juxtapose a narrative, with the "uncanny" statement of the word of God, who keeps "interrupting" the narration with the polemical demand, "Let my people Go!" The narrator "can't get a word in edgewise."

The mind is "jarred" by this, creating a *necessity* that the mind understand the unsaid idea "behind" the musical imagery.

Thorough-Composition

Hall Johnson's "Oh, Glory!" demonstrates the results of rigorous work on a musical idea, submitted to the test called among musicians "thorough-composition." Here, although there may be the use of refrains, or other repeats, the composition is continuously changed, even ever so slightly, such that each phrase, even each syllable, is varied and re-formed. Although this can also be achieved in strict strophic settings, it enjoys a peculiarly rich rendering in thorough-compositon.

In the Johnson setting of the Spiritual "Oh, Glory!" [SEE Figure 10], the increasing density of singularities is also recognizable. The text we use, apparently in the handwriting of Johnson, beautifully illustrates the rigor with which this principle can be deployed.

Notice that the text reads, "Oh, Glory! . . . Oh! Glory!" We can see, in the illustration of the register-shifts of the baritone voice, that Johnson's punctuation of the text—in which he substitutes an exclamation point for the comma in the second "Oh! Glory!"—is echoed in the

FIGURE 10. *From " Oh, Glory!," setting by Hall Johnson, baritone voice.*
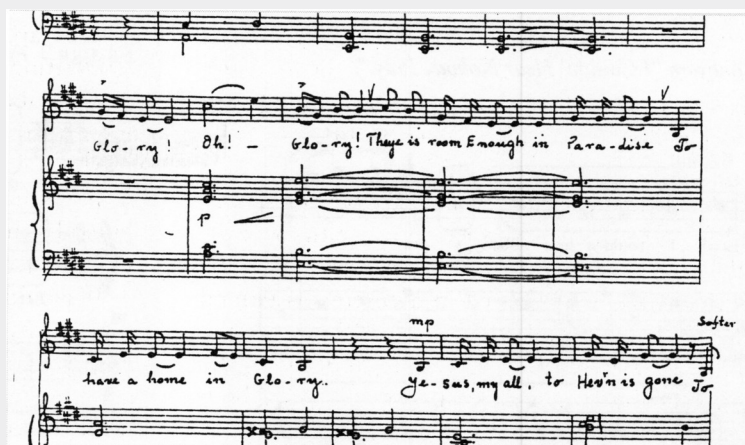
Autograph text in the hand-writing of Hall Johnson.

corresponding shift in vocal registration. Also, again, the meaning of "Oh" is intensified by singing it the second time over two notes and two registers.

The accompaniment in the piano is also shown to be a "singing" accompaniment [SEE Figure 11]. Here we see the accompaniment complete the unsung words of the singer. Instead of singing "to have a home in glory," the singer abbreviates, and the piano finishes his thought. He sings "to have a home," and the piano plays "in Glory." A

FIGURE 11. *From "Oh, Glory!," measures 33-35, voice and piano.*

powerful antiphonal section follows, in which "Glory" is sung in a cascading polyphony by the piano chorus and the singer [SEE Figure 12]. This intensifies the voicing, and leads to an extraordinary passage, in which the singer condenses the entire song to a single mnemonic device, on the syllable "Hm" [SEE Figure 13]. This one syllable is now sung over the entire three-register vocal range.

Compare the piece to that with which we began, "Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted." The syllable "Hm" is in a sense "isoperimetric," in that it becomes the smallest unit, the syllable, over which the greatest range of motion in the musical registers can be enacted. But, it is also a different order of singularity than "Oh," in that "Hm" is made to stand for:

> Oh, Glory! Oh! Glory!
> There is room enough in Paradise
> To have a home in Glory.

"Hm" has a greater *power* as a singularity than "Oh." It represents a "second power class" of singularities. Compare the use of "Hm" to "exalted" in the Handel example

FIGURE 12. *From "Oh, Glory!," measures 40-45, voice and piano.*

supplied. "Hm" is not an embellishment, not a roulade, but a metaphor for the thought-object that generated the poetic text in the first place. Although this thought-object cannot be directly stated in language, the syllable "hm," as a poetic language-device, reproduces an act of creative concept-formation that goes on among singers and composers of any language. It is a "spark," that would carry meaning, when properly sung, to every listener in the world, no matter what his language.

Far more can be said about Johnson's poem, but let us simply point out that the piano accompaniment "sings" the phrase "to have a home in Glory, Glory, Glory," at the song's opening *before the singer is heard* [SEE Figure 10, measures 1-5]. Of course, this is not so unusual, many songs start with an "introduction." But, why reiterate "glory" three times, if introduction is the piano's sole function? In fact, there is no "introduction," no "accompaniment" in this piece, as there is no "accompaniment" in Brahms' "Four Serious Songs" [SEE Figure 14].

Instead, the piano is the chorus from which the voice of the singer emerges. The singer gives a soliloquy, evoking the chorus by means of his vocal registers. The piano increases its role, finishing the singer's sentences. Finally,

FIGURE 13. *From "Oh, Glory!," measures 48-55, baritone voice.*

FIGURE 14. *From "Four Serious Songs," Johannes Brahms, voice and piano.*

the singer abbreviates his message to "Hm," and the piano-chorus supplies the four-part antiphonal answer to this message.

This sort of musical composition, which was the method mastered by Brahms from his work on Beethoven and others, is the proper goal of any serious composer or arranger. It is a sign-post that points the direction to the origin of language in poetry, the which

FIGURE 15. *"Da unten im Tale," by Johannes Brahms.*

exists in a domain outside the boundary of any particular language as such. Musical composition of this (Classical) type proves that *meaning is above language, and originates language,* not the other way around. Also, this implicitly "proves" that before man spoke, he sang—a phenomenon we encounter regularly with young children of different nationalities who are able to communicate with one another in precisely this way.

A different level, and one to which the work of Dvořák in America was clearly pointing, is seen in the *Volkslieder* setting by Brahms shown in Figure 15. This selection is particularly good because it is also written in idiomatic German, and is therefore similar to the Spirituals. There are two speakers, a man and a woman, yet only one singing line. The man is lying to the woman, and the woman is aware that the man is lying, but protesting, resignedly, that she loves him, and wishes the one that the man now loves, and is betraying her with, the best. Yet, there is only one melodic line, with which these opposing views must be transmitted. The line must

FIGURE 16. *"Da unten im Tale," soprano and tenor voices.*

1. He: Down in the valley there, the water in the river is troubled, and I can't tell you how much I love you.
2. She: You always talk about love, you always talk about constancy, but falseness is in you too!
3. He: And if I tell you ten times that I love you and you refuse to understand, I'll just have to travel on.
4. She: For the time, that you have loved me, I thank you kindly, and I hope, that for you elsewhere, things go better.

be a metaphor, incommensurable with either state of mind, but encompassing both—and other qualities besides [measures 1-8].

We analyze the text as though set for a tenor and soprano. Look at the text, and its use of registration and register shifts, to underscore the irony of the dramatic action. For example, look at the woman's "Sprichst" [opening measure], "is au wohl dabei" [measures 7-8], "wo besser mag gehn" [measures 17-18]—all points of verbal action, or change, in the narrative [SEE Figure 16(a)]. Or again, look at "Falscheit" [measure 6] and "anders" [measure 18]—two very important words in our story—and how they are set.

Using the "childhood" register shift of the tenor, look at his "nit sagen" [measure 6], "i hab di so lieb" [measures 7-8], "nit verstehen" [measures 16-17], and "i halt weiter gehn" [measures 18-19] [SEE Figure 16(b)]. Contrast the first two, and their mood, to the second two, and their mood. Now, contrast the first statement of the man, with the first statement of the woman. Look at how the man's second statement is provoked by the first statement of the woman, and consider the use of registration to illustrate this.

Finally, look at the opening measure. Note that the soprano has a register shift, from her first to second register, on the first two notes sung. The tenor's "childhood" shift also occurs here. Think of this as an irony that the composer chooses to use for his musical setting, rather than a simple "anatomical" device.

It should be also noted that, while the accompaniment in the right hand exactly follows the voice of both singers all the way through, at the end of each line, at the lower vocal register-shift, the accompaniment diverts from the vocal line. The internal timing of the measure also changes in the right hand, and is phrased differently in both [measure 8]. The left hand, or bass line, contains three notes instead of two, for the first time in the composition. This accents the change in rhythm, and emphasizes the "punch-line" effect.

In this way, the composer uses the register shift, or voicing, as a secondary, derivative irony, to the primary irony of the strophic setting. The same setting is used by two speakers to say opposite things to each other. He says he loves her. She says he is false. He says that no matter how many times he says he loves her, if she won't listen, then he will just have to leave. She says she hopes things will go better for the next girl. It is a painful scene, made beautiful by a setting that intensifies the divergence of the two speakers by underscoring the irony placed at the end of the line, on which the narrator/accompaniment comments in several different ways, through several different rhythmic settings of the poetic line [measures 8-11]. Notice the phrasing of the bass line across the measure bars. This "pulls" the rhythmic singularities together as a single, powerful choral statement, outside of the boundary of the narrative, particularly in the last two measures of each verse [measures 10-11]. Finally, note that the last two measures of the piece are of a completely different nature than anything in the piece otherwise [measures 23-24]. Melodically, the first three notes of each singer are at the top right hand of the piano, but are reversed in order and changed in time-value. This reverses the motion of the poetic line, "closing" it rather than "opening" it; it therefore "closes" the piece.

The "close" is ironic, however. The bass line also ties the two measures together. This gives us opposite phrasings of the left and right hand—a perfect metaphor for the song's subject-matter.

Brahms' composition student Gustav Jenner wrote, "I have always had the impression that of all the song forms, Brahms considered that of the strophic song to be the highest. . . . The most rigorous form of strophic song is that in which the same melody is repeated for the poet's successive strophes, while the accompaniment also remains the same. . . ." In this light, compare Hall Johnson's "Were You There," with the Brahms *Volkslied.* The Johnson Spiritual is set like a chorale, and is completely strict. Brahms' *Volkslied* is also strict.

In transferring Brahms' compositional method to the shores of America, it was the task of musicians of the National Conservatory of Music to acquaint their students with the idea of taking the spark of creativity that was demonstrated in the folk-compositions of any country, and to elevate that spark to the domain of conscious practice by the next generation to whom these songs were bequeathed. The aborting of that effort must not be the excuse to tolerate the ugliness which is our daily fare, for "a purpose, that higher Reason hath conceived, which men's afflictions urge, ten thousand times defeated, may never be abandoned" (Friedrich Schiller). If men and women could compose the Spirituals in slavery, then the dignity and nobility of man can be seen to be accessible to people everywhere.

Therefore, there is no real excuse for the paucity of real song today, except that a great moment has found an ignoble people. We must do what we can—and, perhaps, more than we can—to live up to that divine spark that is ours, and to sing of it in the Classical poetic form of the African-American Spirituals, *Volkslieder,* and the art-song as it was practiced by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Brahms' students and collaborators.