

# *Amazing Grace*

## *The American Spiritual*

### **Program Notes - “Amazing Grace,” Arr. Jonathan Woody**

By Gwyn Chilcoat

“Amazing Grace” was written in the 18th century by an English-enslaver-turned-Anglican-minister and prolific hymn writer named John Newton. In his early life, he served not only as a servant on a slave ship but eventually as the vessel’s master and perpetrated many crimes against West Africans. In his later life, Newton joined the campaign to abolish the African slave trade within the United Kingdom.

The song gained popularity across the English-speaking world over the following decades. During the early 19th century, “Amazing Grace” was adopted as a popular Black spiritual after it was shared at Second Great Awakening revival meetings and featured in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published 1852. Over the next 100 years “Amazing Grace” was engaged for a variety of uses. In the Civil War, chaplains used the hymn to console distraught soldiers. During the Vietnam War, it was sung as a protest. In the Civil Rights Movement, it was a call for racial justice. Today, “Amazing Grace” is one of the most recognizable songs in the English language, sung at funerals, weddings, and presidential inaugurations.

For *Amazing Grace: The American Spiritual*, Artistic Director Emily Isaacson sought an arrangement that reflected the hymn’s complicated genesis and layered history. Most arrangements she found were “uni-dimensional, almost saccharine,” so she turned

to her colleague, renowned singer and composer Jonathan Woody, to write a piece specifically for this production. Woody, an acclaimed bass-baritone and highly regarded composer, is best known for his work “Nigra Sum Sed Formosa - I am Black But Beautiful (A fantasia on microaggressions).” Woody’s “Amazing Grace” engages the hymn tune, sung in the top voice, in a familiar way, but agitates the meaning with syncopated rhythms from the piano, at the beginning, or the harmonies, in the duet. While the song ends with a triumphant chorus, Woody composes a musical journey that reflects the song's historical evolution.

For further reading on the history of “Amazing Grace,” we recommend the following articles:

- <https://www.biography.com/news/amazing-grace-story-john-newton>
- <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-30/complicated-story-behind-famous-hymn-amazing-grace>