

From Cotton Field to Concert Hall...

## THE ART OF THE NEGRO SPIRITUAL



### Vocal Recital

**Randye Jones, soprano**

**William Tinker, piano**

**November 4, 2007**

**4:00 PM**

**Herrick Chapel**

**Grinnell College**

**Grinnell, Iowa**

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Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit  
Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child  
Balm in Gilead  
Ain't Goin' To Study War No Mo'

Harry Thacker Burleigh  
(1866-1949)

Li'l David Play on Your Harp  
He Never Said a Mumberlin' Word  
'Roun' About de Mountain  
You Mus' Come in By an' through de Lamb

Roland Hayes  
(1887-1977)

Witness  
Steal Away (from *Run Li'l Chillun*)  
His Name So Sweet  
Honor! Honor!

Hall Johnson  
(1888-1970)

### Intermission

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?  
City Called Heaven  
Done Made My Vow  
Oh, What a Beautiful City

Edward Boatner  
(1898-1981)

I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray

John Rosamond Johnson  
(1873-1954)

Go Down, Moses

Florence Price  
(1888-1953)

Sweet Little Jesus Boy	Robert MacGimsey (1898-1979)
Ride On, Jesus	Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943)
Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees	William Lawrence (1895-1981)
He's Got the Whole World in His Hand	Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)



## The Music

“Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit” is a prime example of music used for religious expression and secret communication, both part of the nature of the spiritual. Slaves often met secretly where they could worship away from the eyes and carefully chosen preachings of their white masters. By being possessed by the Spirit, the slave would escape the oppression that was so much a part of their daily lives and made it possible to not only look to heavenly freedom but to the time when they would be free in this life.

Still, there were moments where the pain of seeing a parent, a child, a spouse, sold away with the knowledge that the separation would be for the rest of their lives was almost too much to bear. That pain had to be expressed, and sorrow songs like “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” provided an outlet. Lines in the song are repeated to emphasize the power of the words. Yet, songs such as “Balm in Gilead” helped them remember that there was relief for the troubled soul.

Slaves were not allowed to read, so they told of characters from the Bible in stories and songs. Songs recounted the deeds of Old Testament figures such as David, Daniel, and Samson. Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman’s announced her readiness to lead escapees by singing “Go Down, Moses,” which described the enslaved Israelites with whom those latter-day slaves closely identified.

Yet, no one in the Bible was closer to the slave than Jesus. Slaves rejoiced in His birth and the hope it offered to them, identified with His struggles—especially on the cross—as if He was a Brother who would understand their own struggles, and found reassurance in Christ’s resurrection. If He could conquer death, defeating the

source of His children’s degradation was most surely within His power.

Their relationship with Christ was a very personal one. The songs included expressions of love, dedication, and faith—and reminders that Jesus loves “the sinna” and would bear her “home in His arms.” However, there were also admonitions that sinners could only “get in by and through the Lamb.”

Slaves also often sang about Heaven, both literally as a destination after death and figuratively as a destination to freedom. The River Jordan—and the hidden reference to Underground Railroad destination, the Ohio River—was regularly a subject of their songs.

The spiritual is a uniquely American folksong in that the names of the songs’ originators are unknown. However, one song, “Steal Away to Jesus,” is believed to have been created by the revolutionary Nat Turner. It has been suggested that he used this song to call together his followers. True or not, the song was clearly used to secretly communicate a slave’s intent to escape to freedom.

## The Composers

With the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865, most former slaves distanced themselves from the music of their captivity. The spiritual seemed destined to be relegated to mention in slave narratives and to a handful of historical accounts by whites who had attempted to notate the songs they heard.

However, the performance of spirituals was given a rebirth when a group of students from newly founded Fisk University of Nashville, Tennessee, began to tour in an effort to raise money for the financially strapped school. The Fisk Jubilee Singers not only carried spirituals to parts of the United States that had previously never heard Negro folksongs, the musically trained chorus performed before royalty during their tours of Europe in the 1870’s.

In time, composers, especially those Americans whose ancestors had been slaves, drew upon the spiritual as source material for concert

music. These pioneers wrote vocal settings with the thought of retaining as much of the “feel” of the original spiritual as was possible. Choral settings were ideally performed a cappella, and solo vocal pieces allowed the use piano accompaniment for support of the singer. They mainly composed in a steady 2/4 or 4/4 meter.

These pioneers included:

**Harry Thacker Burleigh** (b. Erie, Pennsylvania, 2 December 1866; d. 12 September 1949, Stamford, Connecticut). Burleigh attended the National Conservatory of Music, where he introduced the plantation songs he had learned from his grandfather to composer Antonin Dvořák. During his career, he was a baritone vocalist, music editor, lecturer, and a charter member of ASCAP. His compositions included between 200-300 songs

**Roland Hayes** (b. 3 June 1887, Curryville, Georgia; d. Boston, Massachusetts, 1 January 1977). Hayes became a pioneer as a classically trained African American by establishing an international career. He was one of the highest paid musicians of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also composed numerous spiritual art songs.

**Francis Hall Johnson** (b. Athens, Georgia, 12 March 1888; d. 30 April 1970, in New York, New York). Johnson began his musical professional career as a violinist, but in time, his interest turned to choral music. He wrote numerous works for choir as well as spiritual settings for solo voice and piano.

**Edward Hammond Boatner** (b. 13 November 1898, New Orleans, Louisiana; d. New York, New York, 16 June 1981) Boatner became known as a successful singer, composer and educator. He was instructor at his own academy, the Edward Boatner Studio. Boatner composed over 200 spirituals set for solo voice and piano.

**John Rosamond Johnson** (b. 11 August 1873, Jacksonville, Florida; d. 11 November 1954, New York, New York) Johnson studied at the New England Conservatory. He began as an educator, but became a composer of vaudeville and Broadway musicals. With his brother, James Weldon Johnson, he published *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* and *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* and “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” known as the Negro National Anthem.

**Florence Beatrice Smith Price** (b. 9 April 1888, Little Rock, Arkansas; d. 3 June 1953, Chicago, Illinois) Music was an important part of her life from an early age, as evidenced by her public performance at the age of four. Price was a teacher and composer, especially of works for the piano. Many of her compositions drew upon her exposure to Negro folk music.

**Robert MacGimsey** (b. Pineville, Louisiana, 7 September, 1898; d. 13 March 1979, Phoenix, Arizona). Mac Gimsey received his musical training at Juilliard. After a brief career as a lawyer, he became a professional whistler, performing on the radio and in recordings. He also pursued a career as a singer and composer. His songs reflected his southern roots, especially the Negro folksongs he heard.

**Robert Nathaniel Dett** (b. Drummondsville, Ontario, Canada, 11 October 1882; d. Battle Creek, Michigan, 2 October 1943). He attended Oberlin College Conservatory, becoming the first of African descent to receive a bachelor’s degree there, and studied at several other prestigious schools in the U.S. and Europe before earning his Master of Music from Eastman School of Music. A choral director and educator, Dett also composed approximately 100 works for piano, chorus, and solo voice.

**William Lawrence** (b. Charleston, South Carolina, 20 September, 1895; d. 17 March 1981, New York, New York) Lawrence studied music at Avery Normal Institute, Charleston, the New England Conservatory, Boston, Boston University, as well as in Paris. He toured extensively, both as accompanist for tenor Roland Hayes and as part of the Hayes Trio.

**Margaret Bonds** (b. 3 March 1913, Chicago, Illinois; d. 26 April 1972, Los Angeles, California) Bonds received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music from Northwestern University, with additional study at the Juilliard School. The pianist was the first African American to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. An educator and composer, Bonds wrote works for the theater, ballet, orchestra, and piano, but the majority were art and popular songs.

## The Performers

**Randy Jones** received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Music Education from Bennett College, Greensboro, North Carolina, where she was named to "Who's Who Among Students in American Colleges and Universities." She completed her Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance from Florida State University, Tallahassee, where she studied with Barbara Ford and Enrico Di Giuseppe. Jones has gained international recognition for her research of African American vocalists and composers through her Web site, *Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music*. She is currently conducting research and regularly presents lectures and recitals on the Negro spiritual. Her research project, *The Art of the Negro Spiritual*, has been profiled in publications such as *Billboard*. She has served as a consultant for The Kennedy Center Honors and The Washington Chorus. She produced her debut recording of spirituals, *Come Down Angels*, in 2003 on AhhJay Records. Jones is currently on the library staff at Grinnell College.

**William Tinker** is a native of St Louis. He has received critical acclaim for his artistry as an organist and harpsichordist in Europe and the United States. He holds degrees from The Juilliard School, The New England Conservatory of Music, Indiana University, and the Amsterdamsch Conservatorium. He has performed more than two thousand recitals and radio broadcasts, and has performed the complete organ works of J. S. Bach five times including a series for National Public Radio, and Radio Nederlands. Dr. Tinker is a Sinsinawa Dominican Associate, a resident of Grinnell, IA and recently retired as Minister of Word and Music from St. Peter Lutheran Church, Dubuque.

## The Art of the Negro Spiritual

The Art of the Negro Spiritual is a research project that is looking into the rich history of the Negro Spiritual as written for solo vocal performance. We are researching the development of spirituals from the folk music of slaves of the United States to the art songs set for performance on the concert stage.

The goal of this project is to gather into one source information for the singer, vocal teacher, accompanist and musicologist. The anticipated results of this research will be presented as a book with accompanying compact disc recording of selected spirituals.

Soprano and researcher Randy Jones will present her next ANS lecture, "The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual," on Tuesday, November 13, 2007, at Grinnell College.

To learn more about The Art of the Negro Spiritual research project, or to engage Ms. Jones for an ANS recital or lecture, please visit [www.artofthenegrospiritual.com](http://www.artofthenegrospiritual.com) or call 641/821-0188.



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