

Classical American Roots



*How our cultural roots
inform musical heritage and shape
America's sense of identity*

Music has an enduring power. Countries often call upon composers to create music that helps shape a national identity. To write music that captures America, many composers took inspiration from the folk music, spirituals and work songs of the African-American experience. By transforming these melodies and rhythms into art songs and symphonic works, composers remind us of the timeless relevance of music in our lives. Moreover, the presence of these authentic melodies in orchestral works acknowledges the role of music in shaping a national identity.

Join us as we honor our classical American roots.

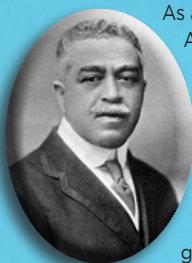


**Atlanta
Symphony**
Orchestra

Joseph Young, Conductor

Dvořák's Landmark

Henry "Harry" T. Burleigh: The Man Who Introduced Dvořák to Spirituals



As a young boy, American composer Henry "Harry" Thacker Burleigh (1866-1949) led his blind grandfather, a former slave

who would sing spirituals and work-songs from his years on a plantation. Burleigh learned all his grandfather's songs and they came to have a profound influence on his professional career. As a young man, Burleigh entered the National Conservatory of Music and met Czech composer Antonin Dvořák. Burleigh spent many evenings singing the spirituals of his youth for Dvořák, including "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Burleigh would find success as a baritone soloist and as an arranger of choral music. He served as a vocal coach for several prominent singers, including Enrico Caruso, Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. Burleigh is widely credited for promoting the spiritual into acceptance as an art song and for distinctly preserving slave-songs by making them known among the finest musicians of his time and the public at large. Without Burleigh's influence, African-American folk traditions might well have been lost and forgotten.

In the 1890's, people in America were searching for music that might reflect their national identity. At the same time, of course, they were asking "what is America?" and "what does it mean to be American?" Orchestral music of the day often imitated a grand European tradition. Could there be a uniquely American "sound"? Did we have music that conveyed a sense of America? Would American composers ever achieve recognition in the world?

To address those questions, a visionary woman named Jeannette Thurber planned a new National Conservatory of Music in New York City, and sought to recruit an important European composer to oversee the conservatory and hopefully to elevate the caliber of American music. She set her sights on a Czech composer named Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904) [pronounced *di-VOR-zhak*].

A Man of the People

Dvořák was born in Bohemia, the son of the village butcher. He pursued a career as a composer for many years before finally achieving recognition in Europe. Dvořák was much admired for his ability to weave the folk melodies of his native Bohemia into symphonic music. When he finally attracted fame, Dvořák was not one to take on the affections of high society. He remained a man of the people, deeply patriotic, and a pious family man who still enjoyed his beer. Dvořák was curious about America partly because so many Czech people had emigrated there — and because he had been offered the biggest paycheck of his life.

The New World

When Dvořák arrived in New York in 1892 accompanied by his wife and two of their six children, America was going through an identity crisis. The nation had survived the Civil War but slavery remained a vivid memory. Until then, America had been isolated from the world by two oceans, but recent waves of European immigration combined with westward expansion to create a "new world" in America — one that could contain people of different cultures, languages, and religions.

"In Negro spirituals my race has pure gold, and they should be taken as the Negro's contribution to artistic possessions. In them we show a spiritual security as old as the ages..." ~ Henry T. Burleigh



"New World Symphony"

Dvořák on the Future of American Music

Before his time at the conservatory, Dvořák had never met an African-American. The conservatory was founded with a policy of encouraging African-American enrollment so that the student population reflected the diversity of the nation. Dvořák met an African-American student named Henry T. Burleigh who introduced him to spirituals and work songs. Dvořák was so impressed that he soon asserted "the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the African-American melodies." If there was to be a national music for America, he declared, it must be related to the "longing to be free" heard in the spirituals.

"It is to the poor that I turn for musical greatness," he wrote in the New York Herald. "The poor work hard; they study seriously. If in my own career I have achieved a measure of success and reward it is to some extent due to the fact I was the son of poor parents and was reared in an atmosphere of struggle and endeavor."

Dvořák's observations didn't sit well with American composers who thought spirituals were dismissible folk melodies. Nevertheless, Dvořák's insights are now seen as prophetic because, within two decades, the music of African-American jazz, gospel, and ragtime swept the country. Dvořák himself was so inspired by spirituals that he composed his famous Symphony No. 9 in E minor, "From the New World," popularly known as the New World Symphony.

What to listen for in Dvořák's New World Symphony

"Everyone who has a nose must smell America in this symphony," said Dvořák. In truth, one can still hear a trace of rustic Bohemia, Dvořák's own homeland, in this music — but he purposefully conceived it to capture the flavor of what he perceived to be Native American music, American folk music and the Negro spiritual.

Dvořák was quite famously homesick the whole time he was in America, as are many immigrants, and the melodies of the New World Symphony suggest a certain melancholy. At the same time, Dvořák embraced the journey and imbues this symphony with a great sense of adventure. Listen to see if the music evokes images of both melancholy and adventure.

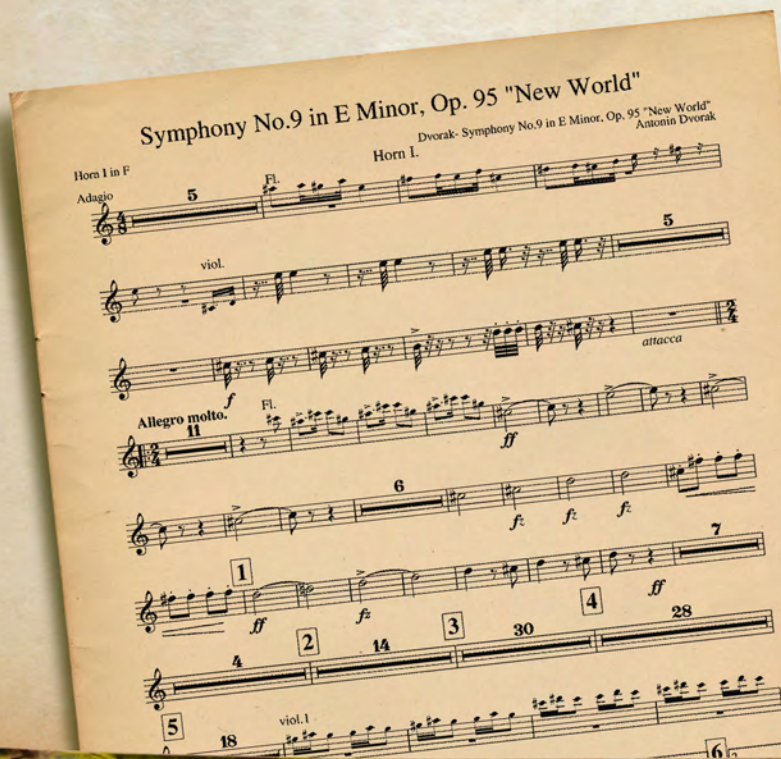
"Goin' Home": The Spiritual that Dvořák Wrote

The main melody in Dvořák's "New World Symphony" is based on existing spiritual melodies, particularly "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." In echoing "the spirit" of spirituals, Dvořák was channeling Scottish and Irish traditions and other folk songs that use a pentatonic (five-note) scale.

Dvořák haunting melody suggests a lament that resonates on a universal level. He was homesick throughout his time in America, a longing shared by many immigrant cultures. The melody also manages to suggest spiritual humility. Years later, one of Dvořák students wrote lyrics titled "Goin' Home" that have attached to the melody with lasting significance.

Lyrics to "Goin' Home"

"Goin' home, goin' home,
I'm a goin' home
Quiet like, still some day,
I'm just goin' home."



Dvořák's Slavonic Dances



Before digital recordings, cassette tapes, or vinyl, people enjoyed their music by listening to someone play a piano in the parlor. In 1878, Dvořák had won many composition awards but was not yet famous as a composer. His publisher approached him with a savvy suggestion to try his hand at composing dance music, something engaging and full of national spirit.

The composer responded by creating a set of “Slavonic Dances” based on lively Slavic rhythms, to be performed by “four hands,” meaning piano duets. Dvořák was so confident in the success of his “Slavonic Dances” that he composed orchestral versions at the same time — and his hunch was right. Dvořák’s piano duets quickly sold out and his orchestral versions brought him international acclaim. Eight years later, Dvořák responded to popular demand by writing a second successful set of Slavonic Dances.

What to listen for in Dvořák’s Slavonic Dances

Dvořák’s Slavonic Dances borrow their rhythms from the Bohemian culture in which he was raised. His work recreates the leaping polkas and melancholy dances of his ancestors but layers them with fresh original melodies that spoke to audiences of his day. Those influences are less familiar today but one can still appreciate the verve and vitality of Dvořák’s attack on his compositions. The complicated interplay between the unpredictable rhythms and the interweaving melodies suggest the more substantial composer Dvořák would soon become. These works clearly foreshadow his ability to engage in and to manipulate the idioms of American folk music traditions.

Other European composers had been brought to America but none connected with the American people as Dvořák did.

Homesick for his Bohemian homeland, Dvořák seized on the suggestion of a colleague and spent all four months of his summer vacation in 1893 located in Spillville, a rural township in Iowa with a Czech-speaking community.

Dvořák took full advantage of the town and its people. He would play the pipe organ in the town church and take long walks into the countryside. Dvořák was profoundly influenced by the prairies of the American landscape, which he came to love. During his summer in Iowa, he wrote to a friend, “It is very strange here...especially in the prairies there are only endless acres of field and meadow. That’s all you see. And so, it is very wild here, and sometimes very sad, sad to despair.”



Dvořák with his wife, children, and friends in New York.

“And so, it is very wild here, and sometimes very sad.”

~ Czech composer



Dvořák's Travels in America

Dvořák and Native Americans

Before the end of the summer, Spillville was visited by a band of Kickapoo Indians, led by their tribal leader Big Moon, who performed a nightly Medicine Show in the town square. The troupe is believed to have been a mix of Iroquois, Kickapoo, and Hunkpapa Indians. Dvořák's family encountered the Native Americans daily and the composer insisted on attending each performance from the front row as tribe members sang, danced, and played music on tom-toms and lutes.

Native Americans were still present in American culture in 1893 but their extinction seemed eminent as well. As recently as 1890, America had witnessed the tragedy of the Massacre at Wounded Knee when nearly 200 men, women, and children of the Sioux Tribe had been slaughtered by federal troops in South Dakota.

Dvořák drew inspiration from the folk traditions of Native American culture as well and included them in his pronouncement about the future of American music. While Dvořák's own work displays the influence of Native American melodies and rhythms, this prophecy never really took hold with the culture at large. One could argue that Dvořák's reference to Native American and African-American musical traditions is somehow less authentic for having incorporated them into a white European art form. At the same time, Dvořák is perhaps best understood as an "outsider" artist uniquely moved by personal humility, sympathetic understanding, and democratic instincts in an honest effort to craft a truly "American" symphony.



Kickapoo Medicine
Show Company

The Legacy of Dvořák

When Neil Armstrong flew NASA's first Apollo Mission to the moon, he brought along a recording of Dvořák's New World Symphony.

Apart from the profound impact of that symphony alone, Dvořák started a distinguished and ongoing teacher-student legacy. He taught Will Marion Cook, an African-American musician who would become a celebrated figure in American musical theatre. Cook and other Dvořák students were the future teachers and mentors of such 20th century greats as Duke Ellington, Aaron Copland and George Gershwin.



Will Marion Cook

Dvořák created great works of "American" music — and inspired an even greater body of American musicians. When Dvořák died in 1904 at the age of 63, one obituary claimed that "if it were possible, the Afro-American musicians alone could flood his grave with tears."



George
Gershwin



Duke
Ellington



Aaron
Copland



Swing Low,

*Through singing spirituals, the African American people
“uttered the burden of its soul in these songs of sorrow without
the slightest tinge of bitterness, animosity, or revenge.”*

~ W. E. B. Du Bois

The Impact of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”

“Swing Low Sweet Chariot” is one of the most treasured and best-known African-American spirituals. It occupies a place in the National Archives of the Library of Congress and is featured among the “Songs of the Century” curated by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

*“Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.”*

The origins of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”

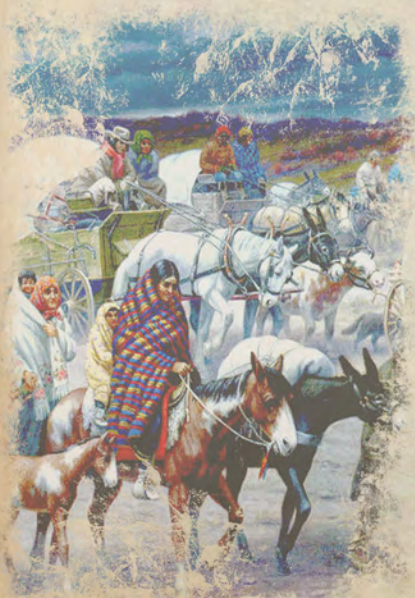
Popular belief suggests that “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” originated as a plantation song shared between unknown slaves as a plea to escape their miserable plight or to seek the redemption of heaven. Historians theorize that the lyrics pass coded information regarding escape routes on the Underground Railroad. It has been suggested that slaves changed the lyrics to “Swing Low, Sweet Harriet” in a reference to Harriet Tubman, leader of the Underground Railroad.

That may very well be true. More recently, however, historians have also traced the origins of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” to sources that connect two shameful chapters in American history: the enslavement of African-Americans and the forced exile of Native Americans on the Trail of Tears.

A Crossroad between Cultures

In the early 1800's, Wallis Willis was an African-American slave owned by Britt Willis, a half-white/half-Choctaw plantation owner in Mississippi. Many Native American tribes participated in slavery in an effort to fit into mainstream white society. These attempts to appear “civilized” only fueled the hostility of white settlers who wanted Native Americans removed. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson secured treaties that forced Native American tribes to leave their communities and to migrate westward. The route was called the “Trail of Tears,” owing to the forced exile, the treacherous terrain, and the dangerous conditions — and many Native Americans did not survive.

Britt Willis, however, did survive. Forced to re-locate due to his Choctaw heritage, he moved his slaves with him, including Wallis, and rebuilt a life in Oklahoma. Wallis wrote “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” there, performing a capella versions with his wife, inspired by Oklahoma’s Red River and the Jordan River of the Bible. Wallis also took inspiration from the Old Testament tale of the Prophet Elijah who did not “die” but went straight to heaven on a chariot. (2 Kings 2:9-12) When hired out to a local school for Choctaw boys, Wallis and Minerva performed many of their songs as entertainment for students, teachers, and guests, including “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Over time, the songs themselves became embedded in the school’s heritage.



Painting by William H. Johnson

Sweet Chariot

How Songs Travel Through Time

Following the Civil War, people became interested in preserving the plantation songs that had been a by-product of slavery culture. In 1871, the headmaster of that Oklahoma school for Choctaw boys transcribed the words and music to Wallis's songs and shared them with the Jubilee Singers of Fisk College, one of the first African-American institutions of higher learning, located in Nashville, TN.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers was a touring group that specialized in preserving plantation songs from the slavery era, and served as a fundraising arm for the struggling college.

After including "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and other spirituals in their repertoire, their fundraising saw a substantial leap and their popularity skyrocketed into international tours. In 1909, the Jubilee Singers became the first artists to record a version of the song.



Fisk Jubilee Singers



The Spiritual as Art Song and Protest Song

It is not difficult to hear the influence of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" on Dvořák's theme of "Goin' Home" in the New World Symphony. It echoes in the melancholy tone, the tonal intervals, and the musical phrasing.

Through Dvořák, the spiritual found acceptance in symphonic music — and through Burleigh and other American composers, the spiritual was embraced as an art song on recital stages. Classically-trained American singers, both black and white, now include spirituals in their classical repertoires.

Throughout the 20th century, performers from the genres of opera, jazz, and rock and roll all embraced the spiritual — and particularly "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Artists who have recorded the song include Paul Robeson, Joan Baez, Benny Goodman, Beyonce, B.B. King, Johnny Cash, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, the Grateful Dead, and many more.



During the 1960's, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" experienced a resurgence in popularity due to the Civil Rights Movement and a revival of interest in folk music as a genre. Civil rights activists found that it was a song that everyone already knew, it provided inspiration to the protesters who sang it, and it efficiently packaged a message of just redemption for the media.

Even today, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" continues to serve as a prayer for rescue from the hardships of mistreatment and discrimination.



What is an Orchestra?

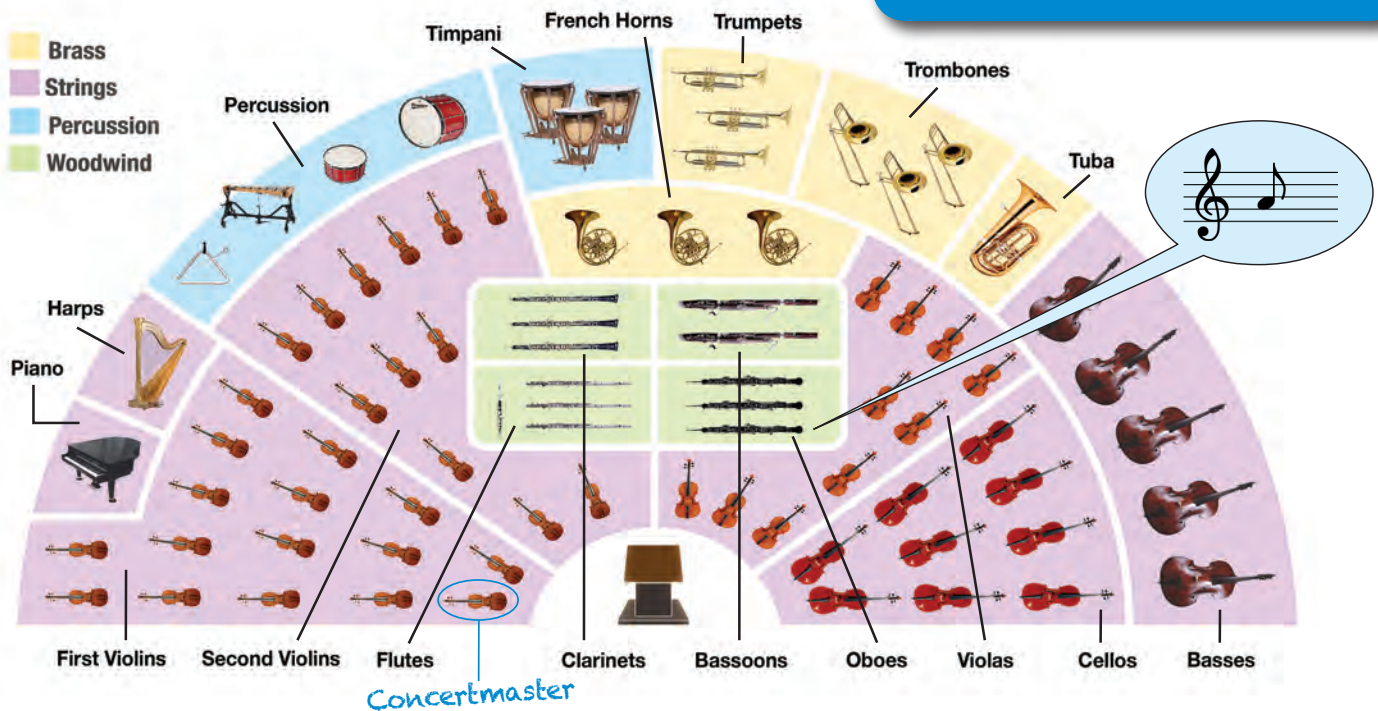
An orchestra is a large group of musicians who perform together on several different instruments — strings (including the violin and cello), woodwinds (including the flute and clarinet), brass instruments (including the trumpet and tuba), and percussion (including drums and xylophones.)

Who is the Conductor?

The conductor is the man or woman who leads the orchestra. Using hands and sometimes a baton, a conductor sets the tempo of the musicians, controls the volume, and shapes the sound of the orchestra. Notice how the musicians stay focused on their conductor and are able to start and to stop at the conductor's command.

Look for the First Violin!

The leader of the violin section, known as the "Concertmaster," usually enters after the orchestra is already seated. He is in charge of tuning the orchestra. You may notice him ask for an "A" from the oboe player when the musicians are tuning up. At the end of the concert, the Concertmaster usually serves as the "point person" when the entire orchestra stands to bow.



Write About It

Do you have a favorite spiritual? Or do you have a personal connection with a particular spiritual?

It could be a spiritual you have sung, or one you saw performed or heard on a recording. The spiritual might have accompanied a worship service, a dance performance or a film score.

What is that spiritual? What was the context? Where were you when you heard it? Who were you with? What was your impression of the words and/or the music?

Write a paragraph of at least five sentences describing your thoughts. If you can, quote the lyrics of the spiritual and explain any significance the words might have.



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WITH DEEPEST GRATITUDE



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