

Amazing Grace

The American Spiritual

Program Notes

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To hear African American spirituals is to hear the challenge enslaved Black people posed to the nation—to be democratic and Christian in thought, word, and deed. It is a challenge voiced in the sounds and poetry of people who, in the face of evil, held tight to their sense of humanity in a sacred world. Spirituals have stood the test of time because of their genius and beauty and because America has yet to fully meet the challenge.

West and Central Africans brought the spiritual and musical practices of their homelands with them into the brutal world of slavery in the Americas. Early attempts to expose enslaved Africans to Christianity were slow and uneven. The colonial religious landscape began to shift, however, in the last half of the 1700s with the First Great Awakening, a Protestant revival movement that brought primarily poor white people and free and enslaved African Americans together in worship. Black people found the anti-slavery content and relative equality in worship attractive. Mid-eighteenth century records show a distinctive style of hymn singing by African American people, but the emergence of what became known as “spirituals” developed in the Second Great Awakening camp meetings, which took place from the 1790s through the 1830s. These

were large, primarily interracial, rural gatherings where thousands gathered for days, even as long as a week, for religious revivals.

Reports of the time made note of the importance of singing at revivals and, in particular, the ways in which the music making of African American worshippers intensified the gatherings. Black people had held onto African derived musical practices and worship aesthetics, which continued across generations. Specific musical practices include call and response; polyrhythm or multiple “feels” of time that happen simultaneously; repetition with revision; and improvisation or spontaneous composition. These musical strategies are foundational to the music making process and make conceptual approaches to music making and shared values audible and visible. Black people understood music to be a participatory communal endeavor, involving cooperation, negotiation, and personal autonomy. You need a community to make music. Music makes social relationships tangible and it provides spaces for the individual to sound within the collective voice.

During nineteenth-century camp meetings, after regular religious services, Black participants would go to their campsites and hold worship-songfests until sunrise. Creatively blending, altering, and extending an array of sources, the all-night worshippers created new songs. They pulled text from prayers, the Bible, orthodox hymns, and narrated their own religious and life experiences with original compositions. They merged text with improvised melodies, as well as hymns, folk and popular songs, and dance tunes, interjecting refrains and choruses to extend the length of the composition. Black musical and worship practices began to influence white congregations, even as some white church leaders protested, and a new kind of religious song emerged that was

unique to the camp meeting movement. These new songs became known as “spiritual songs.” As the sun came up on the final day of the revivals, Black participants ended their all-night song-service with a “farewell march” around the encampment. With a circle dance and singing, they would surround the entire camp and knock down wooden barriers that stood between racially segregated living quarters. Throughout the nineteenth century, these folk-congregational spirituals spread and solidified as a genre of Christian music in African American churches and religious gatherings. It was not until after emancipation, however, that the American public and the world heard these soul-stirring songs.

In 1866, Fisk University opened in Nashville, Tennessee, to serve newly freed African Americans hungry for a long-denied education. The school administrator enlisted a young white teacher, George L. White, to oversee music instruction. White also served as the school’s treasurer and thought a touring choir could raise funds to help the struggling institution. Initially the group of nine, known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, performed hymns, anthems, and other compositions popular for (white) choirs of the day. After regular rehearsals students would sing their own songs—the spirituals of their parents. Here they brought together the arranged European classical style of singing with the melody, text, and passion of the songs of slavery. According to theologian James Cone, “The basic idea of the spirituals is that slavery contradicts God.” God gives the spirit of life, and slavery seeks to kill it. During enslavement African American people used the spirituals to keep the sacred embodied connection to God and in so doing, declared the right *to be*. Life for African Americans after slavery was harsh. They faced economic, political, and social exclusion in a violent and hostile atmosphere. Although not in legal bondage, African Americans still found strength and validation in the

spirituals. The Fisk Jubilee Singers' "concertized" versions made it possible for this repertoire to come out of Black churches and into the wider public.

Beginning in 1871 the Fisk Jubilee Singers embarked on grueling tours of America and Europe that continued until 1878. The initial uneven reaction of audiences and critics soon became overwhelmingly positive as the idea of a serious, highly skilled African American concert group gained acceptance. Enthusiastic responses of audiences to concertized spirituals, in particular, led the choir to make them the heart of the repertoire. The group was able to address the immediate financial needs of the Fisk University by raising \$150,000 for the school (a substantial sum for the time). What they could not have known at the time, however, was the indelible imprint they made on the American musical landscape, giving us the sound of spirituals the world knows today.

Since their inception concertized spirituals have remained extremely popular in college choirs of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as well as moving into concert repertoires of groups across lines of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Too, gospel singers that gained popularity in the 1940s and 1950s incorporated spirituals into their repertoires. It was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, however, that returned spirituals to the folk-congregational form and brought them off of the concert stage, inserting them again into the American soundscape and linking them directly back to their original freedom sound. Black churches and educational institutions provided the feeding ground for civil rights organizing, and activists brought the power of music from these sites into the movement. With the spirit of the original camp meetings that gave birth to spirituals, civil rights workers centered the participatory and emotive power of

music as a political strategy to galvanize supporters and speak to a nation that had yet to keep its promise of full equality for every citizen.

African American spirituals have provided a profound soundtrack in America's consciousness. Beginning with the sonic and embodied aesthetics of Africans, enslaved Africans in America adapted Christian theology to fit into their ways of song making and worship. With emancipation and formal education, the Fisk Jubilee Singers and others incorporated European approaches into the production of spirituals and brought them to the world's attention. Nearly eighty years later, civil rights activists gave the folk-congregational versions back to America, while adapting the lyrics to the urgency of the moment. Today spirituals continued to be heard in all of these forms in churches, on concert stages, and in protests. They have been a great gift to America and the world.