

Songwriters & Publishers

Soprano Gives New Life To Spirituals

Soprano **Randy Jones** recently released the first fruits of her ongoing research of the history of "art song settings" of Negro spirituals. Her CD "Come Down Angels" (AhJay Records) features her singing spirituals accompanied by pianist **Francis Conlon**—with "settings" by composers including **H.T. Burleigh**.

"I don't use the term 'arrange' because it doesn't give the composer proper credit for composing the piece of music," Jones says, though she notes that spirituals emerged from an oral tradition. "So using the term 'settings' is also my way of giving credit to the unknown person who originally inspired the creation of the song."

Burleigh had written vocal and instrumental pieces based on the plantation melodies he learned growing up. But his published setting of the spiritual "Deep River" in 1916 is considered "the first work of its kind to be written in art song form specifically for performance by a trained singer," Jones writes in her CD notes.

"Deep River" is included on "Come Down Angels." It and other spiritual settings, Jones notes, later became popular with concert performers and recording artists, prominently

Words & Music

By **Jim Bessman**
jbessman@billboard.com



performers and composers and on the vocal music forms they influenced—especially opera, art songs and Negro spirituals composed for concert performances.

Jones now looks to produce other recordings of spirituals, in addition to publishing a book for singers, teachers and musicologists. The book will outline the history of the genre, including

biographies of composers and performers, a bibliography of other relevant resources, a discography and an analysis of published scores.

"Most importantly, we want to discuss the ways these art songs should be performed that is stylistically consistent with the roots of the spiritual," Jones says.

"There are many wonderful works out there that challenge the vocalist both technically and on a personal level," she says. "Students and voice teachers are looking for this music, but it is not always easy to find or understand how to perform it. I hope that 'The Art of the Negro Spiritual' will address some of that."

Meanwhile, Jones will distinguish between spirituals and gospel music in a lecture titled "The Gospel Truth About the Spiritual" to be delivered Feb. 24, 2004, at George Washington University.

including **Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, Jessye Norman** and **Kathleen Battle**.

A librarian at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., Jones operates the Art of the Negro Spiritual Web site and a sister site, **Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music**, which focuses on African-American



JONES: CD DOCUMENTS HER RESEARCH