

William Levi Dawson:
An Examination of Selected Letters, Speeches, and Writings
by
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ABSTRACT

William Levi Dawson (1899-1990), director of the Tuskegee Institute Choir from 1931 to 1956, was one of the most important arrangers of Negro spirituals in the twentieth century. He is also remembered as an outstanding composer, conductor, speaker, and leader of festival choruses. His arrangements are still sung by choirs all over the world. Save a small number of dissertations and various articles, however, very little has been written about him. In fact, almost no significant writing has been undertaken utilizing the Dawson papers held at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

This study utilizes that collection in examining four areas of Dawson's life: his work as a composer, his work as an arranger of Negro spirituals, his work as a choral conductor and music pedagogue, and his life as an African American man living in segregated times. Dawson is shown as a thoughtful, deliberate practitioner of his art who built his career with intention, and who, through his various activities, sought both to affirm the traditional music of his people and to transcend his era's problems with the definitions, associations, and prejudices attached to the term "race."

Using a diverse selection of letters, notes, and speeches held in the archive, it is possible to develop a fuller, more nuanced portrait of Dawson. Through a thorough examination of a select few of these documents, his growth can be traced from a young composer living in Chicago, to a college choral director dealing with the realities of racial inequality in the mid-twentieth century, to a seasoned, respected elder in his field,

endeavoring to pass on to others knowledge of the music he spent his life arranging and teaching.

DEDICATION

For my parents, A.V. and Kate Huff,
whose love and support sustained me throughout this process.

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PREFACE

As a young man singing in the Travelers Rest High School Chorus, I found myself in awe of the power of Negro spirituals. The syncopated rhythms, ostinato patterns, and soulful melodies would evoke passionate responses from choristers and listeners alike. As an active choir member, I attended festivals, clinics, and all-state chorus events, and the reaction was always the same. These pieces seemed to hold a rapturous sway over both musicians and audiences.

As a choral education major at Furman University, where this music was a part of the cultural fabric, I became further steeped in the history and performance practice of spirituals. As a graduate student in choral conducting at The Ohio State University, I had the opportunity to conduct the Men's Chorus and the Symphonic Choir. Each time I chose a William Levi Dawson arrangement: the SATB version of "Soon Ah Will Be Done" and the TTBB setting of "Ain'-A Good News." They both present numerous challenges for the conductor and choir, and I spent many hours studying the intricate layers of rhythmic and harmonic complexity found in each piece. That was when my deep and abiding love for Dawson's music really took hold. Subsequently, as a high school choral director, I continued to program Dawson's music on a regular basis, and at Arizona State University, I conducted the combined Schola Cantorum and Symphonic Chorale in a performance of "Behold the Star."

My love for this music eventually led me to a research interest in both Dawson and his music. Emory University's collections of Dawson's papers in its Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL) became available in 2005. On my trip to the

archives in the summer of 2011, I discovered a treasure trove of letters, speeches, notes, musical scores, and artifacts that were largely unknown to the wider musical world. Although several existing DMA or PhD dissertations explore Dawson and his music, those researchers did not have access to these materials.

In writing this study, it is my hope that I can combine my love of Dawson's music with a scholarly examination of his papers to provide an insight to those who study William Dawson's life and music, or simply those who love to sing his songs.

INTRODUCTION

The papers of William Levi Dawson (1899-1990) are housed in the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. As noted in the Collection Description on the library website:

The collection contains the personal papers of William Levi Dawson from 1903-1990. The papers include correspondence, original scores of Dawson's works; files relating to Dawson's music publishing; writings by Dawson; subject files; notebooks, address books; and scrapbooks; personal and family papers; photographs; audio visual materials; ephemera; and printed material.¹

The papers are organized into twelve series: correspondence; scores; music publishing files; writings by Dawson; subject files; notebooks, address books, scrapbooks; other personal and family papers; photographs; printed material; ephemera; audio-visual materials; and collected material. The materials are kept in 120 acid-free boxes, separated by series and sub-series, and generally divided chronologically, when possible, into folders. Ninety-three oversized papers are also included. The holdings are sizable; one gets the sense that Dawson discarded very little.

The MARBL website provides a general overview of the collection's contents. Each of the twelve components of the series is given a "scope and content note," an "arrangement note" (e.g. chronologically), and a listing of the contents of each folder of the series. For example, the location of Series 4 (Writings by Dawson 1955-1959) is listed as Box 29, and it includes seven folders. The description of folder three appears under the rubric, "Speech, American Choral Directors Association convention

¹ Emory Libraries, "Dawson, William Levi, 1899-1990," Emory University. http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/dawson892/#descriptive_summary (accessed December 19, 2012).

[undated].”² This overview is indispensable in helping a researcher develop a plan of attack before examining the collection.

Of particular interest to researchers are the extensive original manuscripts of Dawson’s choral arrangements and his *Negro Folk Symphony*. One can see that he took painstaking care as he wrote, and that he made many, many revisions of each piece. Due to copyright restrictions, however, duplicating or photographing the manuscripts was not permitted at the time of my research. A fuller examination of those materials must wait for another study. The present one is limited to the composer’s correspondence and prose writings.

In keeping with his era, Dawson kept carbon copies of the letters he wrote as choral director and Director of the School of Music at Tuskegee. These include many duplicates of the same letter, addressed to different individuals or institutions. He also kept volumes of personal letters and cards that he and his wife received. In addition, the archive contains journals of business expenses, programs from concerts he attended, and notebooks full of jottings and thoughts. Although these materials lend insight into Dawson as a businessman and family man, they shed little light on Dawson the musician. To gain a better understanding of Dawson’s musical life and thinking, this study focuses on three categories of documents: letters to and from his contemporaries, notes about festival choir performances, and his speeches.

The first chapter is a literature review of all relevant writings about William Dawson, including articles, chapters in books, and dissertations. The subsequent chapters

² Emory Libraries, “Dawson, William Levi, 1899-1990. William Levi Dawson Papers > Writings By Dawson,” Emory University. <http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/dawson892/series4> (accessed December 19, 2012).

examine Dawson using primary documents found in the Dawson archive and other supporting documents. The sum of all these sources, some fragmentary and others complete, provide a clearer picture of William L. Dawson's compositional intentions, his performance practices, and the time in which he lived, than has been available to date.

CHAPTER ONE
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The *Grove Music Online* article on William Levi Dawson states that “Dawson was one of the two or three most significant black American composers of the first half of the 20th century” and that “his vocal music, particularly his arrangements of spirituals (“Talk about a Child that do Love Jesus” and “King Jesus”) have become permanent fixtures in the choral repertory.”¹ Nonetheless, very little has been written about the composer or his music. In fact, the most substantial sources are otherwise unpublished academic dissertations and theses written in the past thirty years. A review of relevant literature shows the evolution of Dawson study and will demonstrate the need for additional work.

WORKS FEATURING DAWSON’S INPUT

Dawson himself wrote an article about his music and Negro spirituals (or “Negro folk-songs,” as he referred to them) in *Etude* magazine in 1955.² He provides a history of the genre, examining the meaning behind the music, and discusses performance practice matters. He addresses the issues of pronunciation, rhythm (specifically duple versus triple rhythms), and tempo. Dawson states that “the religious folk-songs of the American Negro

¹ Willie Strong, “William Levi Dawson,” *New Grove Online*.
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed January 2, 2013).

² William Dawson, “Interpretations of the Religious Folk-Songs of the American Negro,” *Etude* (March, 1955): 11,58,61.

are not to be considered lightly...they are a reflection of deep spiritual experience.”³ The article was reprinted in the liner notes for the album, *Spirituals: Tuskegee Institute Choir*, originally released in 1956.⁴

By far the most comprehensive examination of the life of Dawson Mark Malone’s PhD dissertation at Florida State University, “William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator.”⁵ Malone spent many hours interviewing Dawson at the latter’s home in Tuskegee, Alabama. The author attempts to place his narrative biography into the context of the history of the Negro spiritual and Dawson’s importance in its evolution when he writes, “An investigation which blends the study of black history through the Negro spiritual and the examination of the life of a black American is most appropriate. The career of William Levi Dawson serves as a clear example of the two elements.”⁶ Malone divides his work into the major periods of Dawson’s life, an examination of Dawson’s choral arrangements, and Dawson’s philosophies of teaching.

In 1981, a festival was held in Philadelphia to celebrate Dawson’s life and career. A commemorative monograph was published to accompany the program entitled *William L. Dawson: A Umum Tribute and A Marvelous Journey*.⁷ Some of the contents are worth

³ Dawson, *Etude*.

⁴ *Spirituals: Tuskegee Institute Choir*, directed by William L. Dawson, MCA MSD-35340, 1956, rereleased 1992.

⁵ Mark Malone, “William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator.” PhD diss., Florida State University, 1981. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed July 12, 2011), iii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ Creative Artists and James G. Spady, *William L. Dawson: A Umum Tribute and A Marvelous Journey*. (Philadelphia: Creative Artists’ Workshop, 1981).

noting. A republished article from *The Kansas City Call* entitled “Talking it Over,” by Roy Wilkins,⁸ tells the story of Dawson’s graduation from Kansas City’s Horner Institute of Music in 1925. Though a song Dawson had written was performed for the occasion, he was not allowed to sit with the white graduates. The volume also includes reminiscences from a former colleague of Dawson’s at Tuskegee, Abbie Mitchell,⁹ two articles about Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony*,¹⁰ and a short entry from the then-unpublished *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Music* by Harvard scholar Eileen Southern.¹¹ The most useful part of the book is the thirteen-page biography of Dawson, written by James Spady, who organized the event.¹² A bibliography is also included.¹³

One of the most insightful sources of information about Dawson is a 1983 article written by John Haberlen, “William Dawson and the Copyright Act.”¹⁴ Haberlen discusses Dawson’s legal battles against individuals and organizations that had attempted to use segments of his arrangements in collections or as a part of other arrangements. Much of the Haberlen-Dawson correspondence related to the article is preserved in the Dawson archive.

⁸ Creative Artists and Spady, 2-3.

⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4-9.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 26-40.

¹³ Ibid., 41-44.

¹⁴ John Haberlen, “William Dawson and the Copyright Act,” *Choral Journal* 23, n. 7 (1983): 5-8.

In “The Contributions of William L. Dawson to the School of Music at Tuskegee Institute and to Choral Music,” David Lee Johnson looks comprehensively at Dawson’s work at Tuskegee and his influence on his fellow arrangers.¹⁵ Johnson’s work is significant because of his numerous interviews with Dawson and his contemporaries, and his examination of primary source documents while compiling his research. Interviewees include former Tuskegee Presidents Frederick D. Patterson and Luther H. Foster, former colleagues and students from Dawson’s time at Tuskegee (1931-1956), and residents from the town of Tuskegee. Johnson also interviewed four prominent choral directors, William Garcia, Jester Hairston, Relaford Patterson, and Albert McNeil. Hairston and McNeil were also well-known arrangers of spirituals.

ALSO WRITTEN DURING DAWSON’S LIFETIME

“The Development of the Negro Spiritual as Choral Art Music by Afro-American Composers with an Annotated Guide to the Performance of Selected Spirituals,” a 1972 PhD dissertation by Arthur Lee Evans, is one of the first studies of William Dawson’s music, albeit in the context of the larger scope of Negro spirituals.¹⁶ Evans examines the works of sixteen early- to mid-twentieth-century arrangers, including Dawson, and provides a detailed analysis of fifteen of Dawson’s pieces.

¹⁵ David Lee Johnson, “The Contributions of William L. Dawson to the School of Music at Tuskegee Institute and to Choral Music.” EdD. Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1987. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed July 11, 2011).

¹⁶ Arthur Evans Lee, “The Development of the Negro Spiritual as Choral Art Music by Afro-American Composers with an Annotated Guide to the Performance of Selected Spirituals,” PhD diss., University of Miami, 1972. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed December 27, 2011).

Carl Harris's 1972 work, "A Study of Characteristic Stylistic Trends Found in the Choral Works of a Selected Group of Afro-American Composers and Arrangers"¹⁷ includes a brief biography of Dawson and brief examinations of "Behold the Star" and "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley." An appendix lists Dawson's works.

WRITTEN SINCE DAWSON'S DEATH

"The Choral Music of William Dawson" by William Robert McMillan is a substantial study of the composer's music.¹⁸ In his abstract McMillan writes, "His choral works have remained in print as long as sixty-five years, and his skills as a composer have been compared with those of Harry T. Burleigh and R. Nathaniel Dett. In spite of these facts, Dawson's choral music has never been the subject of a significant study."¹⁹ The author analyzes forty-seven of Dawson's spirituals, but excludes his secular compositions.

For his background material, McMillan draws largely on the work already done by Malone and Johnson and makes the point that these two previous studies are the only sources of in-depth writing on Dawson. McMillan makes the case for another study when he writes, "This project encompasses all of Dawson's known choral works. It is possible

¹⁷ Carl Gordon Harris Jr., "A Study of Characteristic Stylistic Trends Found in the Choral Works of a Selected Group of Afro-American Composers and Arrangers" (DMA thesis, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1972).

¹⁸ William Robert McMillan, "The Choral Music of William Dawson" D.M. diss., University of Northern Colorado, 1991. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed July 11, 2011).

¹⁹ McMillan, iii.

that there are other choral works that Dawson did not publish. It is not possible to search for unknown works at the time of this writing since much of Dawson's estate is sealed in the vault at Tuskegee University."²⁰ Dawson had no children, and upon his death in 1990, his papers were left to his nephew, Milton L. Randolph Jr., who donated the papers to Emory University.

Pamela Teresa Burns's study is a succinct look at the performance practices of Negro spirituals, both solo and choral.²¹ The author pays close attention to the work of several early arrangers of spirituals, including Dawson, and specifically examines "Ain'-A That Good News," "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," and his piece for solo voice and piano, "Talk About a Child That Do Love Jesus."

A more detailed examination of several of Dawson's arrangements was written by Marcia Mitchell Hood in "William Levi Dawson and his Music: A Teacher's Guide to Interpreting His Choral Spirituals."²² Hood's first chapter is a concise biography of Dawson, and she relies heavily (as did McMillan writing a decade earlier) on Malone's research. Her second chapter is a succinct and thoroughly documented introduction to the performance practice issues surrounding Negro spirituals.

In her fourth chapter, Hood provides the reader with an overview of Dawson's work. She divides his compositional output into three periods: his years in Kansas City

²⁰ McMillan, iv.

²¹ Pamela Teresa Burns, "The Negro Spiritual From the Southern Plantations to the Concert Stages of America," (DMA document, University of Alabama, 1993).

²² Marcia Mitchell Hood, "William Levi Dawson and his Music: A Teacher's Guide to Interpreting His Choral Spirituals." DMA doc., University of Alabama, 2004. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed July 11, 2011).

and Chicago, the Tuskegee years and the years after his retirement.²³ Hood's true contribution to furthering a greater understanding of the music of William Dawson comes in the final section of her study. With great detail, she provides a thorough examination of six of Dawson's most widely performed pieces: "Soon-Ah Will Be Done," "There is a Balm in Gilead," "Ain-A' That Good News," "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," "Every Time I Feel The Spirit," "Behold the Star," and "Mary Had a Baby." In a sense, this study builds upon and in some cases replicates the work of McMillan, which she lists in her bibliography.

In the collection *Black Lives: Essays in African American Biography*, there is a short chapter devoted to William Dawson, much of it reproduced from the earlier dissertations of Malone and McMillan.²⁴ André Thomas devotes a chapter to Dawson in his book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual*.²⁵ Thomas divides his work into two sections: in "Understanding the Spiritual," he discusses the evolution of the genre and provides short biographies of thirty-seven composers and arrangers. In "Performing the Spiritual," Thomas reflects on six twentieth-century arrangements. He discusses Dawson's arrangement of "Soon-Ah Will Be Done" and provides performance practice suggestions.²⁶

²³Hood, 35.

²⁴ Ralph Anthony Russell, "A Black Composer Speaks: William Levi Dawson," in *Black Lives: Essays in African American Biography*, ed. James L. Conyers Jr., (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999), 110-116.

²⁵ André Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton: Heritage Music Press, 2007).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 98-110.

Gwynne Kuhner Brown is the first researcher to make extensive use of the William Dawson archive at Emory University.²⁷ In her November 2012 article for the *Journal of the Society for American Music*, she considers his *Negro Folk Symphony* and examines its initial success with audiences and critics and its subsequent retreat into obscurity.

The final important source of information on the life and music of Dawson is a website maintained by Emory University, “William Levi Dawson: The Collection at Emory University.”²⁸ The MARBL staff has uploaded many pictures and audio links to help tell Dawson’s story. The clips of interviews with Dawson are particularly valuable.

²⁷ Gwynne Kuhner Brown, “What Happened to William Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony*?” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6, n. 4 (November 2012): 433-456.

²⁸ Emory Libraries, “William Levi Dawson: The Collection at Emory University. <http://larson.library.emory.edu/dawson/web> (accessed July 22, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO

DAWSON THE COMPOSER

As one of my humble friends says, I am not rejoicing but I do give thanks.
—William Dawson, *Letter to Leopold Stokowski*

William Dawson saw himself first and foremost as a composer. After initial studies at Tuskegee, Dawson studied composition, graduating in 1925 with a Bachelor of Music degree in theory at the Horner Institute of Fine Arts in Kansas City, Missouri. He went on to receive a Master of Music degree in composition from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago in 1927.¹ When he retired from Tuskegee at the age of fifty-six, he wanted to manage his publishing empire and increase the number of festivals choirs he was able to conduct, but his primary aim was to focus on arranging and composing.²

In 1921, the twenty-two-year-old Dawson was still a student at the Tuskegee Institute and was already beginning to compose. From those early years, a letter survives from Harry T. Burleigh, whom Dawson sought out for advice about his work. Burleigh (1866-1949) was an early, important arranger of Negro spirituals. Willie Strong writes that Burleigh's "arrangements of African American folksongs set a standard for several generations of composers."³ This letter documents Dawson's interest in the opinions of the famous Burleigh on Dawson's composition, "Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back."

¹ Haberlen, 5.

² Malone, 113.

³ Willie Strong, "Harry T. Burleigh," *New Grove Online*.
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music>,
(accessed January 30, 2012).

March 17, '21

Mr. Wm. L. Dawson,
Tuskegee, Alabama

My Dear Mr. Dawson,

In looking over your song more carefully than I had time to when you first showed it to me, I find many weak spots in it.

Particularly this is noticeable in your frequent use of 6/4 chords (sometimes on the first beat of a measure) and the doubling of 3rds and 7ths which never sounds good – especially where the root of the chord is omitted. (in the 7th measure of the song, counting from the beginning of the verse, in the word “Honey,” you will find an evidence of this. I have penciled in a better arrangement of the chord a. Different resolution with “a” -- an awkward cross-relation.

Then to, the important part of the song, in each voice is two bars short for correct form and the accent of the words. I have suggested the alteration necessary to correct this fault, and I hope you will see the benefit of it.

Six-four chords always suggest a cadence and a cadence should come at the end of a piece. They are weak and ineffective in the middle of a composition and indicate the hand of an amateur in the use of harmony.

Do try to correct them if you want to improve your song.

As it is now, it has no commercial value, altho' it has many effective points.

With kindest regards and all good wishes, I am

Very truly yours,
HT Burleigh⁴

Though he does not mention the song by name, from the word “honey” we can infer that Burleigh was referring to “Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back,” for solo voice and piano, with a text by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The song was published in 1923 by the Wunderliche Piano Company.

At the time he wrote this letter, Burleigh was fifty-five years old and a published composer and arranger of Negro spirituals. Throughout his career, aspiring composers sought him out for advice, including William Grant Still, who asked Burleigh for help in

⁴ Harry T. Burleigh to William Dawson, March 17, 1921, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

drawing attention to his opera *Troubled Island* at the Metropolitan Opera. In her biography of Burleigh, Anne Key Simpson:

Burleigh was very kind but he told the young man [Still] that the manuscript should be submitted directly to the Met. Still, at the time took this as a rebuff, but later understood the wisdom of Burleigh's advice: that the Met went its own way and listened to no one. In later years, Burleigh was more friendly and encouraging to Still.⁵

One of Dawson's original manuscripts of "Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back" survives, and a facsimile image is available online at the Dawson archive.⁶ This version, which is identical to the published score, must have been written after Dawson heard from Burleigh. The doubled thirds and sevenths to which Burleigh refers are no longer present, and any 6/4 chords have been eliminated. In 1930, several years after the piece was published, it won the Rodman Wanamaker Prize for composition.⁷

Dawson continued to compose, and his reputation grew in other areas as well. He was the first trombonist in the Chicago Civic Orchestra from 1926 to 1930, and in 1929 he won the *Chicago Daily News* Contest for Band Directors.⁸ Around this time, he caught the attention of Robert Moton, president of the Tuskegee Institute, who was planning for

⁵ Anne Key Simpson, *Hard Trials: the life and music of Harry T. Burleigh* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1990).

⁶ <http://larson.library.emory.edu/dawson/web/section/view/sectionId/19> (accessed February 7, 2013). A request was made to reproduce the entire manuscript for this study, but as of this writing, the MARBL staff was still attempting to secure permission from the Dawson family for the reproduction. A facsimile of the 1923 sheet music of "Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back" was obtained from the University of Pennsylvania Rare Book and Manuscript Library for this comparison.

⁷ "Wanamaker Prize Winner Music Head at Tuskegee," *The Chicago Defender*, September 27, 1930.

⁸ Haberlen, 5.

a new School of Music. Dawson moved to his alma mater to assume the positions of Director of the School of Music and Director of Choirs.

As will be discussed Chapter Five, the fame of the Tuskegee Choir under Dawson's direction spread quickly. The choir was invited to perform in the inaugural series of concerts for Radio City Music Hall for a two-month period beginning on December 27, 1931. The organizer of the event, Samuel "Roxy" Rathafel, told Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Leopold Stokowski, who was in town for the events, that Dawson was busy composing a symphony. Stokowski was extremely interested in the work, which was to be based on Negro folk melodies, but it was two years before Dawson completed the piece.⁹ Remembering Stokowski's interest, Dawson sent him the score. The Philadelphia Orchestra read the piece in early November of 1934, and Stokowski must have decided almost immediately to present it in a concert. The following is a letter from an astonished Dawson to Stokowski:

November 10, 1934

Leopold Stokowski
1715 Rittenhouse Street
Philadelphia, Pa.

My dear Mr. Stokowski:

I am writing to say that I am planning to arrive in Philadelphia, Monday morning. I shall call your office on arriving and hope that you will find it possible to indicate to your secretary an hour when I may see you. I shall be arriving about 9:00 o'clock.

Meanwhile I have been recovering from the surprise and confusion that have followed the receipt of your telegram and letter, advising me of your acceptance of the "Negro Folk Symphony" and your plans to give it public performance. But what I find to be uppermost in my mind is not a sense of achievement but of

⁹ Brown, 437.

gratitude to the friends whose confidence and good will have given me this rare opportunity.

Of course I have not heard the Symphony myself. You can understand, therefore, my anticipation and the expectancy, not to say any nervousness with which I approach the hour.

I want to thank you for your encouragement of my efforts and your generosity in counting me among your friends.

Sincerely yours,

William L. Dawson

P. S. As one of my humble friends says, I am not rejoicing but I do give thanks.¹⁰

Dawson was developing a substantial reputation as a choral conductor, thanks in part to the appearances in New York. Having a major instrumental work performed by a leading American orchestra and one of the most well-known conductors of the day would broaden Dawson's reputation beyond the choral realm and help to establish him as a serious composer. The Philadelphia Orchestra premiered the piece ten days after Dawson wrote this letter, on November 20, 1934.¹¹ As Gwynne Kuhner Brown writes, "Given that Dawson knew the Philadelphia Orchestra had read the piece at the beginning of the month, his statement suggests that Stokowski's decision to program the work was made and acted upon with incredible speed."¹²

¹⁰ William Dawson to Leopold Stokowski, November 10, 1934, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

¹¹ Philadelphia Orchestra concert program, November 20, 1934, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

¹² Brown, 437.

This event represents a peak moment of Dawson's professional life; it would cement Dawson's place in the pantheon of prominent African American composers of his day. Although the premiere was a critical triumph, Dawson is remembered primarily as an arranger of Negro spirituals. While he may have planned to write additional symphonies, he never completed another major orchestral work. The *Negro Folk Symphony* received initial critical success and had a few performances by major and regional orchestras. It did not remain in the standard repertoire of any orchestra and has not been performed regularly in the past fifty years. Since Dawson found more critical and commercial success as an arranger, he chose to focus his creative energies in that arena.

In the last decades of his life, Dawson's choral arrangements were widely performed. Since his source materials were the plantation folk songs that he heard as a child, other composers and arrangers might have felt that the melodies were in the public domain. Over and over Dawson's songs were plagiarized; quotations from one song, "There is a Balm in Gilead," appeared in twelve hymnals and sacred song collections.¹³ As John Haberlen discussed in his 1983 *Choral Journal* article, Dawson was very protective of his arrangements and many times was forced to take legal action against those who he believed had appropriated his intellectual property. Dawson wrote a number of letters to individuals and organizations in this regard.

One of these letters stands out, because it was directed to a well-known choral conductor (instead of to a publisher, which was Dawson's usual practice) and because,

¹³ Haberlan, 5.

exceptionally, the charge seems to be without merit. A carbon copy of Dawson's letter to Paul Christiansen, choral conductor at Concordia College, is preserved in the archives:

December 6, 1978

Mr. Paul Christiansen
Concordia College
Moorhead, Minnesota 56560

Dear Paul:

It is not enjoyable for me to write this letter. When you read its full content, I think you will understand my reason for saying in the first sentence that writing it is not a pleasure.

In the album titled The Peaceable Kingdom, you recorded "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and stated that it was "arranged by Paul Christiansen"! This is not a truthful statement.

With the exception of the three measure introduction, and the final phrase "swing low") by the soloist, the harmonies (which, by the way, are not traditional) are by William Dawson and published and copyrighted by him in 1946!! In other words, what you have appropriated and stated as being by Paul Christiansen, is in essence by William Dawson.

Paul, you have an outstanding reputation as a musician. Please do not tarnish the luster of it.

I send kindest regards and best wishes.

Sincerely,

William L. Dawson¹⁴

Paul Christiansen, son of famed St. Olaf choral director F. Melius Christiansen, served as choral director at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, from 1937 to

¹⁴ William Dawson to Paul Christiansen, December 6, 1978, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

1986.¹⁵ In addition to his work at Concordia, he was a prolific composer and arranger of sacred choral music.

Dawson is referring to the release of the Concordia Choir's album *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Both Christiansen's and Dawson's arrangements of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" are still in publication. Dawson's setting was released in 1946 by Neil A. Kjos Co.,¹⁶ Christiansen's was published in 1963, also by Kjos.¹⁷

A comparison reveals both similarities and differences between the two pieces. Both arrangements are forty-four measures long and set the text:

Swing low, sweet chariot
coming for to carry me home
I looked over Jordan and what did I see
coming for to carry me home
a band of angels coming after me
coming for to carry me home.
If you get there before I do
coming for to carry me home
tell all my friends I'm coming too.¹⁸

Both are set for solo and SATB choir, and follow an alternating chorus\verse\chorus\verse\chorus pattern. There the similarities end.

Each piece has a short introduction and coda, which Dawson notes is different in Christiansen's setting. Christiansen calls for a tenor or baritone soloist, while Dawson

¹⁵Anton Armstrong, "The Christiansen Tradition in Sacred Choral Music," *Music in the Church* 12, No. 3 (1992).

¹⁶ William Dawson, arr., "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (San Diego: Neil A. Kjos Music Co., 1946).

¹⁷ Paul J. Christiansen, arr., "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (San Diego: Neil A. Kjos Music Co., 1963).

¹⁸ Ibid.

utilizes a soprano. Both pieces are set in common time, but Dawson uses 2/4 to set the text “coming for to carry me home.” Dawson chose A-flat major for his setting, and Christiansen uses F major. In his letter, Dawson states that his harmonies are not traditional. Indeed, he uses a different harmonic language than Christiansen.

Although the Concordia Choir’s album *The Peaceable Kingdom* that Dawson references in his letter is difficult to come by, the album *Fifty Years With Paul J. Christiansen Vol. 1 & 2*¹⁹ is available on the Concordia Choir’s website.²⁰ The thirty-four recordings were selected from previously released tracks and include “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as arranged by Christiansen. A comparison of the sound recording to the written score reveals without doubt that the Concordia Choir is singing Paul J. Christiansen’s arrangement of the old tune.

From listening to the recording and considering the stark contrasts above, it can only be concluded that Dawson was mistaken in his allegation. The archive contains many letters to and from individuals and organizations that misappropriated Dawson’s work, but there are no further letters about this particular matter with Paul Christiansen. Since Dawson saved letters so meticulously, the matter must have been dropped soon after the initial correspondence.

These letters help to trace William Dawson’s evolution as a composer. As a young man striving to become published, he reached out to the well-known Harry T. Burleigh, asking for advice about one of his earliest compositions. Later as an established

¹⁹ *Fifty Years With Paul J. Christiansen Vol. 1 & 2*, Concordia Recordings, E-1861, E-1862, CD, 1991.

²⁰ <http://www.concordiarecordings.com/category/choral.html> (accessed February 24, 2013).

choral conductor and arranger, Dawson had the opportunity of a lifetime: to become noticed as a serious composer of orchestral music. Later, after he had turned his energies to his choral music, he set out to preserve his artistic legacy and protect his music.

CHAPTER THREE

DAWSON AS ARRANGER OF SPIRITUALS

I think you have managed to combine with rare skill the simple, primitive nature of the spiritual with the almost liturgical chorale-like "Hail Mary."

—Marshall Bartholomew

There can be no doubt that William Dawson's primary legacy is in the many Negro spirituals he arranged, initially for the Tuskegee Institute Choir. This statement is found in a published anthology of his works:

Known and revered the world over, William Levi Dawson was one of the greatest contributors to the art of American choral music. Deeply rooted in the flowering era of American *a cappella* choir and African-American folk traditions, Dawson fashioned the most widely performed selection of such original American choral music, the Tuskegee Choir Series, now published by Neil A. Kjos Music Company.¹

As he told Mark Malone, Dawson grew up listening to spiritual tunes, and at the Tuskegee Institute they were a part of the curriculum.² When Dawson assumed leadership of the Tuskegee Choir in 1931, the tunes provided a wealth of rich melodies from which he could draw when composing for the choir. As an arranger, he garnered an international reputation for this body of work.

This chapter documents Dawson's work as an arranger of spirituals during his career. First, in an undated document, he provides performance suggestions for his setting of "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel." Then, in an exchange with Marshall Bartholomew, director of the Yale Glee Club, he gives insight to his setting of "Hail Mary." Finally, in a short

¹ William Dawson, *Dawson Spirituals: Volume One* (San Diego: Neil A. Kjos Music Co., 2008).

² Malone, 20-21, 26.

letter to his editor, he shows his penchant for detail when he describes changes that need to be made to his setting of “In His Care-O.”

Many of Dawson’s original manuscripts survive, but due to copyright restrictions, they cannot be reproduced here. Tucked away among the scores, however, is a single document entitled “Rehearsal Suggestions For Ezekiel Saw de Wheel”:³

- (1) Pronunciation: “de” is pronounced “dee” when it precedes words beginning with a vowel sound, and “duh” before those beginning with a consonant sound.
- (2) It is suggested that each singer learn his or her part well; it will be better if parts are committed!
- (3) At first, rehearse at a slow tempo; then gradually increase the tempo. This procedure will be carried out in rehearsals.
- (4) Give attention to the “short” notes on the weak part of the each [sic] beat! This matter should receive especial attention in Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit, Ain’-A That Good News!, and Ezekiel Saw de Wheel.
- (5) Page 5: measures 4, 5, 8, and 9, have all 1st tenors sing the solo; in measure 8, have all 2nd tenors sing (hum) the tenor part over the baritone and bass parts.
- (6) From page 10 to page 15 can be learned very quickly if the following procedure is followed: Have the 1st and 2nd altos (2nd staff from the top of the page) and the baritones and basses (6th staff from the top of the page) repeat measure 1, over and over, until they are able to sing their “parts” with ease at the proper tempo; since the 1st altos usually have difficulty, have them work their part out with the basses; then add the baritones; observe well the accents! Then lastly, add the 2nd altos.

From:
William L. Dawson⁴

This undated list invites the conductor into the mind of an extremely disciplined director and educator. His first instruction, concerning the pronunciation of “de” before

³ Chapter Four contains another document mentioning “Ezekiel Saw De Wheel.”

⁴ “Rehearsal Suggestions for Ezekiel Saw de Wheel,” Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University. Format is from the original notes. Paper was found in Box 28, ff 7, filed along next to the original manuscript.

consonants and vowels, is one that has been a part of performance of Negro spirituals for many years. André Thomas, acknowledged as an expert in the interpretation of spirituals, writes about his first encounter with Dawson's contemporary, Jester Hairston: "He began to explain to me things about the dialect, particularly the 'th' sound that is written as a 'd' in dialect. He told me that the 'th' sound is not present in any of the African dialects. This meant that the slave simply accommodated with the 'd'."⁵

Item (3) is a general note, which all choral teachers would be advised to follow, but item (4) is a specific instruction, tailored to this genre of music. Dawson suggests that special "attention" or emphasis be given to the "short notes on the weak part of each beat." This weight would emphasize the syncopated character of each piece, putting metrical stress on parts of a measure that are generally unstressed. An example is emphasizing beats two and four in a piece written in common time.

With item (5) Dawson was, in effect, rewriting his own arrangement. In the choral score, the measures Dawson notes are marked as tenor solos, with the tenor section moving to the line above the baritone pitches. In these rehearsal notes, however, he divides the tenor section and eliminates the solo. Should conductors then disregard the instructions in the music and follow Dawson's directives in the rehearsal notes? For confirmation, it is informative to listen to the 1955 recording of the Tuskegee Institute Choir, *Spirituals: The Tuskegee Institute Choir*.⁶ In the recording of "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel," Dawson divides the tenor section exactly as he states in the rehearsal notes, with a small group of tenors singing the solo as opposed to a single person. Since Dawson was

⁵Thomas, xiv.

⁶ *Spirituals: The Tuskegee Institute Choir*, William L. Dawson, dir. Tuskegee Institute, 1955.

so precise with his other notes, one wonders why he would have not have made changes in subsequent editions of this piece. Perhaps the expense of re-typesetting was prohibitive.

Item (6) is a set of instructions for teaching the “Doo-mah-loo-mah” section, by far the most challenging part of the piece. As an experienced teacher who had taught this piece many times to his own choir and to festival groups, he hopes to impart the benefit of his experience to singers and conductors. “Observe well the accents!” is a note that every choral conductor should convey to his or her choir. The 1955 recording bears out Dawson’s attention to the accents he includes in the arrangement.

As Dawson became well known, he received a plethora of letters from musicians all over the world including James Weldon Johnson, Wendell Whalum, and Robert Shaw. One such letter, which shines light on one of Dawson’s arrangements, is from Marshall Bartholomew, conductor of the Yale Glee Club from 1921 to 1953:

Dear Mr. Dawson:

You will be interested to know that the Yale Glee Club will sing your setting of “Hail Mary” in Symphony Hall, Boston, on December 4th. The boys have taken to it with great enthusiasm and I think will do a very respectable job of it.

I think you have managed to combine with rare skill the simple skill of the simple, primitive nature of the spiritual, with the almost liturgical chorale-like “Hail Mary” which comes in the middle and continues with the original melody as a counterpoint. This choral section doesn’t sound at all like a spiritual. Do you know its history? Was it borrowed, or picked up by accident from Catholic sources? It would interest me to know because if I could have your authentic definition of the sources of this spiritual I might include them in my program notes for our Carnegie Hall concert in New York next March 14th when we propose to sing “Hail Mary” with several other spirituals and American folk songs.⁷

⁷ Excerpt taken from letter written by Marshall Bartholomew to William Dawson. November 19, 1948, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

Bartholomew was also known as a prolific arranger of American folk songs and spirituals.⁸ As was his custom, Dawson sent a reply and saved a copy of it. An excerpt from the response, dated November 29, 1948 follows:

Dear Mr. Bartholomew:

Thank you for your letter of November 19. I am happy to know that the members of the Yale Glee Club have taken to "Hail Mary" with great enthusiasm; and I am especially happy to learn that you like it well enough to use it on your concert in Symphony Hall, Boston, on December 4th.

The middle section of "Hail Mary" (page 6 to page 11) about which you inquired, is original. After much time and patience spent in fashioning the melody which first appears in the bass on page 6 and later, on page 9, the chorale-like section "Hail Mary" (hence the title of the piece) seems to have come to me not unlike a host of angels appearing in the heavens singing in adoration to Him who was born under such lowly circumstances. Yes, we love to call Him by much exalting names as "King Jesus" and "King Emmanuel", and by much endearing names as "Chile of God" and "Lit'l Boy-Chile".⁹

In "Hail Mary," Dawson's setting of the tune "Mary Had a Little Baby" is juxtaposed with his newly composed chorale-like setting of the words, "Hail! Mary, Virgin Mary, Oh, Hail! 'Chile of God.' Hail!"¹⁰ The older text is known to Bartholomew and he points out the contrast with the "almost liturgical" middle section. In the final section, Dawson sets both texts simultaneously, creating an especially moving and powerful ending.

⁸ Yale University Library, "The Marshall Bartholomew Papers." Compiled by Janice Eaton, revised 26 January, 2010, <http://drs.library.yale.edu:8083/fedora/get/music:mss.0024/PDF> (accessed January 11, 2012).

⁹ Letter from William Dawson to Marshall Bartholomew, November 29, 1948, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

¹⁰ William Dawson, "Hail Mary!" Neil A. Kjos Music Co., San Diego, 2008.

Dawson does not address Bartholomew's specific inquiries, other than to write that the middle section was original to Dawson. That Dawson is a deeply spiritual man is quite evident from this letter. His statement that the choral section "seems to have come to me not unlike a host of angels appearing in the heavens"¹¹ is reminiscent of the story of Handel's inspiration when composing *Messiah*. Dawson had a deep emotional connection to his arrangements – not only academic, but intense and profound.

Twenty-six years later, as a seventy-five year old, Dawson was still very involved in the managing of his musical empire. After his retirement from Tuskegee in 1956, Dawson sold his Tuskegee Press imprint to Neil A. Kjos Co. Dawson retained the copyrights to his arrangements, however. He continued to compose, and "In His Care-O" was published in 1961. His attention to detail, as evidenced by his meticulous instructions for "Ezekiel Saw De Wheel," is also apparent in a letter he wrote in December of 1974:

Dear Mr. Thomas:

I plan to be in New York City Monday, January 6, and shall remain for two or three days.

While I am in the City, I should like to come over to Westbury for the purpose of putting in several accents in both arrangements of No. 122 and 123, In His Care-O. Since this might require about 30 minutes or so, I'll call your office and find out what day and hour would be best.

I shall appreciate it if you will give Mrs. Effig the information. This will, perhaps, save you the time of coming to the telephone.

I send best wishes for a Happy and Prosperous New Year!

Sincerely,
William L. Dawson¹²

¹¹ Bartholomew letter to Dawson.

¹² Letter from William Dawson to Mr. Thomas (specific recipient unknown), 31 December, 1974. Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University. Format from

Dawson wanted to give singers and conductors as much information as possible and wanted to provide every bit of detail that he could. Unlike many of his contemporaries, including R. Nathaniel Dett, Jester Hairston, and Hall Johnson, his choral scores abound in style markings. Dawson did not see these as suggestions, but as explicit directions to performers, and he took them seriously enough to take considerable time over them. As an arranger of Negro spirituals, Dawson was aware of the importance of his work. Beyond the national acclaim he earned, he was writing music not only for choral groups of the mid-twentieth century, but for succeeding generations of conductors and singers.

original letter. “No. 122 and No. 123 are references to the original catalogue numbers of the SATB and TTBB arrangements of the piece.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAWSON AS CONDUCTOR

To be a leader one must give the most service. We are classified as teachers. To be a teacher means to be an example.

—William Dawson

When Dawson retired from Tuskegee in 1956, he spent an enormous amount of time traveling around the world conducting festival choruses and leading workshops. He preserved many letters he sent and received from festival organizers. In these letters, one can see a masterful planner with a firm grasp on every detail. In the text of a speech at the end of the present chapter, Dawson is revealed as a master teacher, with strong ideas about the skills needed by every choral conductor.

Dawson's rehearsal notes for the members of the MENC (Music Educators National Convention) All-Eastern Division Chorus, held in Washington DC in January 1961 survive in the archive. In Instructions For Learning And Memorizing The Music, he writes: "Chorus Members, Please have all of your music memorized before arriving in Washington, D.C. There will be no time to teach notes, rhythms, or pronunciations. All rehearsal time will be needed for fine points of performance such as interpretation, style and polish. Start learning now!"¹ The program includes *Die mit Tränen säen* by Hermann Schein (sung in German), "Grant Unto Me the Joy of Thy Salvation" by Johannes Brahms, "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates" by Volkmar Leisring, "This Little Light O'Mine" arranged by John W. Work, and Dawson's own "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel."

¹ "Instructions for Learning and Memorizing the Music by Mr. William L. Dawson, Conductor," Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

Three of the five pieces are by German composers (although only one was sung in the original language), and the remaining two pieces are arrangements of Negro spirituals.

When examining the document, Dawson's attention to particular details becomes apparent. As is typical of festival conductors, Dawson chose pieces he knew well and had taught many times before. By sending out notes to the participants ahead of time, he hoped to eliminate many problems before they occurred. He writes that choir members need to learn the German pronunciation on their own, but provides a guide, to give the choristers an opportunity to become familiar with the sounds of the language: "Die as in dee; Mit as in mitt;" etc., and writes "please give proper attention to each word. Sing the initial and final consonants."² Dawson only writes a few notes about the pieces by Brahms, Leisring and Work, but gives very specific instructions about his own:

Ezekiel Saw de Wheel.....William L. Dawson
All first tenors please learn the tenor solo part on page (5), measures 4, 5, 8 and 9. All second tenors learn the regular tenor part on page five (5). Please observe that in measure eight (8) page five (5) the tenor part is indicated by a line leading to the tenor part over the bass and baritone notes. Pages 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15: all first altos learn all first alto parts; all second altos learn all second alto parts; all first tenors learn all first tenor parts; all second tenors learn all second tenor parts; all first basses learn all first bass parts; all second basses learn all second bass parts.³

In having the altos, tenors, and basses learn both parts of the subdivided choral lines, Dawson wanted the flexibility to assign any number of singers to each part, for the sake of choral balance. The choir members would be responsible for memorizing two different choral parts for seven pages, but Dawson wanted that control over the interpretation of his music. The instructions are very similar to Dawson's performance

² Dawson, "Instructions for Learning and Memorizing the Music."

³ Ibid.

notes, discussed in Chapter Three. They are included here, however, to demonstrate the fastidiousness with which Dawson operated when conducting his own arrangements.

In addition to maintaining quality control over the musical aspects, Dawson sought to have the same influence over the operational side of the performance. The summer before the event he sent the following letter:

June 27, 1960

Mr. Wayne Camp
Bay Shore High School
155 Third Avenue
Bay Shore, Long Island, New York

Dear Mr. Camp:

Thank you for your letter of June 20 concerning the All-Eastern Division Conference High School Chorus.

Please send me the following information. I feel that I need it in order to get some idea or “feel” of what has been going on in your All-Eastern programs. It will, I am sure, help me in deciding on the selections I shall use:

1. The size of the chorus (number of basses, tenors, altos and sopranos, etc.)
2. Send a copy of each of your recent division festivals programs. These should give me an idea of what has been going on.
3. Please send programs of your last three or four All-Eastern Division High School chorus concerts.
4. Do you wish the selections for the Chorus to be chosen on the basis of their appeal to a TV audience or as we have done when the TV angle was absent?
5. Do you plan to televise the whole concert or only a portion of each unit?

I shall appreciate receiving this information and materials and any additional information that you and your committee feel might be of help to me.

Sincerely yours,
William L. Dawson⁴

⁴ “William Dawson letter to Wayne Camp.” Dawson Collection at MARBL. Emory University.

Not willing to take a chance with the smallest of details, he asks for every bit of information that may assist him in choosing music. Dawson's questions regarding the prospect of televising the concert are of particular note. He had had considerable experience with various kinds of broadcasts. The Tuskegee Choir under Dawson was a regular performer on local and national radio broadcasts in the 1930s and 1940s. On April 6, 1952, the choir made its first television appearance, on Ed Sullivan's program "Toast of the Town."⁵

Since Dawson was so willing to accommodate the possible broadcast of the performance, another question should be raised. Would Dawson have allowed his choice of repertoire to be altered by the inclusion of television cameras, knowing there was a wider audience that would have been watching?

From these two letters, Dawson emerges as a musician who was deeply committed to his art. He was a conductor who asked for precision from his choirs. An apparent perfectionist, he did not conduct a festival without endeavoring to pin down every detail. And as an arranger he was committed to exactness – on the page and off. Dawson was no different from many nationally sought-after conductors and clinicians in that he expected the highest level of performance from his ensembles. It is noteworthy, however, that Dawson was not only a nationally known choral conductor, he was an expert on Negro spirituals, and for the MENC concert programmed two of them. He took up the mantle of a transmitter of the music of his forebears and its correct performance practice. Through his meticulous notes and even more scrupulous rehearsals, he would

⁵ Malone, 111.

have been able to educate his choirs in the proper singing techniques of this genre of music.

In addition to working with festival choirs, Dawson spent a great deal of time and energy speaking to conventions and gatherings of conductors and singers about his music and Negro spirituals. One speech, however, stands out because of its broader focus. The text is handwritten, and a transcript is found in Appendix A. The manuscript has no heading, internal reference, nor any other clue that hints at the origin of or audience for this speech, yet it could serve as a manifesto for this great teacher and conductor.

The speech deals with “some of the principles of training and conducting a chorus.”⁶ In this instance, Dawson was called upon, not to discuss the music he was so well known for arranging and conducting, but to impart his wisdom and knowledge as a well-respected choral music educator. The principles he discusses apply not only to the conductors of Negro spirituals, but to choral conductors universally. In the pages of this speech, we see a seasoned veteran imparting a lifetime of knowledge and experience to choral conductors, most likely in a lecture or convention setting. The speech reveals Dawson as a brilliant musician, teacher, and leader. He spells out in specific detail the background necessary for a successful choral conductor, the roles of a conductor in rehearsal, and procedures for developing and nurturing a healthy, vibrant choral sound.

Dawson lists skills or “equipment” that the choral conductor should possess: an absolute confidence in one’s own ability, a profound knowledge of the subject matter, and a sensitive ear. Out of the three, having a good ear is most important to Dawson; “whatever satisfies his ear he accepts as good. This is why one chorus has a more

⁶ William Dawson, *Speech*, unknown date. William Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University, 1.

beautiful tone than another.”⁷ Falling under the heading of “profound knowledge of the subject,” there are eight sub-categories: “a keen sense of rhythm,” “high musical ideals,” “a good sense of tempos,” the ability “to make a choir to do just what he wishes,” “enthusiasm,” “knowledge of the voice,” and knowledge of “harmony, counterpoint, and form.” Dawson stresses that in addition to being well-schooled in music theory, conductors must have an excellent sense of tempo, be able to play a keyboard instrument, have knowledge of vocal pedagogy, be a skillful motivator, and be able to set a high bar for his or her ensemble. Is it possible for a conductor to be “deficient,” as Dawson says, in one of more of these skills and still be successful? Yes, but the conductor must make every effort to increase his or her proficiency in these areas.

Dawson goes on to discuss the objectives every conductor should have for his or her ensemble. All objectives should stem from establishing a good tone. A good tone is of such paramount importance to Dawson that he quotes scripture to make his point:

It comes to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking Jehovah; and where they lifted up their voice with trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praise of Jehovah, singing, for he is good; for his loving kindness endures forever, that there the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of Jehovah, so that the priest could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud for the glory of Jehovah filled the house of God⁸

Dawson’s faith was vital to him, and it is not surprising that in a discussion on leadership and conducting he begins with a quote from the Bible.

⁷ Dawson speech, 1.

⁸ Ibid., 1. Quote is from 2 Chronicles, 5:10.

For Dawson, a good blend is having all voices of an ensemble sublimate individual sound “into one round, rich, full, and smooth quality of tone.”⁹ How is an exceptional blend achieved? What must a conductor, with his or her “high musical ideals”¹⁰ do to communicate the idea of exceptional blend to a choir? To Dawson, good blend starts with “correct breathing and correct breath control.”¹¹ There can be no good choral tone without good breath control. Here, he makes a connection to physiology, discussing the role of the abdominal muscles, the diaphragm, and the lungs in breath management. But where should a singer focus his or her sound? Dawson believes that the tone should be focused “toward the hard palate, just back of the upper front teeth.”¹² He demonstrates his knowledge of vocal pedagogy when he writes that all vowel sounds are focused to this point, “to preserve the vibrations of the fundamental tone generated through the vocal cords.”¹³ Dawson does not just give an abstract description of how a good tone should sound; he goes into detail, using specific terminology. He not only communicates a sound knowledge of the art of singing, but gives his audience tools to use with their singers as well.

Dawson also discusses precision attacks and releases. An attack is “the way a note is started,” and release is “the way we let go of it.”¹⁴ The unification of attacks and

⁹Dawson speech, 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

releases is important, and he gives several clues about how a note should be approached. Many of these instructions would be familiar to choral conductors but are worth noting: “Think the tone before singing it!,” “hit it on the nose, don’t slide up to it,” “quite noticeable on upper notes,” [employ the] “click of the glottis,” and “use staccato more.”¹⁵

After mentioning a “click of the glottis”¹⁶ Dawson elaborates: “attack correctly, by releasing the breath in starting the tone at exactly the same instant the breath strikes the vocal cords at the exact instant they are in position to form a tone.”¹⁷ This instruction comes from a conductor who has a firm grasp of vocal pedagogy. To be sure, Dawson could have given a great deal more about the physiology of the vocal mechanism; however, having this basic information is still valuable to the choral conductor.

Beginning with his next section, Dawson changes writing styles. Instead of writing out every sentence, he changes to an annotation format. Reading between the lines in what Dawson has highlighted for his listeners, a full picture of what he believed is important in a rehearsal begins to emerge. “Ear training and note singing”¹⁸ tells the reader that he was a proponent of ear training exercises to assist with musical growth and music reading skills. “Unaccompanied singing,”¹⁹ was the way in which the Tuskegee Choir most often performed. Almost all of his choral arrangements were set for a

¹⁵ Dawson speech, 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

cappella choir, and no doubt Dawson thought that was important in their musical training as well. “Striving for quality rather than quantity,” is an axiom that conductors hear and repeat often. It is always better to sing a small number of pieces well than to sing a large number of pieces poorly. In examining the programs of Dawson’s concerts, both with his choir and with festival choirs, it is clear that he followed this principle when choosing repertoire. Again he reminds his audience about the proper placement of tone, and he concludes the section by stating his most imperative advice, “Most of all think! and Listen!”²⁰ This is fitting guidance for not only the chorister, but for the conductor as well, for “whatever satisfies the ear he accepts as good.”²¹

Section six is “Expression and beauty of tone,”²² and Dawson has suggestions to help the conductor understand the meaning of the text in a piece of music. A study of the text is important, to get to the underlying message of the song and perhaps, (although Dawson does not explicitly say so) the poet’s and composer’s intent as well. Beyond the words on the page are the rhetorical aspects of the music itself. If music is likened to oratory, in what ways is the composer shaping his or her piece to convey the text, convey an idea or tell a story? How is the melodic curve of each part used to further express the composer’s musical ideas? And then, as choral conductors are in the business of creating art, he implores his audience to “cultivate your imagination and use it.”²³ Do not be bound solely to the notes and rhythms on the page.

²⁰ Dawson speech, 3.

²¹ Ibid., 1.

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Ibid., 3.

Dawson's diction notes are fundamental and an expansion of these ideas would be instructive: correct mouth position when singing vowels, the articulation of consonants, and the proper pronunciation of words, with the note "don't move them out of shape."²⁴ He discusses pharyngeal resonance, as it relates to vowels and then connects that concept with tone.

Dawson touched on the rhetorical accent of words as well. As discussed in Chapter Three, as a conductor he was very particular about style markings in his arrangements, even going so far as to correct markings in earlier editions.

He continues by giving specific rules about when and where a choir may breathe, citing grammatical and rhetorical rules. Then he talks about different types of choral compositions, and then apparently offers a brief explanation of using the solfege system of learning music by noting: "Solfeggio {Explain _____, 'Do' etc.}"²⁵

Dawson ends his comments with conducting advice. He tells conductors not to conduct syllables, but to "beat time in units....4/2, 4/4, 4/8 and Compound time 6/4, 6//8, 9/8, 12/8, 5/4."²⁶ He uses the poly-metric section of his arrangement of "Balm in Gilead" to explain conducting "alternating time signatures."²⁷

²⁴ Dawson speech, 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

His last notes under “final suggestions”²⁸ contain nuggets of real wisdom and point to Dawson’s true genius as a teacher and leader. He tells his audience to “show no favoritism to singers in your chorus” and to “observe strict impartiality.”²⁹ When working with singers of any age, talent-level or background, these axioms must hold true. And then he points to the care of choral singers when he writes, “each singer is a pipe in an organ. Keep it in tune and playing condition.”³⁰ The vocal health of each singer must be taken into consideration. But beyond taking care of the voice, the director must help nourish the soul of each singer. Dawson says it perfectly: “Remember that we are working with young voices. We must make them express their best qualities. Think of your choir as a world and its members as inhabitants looking to you as a leader to teach them the power and beauty of their voices.”³¹ In these final statements, however, there is an inherent contradiction. When Dawson writes “each singer is a pipe in an organ,”³² the image conveyed is one of mindless pipes being played on a single keyboard by one player – the conductor. This autocratic view of choral ensembles is one that hopefully has evolved over time. Dawson mitigates that statement with his closing thoughts when he states that the choral director must also “nourish the soul of singer.”³³ He ends the

²⁸ Dawson speech, 4.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid., 4.

speech by reading the poem “The Finding of the Lyre” by James Russell Lowell.³⁴

Lowell likens conductors and teachers to Mercury, who finding a discarded shell, adds strings and makes something beautiful and musical from it.

Dawson makes several fundamental points in this speech. The most important quality of any good choir is a good tone, says Dawson, and for him all other traits seem to relate in some way to this fundamental idea. The second is that conductors must be masters of their craft. They must have a firm grasp of knowledge of their field and related fields and when there are deficiencies in knowledge or a desire to know more, teachers must become students. A good ear is the conductor’s most valuable asset; it is the reason that one choir sounds superior to another. Finally, conductors are first and foremost leaders of people: they utilize the art of conducting and the medium of choral singing, but at an elemental level, they are helping people to discover the beauty and power of music and their voices. “The shell disdained a soul had gained, the lyre had been discovered.”³⁵

Dawson was a dynamic conductor and an intense man. A video clip of his work with the Georgia State University Chorus demonstrates these traits.³⁶ An animated personality, however, is not enough. Dawson emphasized that all choral conductors should have a set of fundamental skills. Today, these skills can be developed and nurtured by accredited music programs at many colleges, conservatories, and universities. When writing his speech, Dawson would have kept in mind all of those audience members who would not have received the formal education and training that he did.

³⁴ Dawson speech, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ <http://larson.library.emory.edu/dawson/web/presentation/index/presentationId/8> (accessed March 3, 2013).

Dawson's goal was to educate these conductors, so that they might, in turn, properly educate their students.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAWSON AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

The Tuskegee Institute Choir, which gave a concert in Carnegie Hall last night, under the direction of William L. Dawson, showed its good technical drilling in the precision of its attacks, its tonal unity, its excellent balance and the beauty of one of its solo voices. Its fine body of tone is blessed with the unique quality that the Negro timbre contributes to choruses, and if it used these virtues differently, its performance might be well a thrilling one.

—H.H. *New York Times* review, November 9, 1933

Being a nationally respected composer and conductor did not free Dawson from his era's issues with what was then termed "race."¹ Throughout his career, Dawson was faced with injustice not only because of the color of his skin, but as a result of the era's misguided use of race as an organizing principle in society. Dangers based on skin color went far beyond inequality of opportunity, to persistent threat of mortal danger. In 1919, Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, initiated a study of national lynchings.²

Concurrently with outwardly benign mentions of "race" in critical reviews of Dawson's performances, Black Americans suffered the atrocities of mob violence ending in death by hanging. Washington's study documents lynchings of African Americans in most states until the 1930s, when pressure from resistance groups such as Jessie Daniel Ames's Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and Communist

¹ For a deeper understanding of the evolution of the term "race" see Jonathan Marks, "Race: Past, Present, Future," in *Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age*, ed. Barbara Koenig, Sandra Soo-Jin Lee, and Sarah S. Richardson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 21-38.

² "Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882–1968". University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law. Retrieved 2010-07-26. "Statistics provided by the Archives at Tuskegee Institute."

Party USA succeeded reducing such incidents.³ Through a speech found in the Dawson archive, Dawson shows himself to be a true statesman, undeterred by the prejudices and implied dangers he must have faced during his lifetime. Dawson did not discuss these challenges, but they stand as a backdrop to many of his activities. Any difficulties he and his choir experienced are referred to obliquely at best both by Dawson and his correspondents. One such example occurs in a letter to Dawson from R. Nathaniel Dett.

Dett, a contemporary of Dawson's, was a prominent arranger of spirituals as well as a collegiate choral director, most notably at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. A pioneer in the field, Dett wrote Dawson after a performance in New York City.

June 28, 1933

Mr. William Dawson
Tuskegee Institute
Tuskegee Institute, Ala.

My dear Friend:

You do not know how many times I have started letters to you which have never been finished but I hope nothing will prevent this one reaching completion. I want to congratulate you first of all, on the success you had in New York and especially for having used my number, "I Will Never Turn Back No More," which was especially mentioned by a number of reviewers. I know that New York was a very rich experience for you on both its pleasant and perhaps unpleasant sides.

I was glad to learn also of your symphony which seems to be, from all reports, a monumental work. We have been fortunate here in Rochester in hearing a number of symphonic works by William Grant Still, What are you working on now?

Please give my kindest regards to the Motons and the other members of the music staff, especially Mr. Rosamond who was so kind to me while in Chicago. At your leisure, you might drop me a line.

3

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2013/01/08/lynching_map_tuskegee_institute_s_data_on_lynching_from_1900_1931.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2013/01/08/lynching_map_tuskegee_institute_statistics_data_on_lynching_from_1900_1931.html) (accessed April 6, 2013). Statistics provided by the Tuskegee Institute.

Very sincerely yours,

R. Nathaniel Dett⁴

At this point, Dawson had been at Tuskegee for only two years. Dett addresses Dawson as “My dear Friend” and confesses to previously starting many letters to him. Dawson and Dett did indeed know each other: “Dawson greatly admired Dett and was able to meet and talk with him. Dett was most encouraging; he urged Dawson to continue studying composition.”⁵

Dett notes that Dawson used one of his pieces for a performance in New York City. Bearing the date of the letter in mind (June 28, 1933), Dett is most likely referring to the Tuskegee Choir’s performance of February 8, 1933 at Carnegie Hall. The concert was a part of their extended stay in New York, following the opening of Radio City Music Hall. Dawson kept the program from the February 8th concert, and the Tuskegee Choir performed two pieces by Dett, “I’ll Never Turn Back No More,” and “Listen to the Lambs.”⁶

Only in the two words “unpleasant sides” does Dett make any reference to anything negative. The Tuskegee Choir’s national debut had occurred in December of 1932. At the invitation of Samuel Lionel Rothafel, known as “Roxy,” the group was

⁴ R. Nathaniel Dett to William Dawson, June 28, 1933, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

⁵ Malone, 94.

⁶ Carnegie Hall program, “Tuskegee Institute Choir and Male Chorus,” February 8, 1933, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

contracted to perform at the opening of Radio City Music Hall in New York City.⁷ Mark Malone writes, “Roxy spent several months scouting the nation for top acts for the spectacular opening of Radio City. When he heard the Tuskegee Choir sing, he wanted them to perform at the opening.”⁸ Reviewers were enthusiastic about the choir’s performance. The choir stayed in the city for an extended period, performing at Radio City Music Hall as well as other venues. It seems, however, that the Carnegie Hall concert did not go as well. In fact, the *New York Times* review of the concert may have been what Dett was referring to when he wrote, “I know that New York was a very rich experience for you on both its pleasant and perhaps unpleasant sides.”⁹ Here is the entire review:

The Tuskegee Institute Choir, which gave a concert in Carnegie Hall last night, under the direction of William L. Dawson, showed its good technical drilling in the precision of its attacks, its tonal unity, its excellent balance and the beauty of one of its solo voices. Its fine body of tone is blessed with the unique quality that the Negro timbre contributes to choruses, and if it used these virtues differently, its performance might be well a thrilling one.

But alas! Like some other Negro choruses, this one has not escaped the seduction of classicism. The spirituals, which constituted three-fourths of the program, were delivered with the solemn and precise formality that oratorio societies sometimes mistakenly bestow on Handel or Bach. As anyone knows who has ever attended a Negro religious revival, or, for that matter listened to Hall Johnson’s choir in its early days, the spiritual is an aching or a lyric cry; a music rising irresistible out of pain and longing; intensely alive in its emotion, spontaneous and vivid in its projection; a contribution to the folk-literature of the world of which Americans, both colored and white, may justly be exceedingly proud.

Nothing of this appeared in last night’s concert, save for a moment in “Good News.” The fault was partly Mr. Dawson’s arrangements and those he

⁷ Radio City Music Hall program, December 27 1932, reproduction, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

⁸ Malone, 83.

⁹ Dett to letter Dawson, June 28, 1933.

chose, and partly his interpretation. Dett's harmonization of "I'll Never Turn Back"; Mr. Dawson's "Nobody Knows," and other pieces have garbed a simple poignant melody in pretentious harmonic garments abounding chromatic modulations suitable to Meyerbeer, harmonic colors falsely rich à la Cyril Scott. And these, unfortunately, Mr. Dawson caused the choir to project stiffly, with now and then a tempo rubato and now and then a hold.

The result of this treatment, unhappily, was to render the spirituals sterile and to substitute for their gorgeous vitality pallid concert pieces, stripped of their racial authenticity and not sufficiently interesting to stand up without it.

It would be pleasant to relate that the non-spiritual numbers of Mr. Dawson's program redeemed it, as they should have done, since he has eschewed the spiritual's simple spontaneity for the formal concert manner. But instead of Brahms or Bach there were Metcalfe and Christiansen – which leads one to believe that Mr. Dawson has not yet distinguished between Carnegie Hall and Radio City. The audience was fair-sized and cordial.¹⁰

What did the critic mean in using the term "racial authenticity"? That question is impossible to answer, but it is worth noting the range of plausible interpretations: timbre, biological difference, demeanor, dress, pronunciation, or a mixture of these concepts and more. Dawson may have had an intuitive understanding of the term; if so, he did not comment on it in the documents examined in this paper.

Dawson's challenge was considerable. By having his choir sing pieces from the standard, classical repertory, he is attempting to legitimize the group by programming more than just their usual Negro spiritual set. The reviewer suggests that the other music selected by Dawson, however, was not up to standard. J.W. Metcalfe and F. Melius Christiansen were no Johannes Brahms or J.S. Bach, implying that the music Dawson chose was not serious enough for a Carnegie Hall performance. Further, the spirituals disappointed the reviewer as well. Dawson found himself in a position where nothing was good enough for this critic. After performing to great acclaim in Radio City Music Hall, this response must have been painful.

¹⁰ H.H., Music Review, *New York Times*, February 9, 1933.

Another striking element in the review is in the first paragraph: “Its fine body of tone is blessed with the unique quality that the Negro timbre contributes to choruses.”¹¹ The review points out the distinctiveness of the choir’s sound, but states that like other African American choirs, this one “has not escaped the seduction of classicism.”¹² Again, does the critic suggest that the choir has over-reached its given “place” in society, or does he complain that Dawson attempted to legitimize concert pieces based on traditional black music by transferring performance practices from the Western European tradition?

Dett may have been referring to the review when he wrote, “I know that New York was a very rich experience for you on both its pleasant and perhaps unpleasant sides.”¹³ On the other hand, he may also have been thinking of the broader challenges for a black choir performing in New York in the 1930s that the review reveals.

By the 1940s Dawson’s reputation as a nationally prominent musician was established, but that did not preclude him from having to deal with the racist side of show business. He received the following letter from a Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS) radio executive in 1946:

March 11, 1946

Dr. William Dawson L. Dawson
Tuskegee Institute
Alabama

Dr. Dawson:

Now that the February concerts offered by the Tuskegee Institute Choir over the Columbia network have been successfully concluded, I want to take the occasion to thank you and the members of the choir for the time and attention you

¹¹ Music Review, *New York Times*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dett letter to Dawson.

gave to the programs. We can all feel assured, I think, that this time and attention was justified by the pleasure our listeners received from the broadcasts.

Mr. Thad Holt, General Manager at Station WAPI in Birmingham, and Mr. Jimmie Wilson, Program Manager, have indicated that you would be interested in having from the Columbia Broadcasting System for your future guidance some critical opinion of your programs. Miss Inman had a recording made for you each week, and doubtless your own analysis of these transcriptions will be your surest guide in this regard. However, I am passing on to you one or two comments which represent a consensus here.

First, in the matter of soloists: For the most part, the soloists presented, although their voices were potentially fine, had not reached that degree of maturity that in justice to themselves and to the musical reputation of Tuskegee, they should have had for appearance on a network program. The participants in any radio program are subject to comparison with the most talented and most experienced performers heard on other programs. On a local broadcast, community pride offsets such immaturity, but the same sympathetic hearing does not extend to the farthest reaches of a network.

There was also a feeling here that the choir showed to better advantage in the singing of the spirituals, particularly those of more traditional arrangement, than in the classical numbers and the more formally arranged spirituals. The Negro voice seems to have unique qualities which, in the singing of the spirituals, presents both singer and song more effectively than other voices can. Therefore, it seem advisable to emphasize the spirituals and traditional songs on such programs as these, instead of giving too large a place to other types of music.

No doubt you understand, as I do, how unsatisfactory it is to offer critical comments by letter. However, we at CBS hope you will find these remarks helpful.

Sincerely,

Davidson Taylor¹⁴

In the letter Taylor makes the judgment that the quality of the soloists was not up to the standards of the network or to the reputation of Tuskegee. By this time Dawson was in his fourteenth year of conducting the choir, and its national reputation was firmly established. Even if Taylor's subjective comments about the vocal quality of the soloists was accurate, his comments in the fifth paragraph warrant attention: "The Negro voice

¹⁴ Davidson Taylor to William Dawson, March 11, 1946, Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University.

seems to have unique qualities which, in the singing of the spirituals, presents both singer and song more effectively than other voices can.”¹⁵ Under the least offensive of interpretations, “unique qualities” refers to the timbral signature familiar in African-American performance practice of spirituals. This comment relies as heavily on interpretation as did the *New York Times* review of thirteen years earlier.

Mark Malone, in his study of William Dawson, has a partial list of Dawson’s honors.¹⁶ Twenty-nine years after the CBS letter, Dawson was asked to be a guest of honor at an American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) convention. The list, compiled by Dawson, states that on March 6 – 8, 1975, Dawson was “honored by the American Choral Director’s Association at its Third National Convention at St. Louis, Missouri: ‘For Pioneering Leadership, Inspiration, and Service to the Choral Arts.’”¹⁷

The American Choral Directors Association’s National Convention program was published in the February 1975 edition of the *Choral Journal*.¹⁸ The “Convention Highlights” page states:

Howard Swan will be the catalyst moderating two panel discussions in which distinguished choral conductors share their perspective on the evolution of our art. Directing their attention to “Our American Choral Tradition: Where We Have Been” will be Elaine Brown, Olaf C. Christiansen, William L. Dawson and Roger Wagner... Noble Cain, Olaf Christiansen, Richard P. Condie, and William L. Dawson have graciously consented to conduct the Convention assembly in the reading of some of their favorite choral works.¹⁹

¹⁵ Taylor letter to Dawson.

¹⁶ Malone, 166-169.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁸ *The Choral Journal*, 15, no. 6 (February 1975).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

The panel discussion, scheduled for 4:00 – 5:30 PM on Thursday, March 6, was an examination of the history of choral music in America with some of the leading choral figures of the day. Dawson’s prepared text focuses specifically on the genre of the Negro spiritual and its evolution as an art form.²⁰

The speech is an overview of the development of the music of the “American Negro” from the post-Civil War years (see Appendix B). It is notable in part because, even though he gives a thorough if succinct history of African American choirs, Dawson makes no reference to the dangers and contempt (both overt and subtle) these choirs faced.

Dawson’s choice must be considered within the context of the occasion for his speech. Dawson was being honored by ACDA, alongside other luminaries, for a lifetime of work in choral music. At such an auspicious occasion, his speech was framed to highlight the successes of early African American choirs, giving particular attention to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the Hampton Institute Choir, and the Tuskegee Institute Choir. The picture that he paints is one of resilience and triumph. The accomplishments of these groups, however, were made in the face of extraordinary adversity. Long before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, these nationally recognized choirs were receiving critical affirmation, but only so far as their status as “race choirs” would allow. Even when a group received a positive concert review, it could be couched in racist and demeaning language. The struggle for legitimacy as a choir, not just as a choir of color, was a struggle for all of the ensembles Dawson lists in his speech.

²⁰ William Dawson speech to ACDA. Dawson Collection at MARBL, Emory University. Both the handwritten rough draft and the typescript are preserved.

Dawson begins his survey with the founding in 1871 and subsequent tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers under the direction of George L. White. He briefly mentions other early choirs: the Williams Jubilee Singers, the Eva Jessye Choir, the Hall Johnson Choir, and the Leonard de Paur Chorus. He discusses the Hampton Institute Choir and their conductor R. Nathaniel Dett, and then talks at greater length about the Tuskegee Institute Choir, under his direction.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first choir to sing choral arrangements of Negro spirituals. “They established the black spiritual in the history of American music; the group was the first to introduce and popularize these songs among white audiences, and became a model for later black singing groups.”²¹ Dawson mentions a number of positive reviews, but the group did not always meet with such positive reaction. J.B.T. Marsh, in *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*, recounts how the group was received at a performance in Nashville in 1870:

The National Teachers’ Association of the United States was holding its annual convention in Nashville, and arrangements were made for the Fisk choir to sing in the opening exercises, to the great disgust of some who were profanely indignant that “the niggers could not be kept in their own places.” Other musicians were to favor the convention with their services at the subsequent meetings; but the singing of the “niggers” proved to be so popular that they were in demand for every session until the close of the convention.²²

The Fisk Singers faced unbelievable hostility at that event and elsewhere, but nonetheless proved popular with most audiences.

²¹ Geneva H. Southall, “Jubilee Singers (Fisk),” *New Grove Online*. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu>. (accessed February 8, 2013).

²² J.B.T. Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* (1892; repr. Mieola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 13-14.

Although Dawson quotes from several positive reviews in his speech, the Tuskegee Choir was not always met with such acclaim, as the *New York Times* review above attests. Even in the most positive notices, they were often viewed as, first and foremost, a “Negro” choir. A November 10, 1937, article in the historically black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* states that the Tuskegee Choir, already presenting weekly live broadcasts on NBC, would now have their shows broadcast internationally on shortwave radio. “For the first time in radio history, a radio program using solely Race material will be broadcast on a regular shortwave international schedule... London, Paris, Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and other world capitals will now be able to enjoy the thrilling concert renditions of race spirituals, sung by boys and girls who learned them on their mother’s knee.”²³ “Race” in this context refers to the ethnicity of the choir and their music.²⁴ One interpretation of the stereotype is that the music and performances are not practiced nor studied, but simply a part of black heritage.

Even with the national accolades that the choir received, many reviews had racist overtones. One review in the April 28, 1938, edition of the *Atlanta Constitution* is meant to be affirmative, but there is an underlying hint of the otherness of Dawson’s group:

The Tuskegee Choir, of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama in their program of negro folk music at the city auditorium last night, did some of the best spiritual singing I have ever heard. This group of 100 negro boys and girls responded to every direction of their capable conductor, William L. Dawson, with true musicianship

²³ “Entire World to Hear Famed Tuskegee Choir Sun., Nov. 21,” *The Chicago Defender* (National Edition), Nov. 20, 1937, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu>. (accessed February 22, 2013).

²⁴ Paul Oliver’s entry on “Race record” in *Grove Music Online* says that race records is “a term applied between 1921 and 1942 to phonograph recordings made in the USA especially for black listeners.” As such, it may be seen as a marketing descriptor as well as in the context above. (accessed March 28, 2013).

and an inherent feeling for the songs they sang...the choir's program was for the most part made up of traditional negro spirituals and works by negro composers. The singing of the spirituals excelled. There is a certain tone quality, a certain strain that only negro singers can embody in the singing of spirituals. And the Tuskegee Choir possesses that requisite with finely developed ensemble, which makes for perfect enjoyment.²⁵

In his speech, Dawson does not cite this review, which reflects the novelty that still surrounded African American choirs in American public life. While Dawson and the Tuskegee Choir were presenting serious concerts of sacred music, many of the portrayals of African Americans on the stage were negative and stereotypical. The reviewer mentions the choir's "true musicianship" but that "there is a certain tone quality, that only negro singers can embody in the singing of the spirituals."²⁶ Here is found a common thread between the two Tuskegee reviews, since both reviewers attribute the choir's exceptional performance of spirituals to their race.

Although Dawson was aware of this history and had personally experienced many of the events as they unfolded, he did not discuss these incidents when given the opportunity. Instead, he chose to focus on the many positive aspects of the historical record. In the context of a national choral convention, which was celebrating the development of choral music and the accomplishments of notable conductors, his tone was one of pride, conveying a sense of accomplishment and joy. He ends his speech celebrating the contributions of African Americans to choral music when says: "Almost 40 years ago, a style of singing a cappella came into vogue in this country. A cappella

²⁵ Mozelle Horton Young, "Critic Finds Orchestral Fullness In Concert Of Tuskegee Choir," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 28, 1938, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu> (accessed February 9, 2013).

²⁶ Dawson speech to ACDA.

singing is a tradition with the Negro. He sang in the cotton fields, in the church, in his Wednesday night prayer meeting. He created his folksongs, and sang them without instrumental accompaniment.²⁷ Dawson credits the African American people, in the face of adversity, with creating a genre of music, which speaks to both their resourcefulness and resilience.

²⁷ Dawson speech to ACDA.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Love, togetherness, no hate.

—William Dawson

William Dawson spent a lifetime arranging and teaching the music of his ancestors. From poor beginnings in Anniston, Alabama, and through determination, hard work, and talent he rose to become a nationally recognized arranger, composer, and conductor. He intentionally reached out to other musicians, fostering and maintaining such relationships throughout his career. He traveled extensively, leading festival choruses, workshops, and giving speeches about his music, Negro spirituals, and choral music.

From Dawson's letters, manuscripts, notes, and speeches a story emerges of a young man who reached out to one of the foremost African American musicians of the early twentieth century, Harry T. Burleigh. Garnering early recognition for his musical and compositional skills, he assumed direction of the Tuskegee Choir and was quickly launched into national prominence. Because of the times in which he lived, he faced not only public acclaim but also racist-tinged reviews. In the last portion of his life, he assumed the responsibility of passing on his music to succeeding generations of musicians.

On a single three-by-five index card, Dawson wrote several adages about folk music:

To connect the past with the present and predict the future, we must go to our folk music. From our folk music we derive our virtues, and moral excellence, our good qualities.

A race without a knowledge of its past is like a tree without roots – it dies.

Love, togetherness, no hate.¹

From these statements, it is clear that Dawson felt an indelibly strong bond with the folk music of his people. He saw himself as a purveyor of Negro spirituals. If a group forgets its past that is inextricably linked to its music, it loses itself, he argued. And in singing, writing, performing, and sharing this music, a people can come together, “Love, togetherness, no hate.”²

William Robert McMillan noted that Dawson’s papers had long been inaccessible to scholars and urged further study once they became available.³ This paper is a next step in that further study. The documents examined here, however, are only a fraction of the thousands of artifacts housed at the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University. I have attempted to use the documents in the archive to construct a narrative of Dawson’s life and to place his work into historical context. But this is only the beginning; more extensive work needs to be done. Using this work as a skeleton, aspects of Dawson’s career and his thinking about music can be examined in much greater depth.

This work could lead to further studies about the evolution of the concerted, choral Negro spiritual in the first half of the twentieth-century; the Tuskegee Choir as a traveling chorus; Dawson’s interaction with other composers and choral conductors in the early- to mid-twentieth century; and the evolution of the art form in Dawson’s hands. Many possibilities await, and with such a rich resource now available to scholars, it is my

¹ Index cards, Dawson collection at MARBL, Emory University.

² Ibid.

³ McMillan, iv.

hope that this work prompts others to further consider the contributions of one of the great choral arrangers of the twentieth-century.

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APPENDIX A

WILLIAM DAWSON SPPECH, DATE UNKNOWN

For the next few minutes we shall discuss some principles of training and conducting of a chorus. At the onset I wish to impress upon those of you who work with bands and orchestras that that these same principles are necessary in your work.

The objective of every conductor is to secure the blending of the voice, placement of the voice, precision of attack, release, importance of pitch expression and beauty of tone. Such an objective is not new, for in second Chronicles fifth chapter ten verse we read the following: it comes to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking Jehovah; and where they lifted up their voice with trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praise of Jehovah, singing, for he is good; for his loving kindness endures forever; that there the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of Jehovah, so that the priest could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud for the glory of Jehovah filled, the house of God.

Notice carefully the phrases, “where the trumpeters and singers were one,” “to make one sound.” When they lifted up their voice (not voices) but their voice!

Now that we know the objective, what should be the equipment of the person who was to lead others in such an objective? To begin with he should have absolute confidence in his Gen. ability and profound knowledge of the particular subject being handled; a sensitive ear; he should learn to listen. When working with an ensemble the leader undertakes to make it produce his concept of a beautiful tone. Whatever satisfies his ear he accepts as good. This is why one chorus has a more beautiful tone than another. You can understand why it is so necessary that the conductor have a refined ear.

He should have a keen sense of rhythm; high musical ideals; a good sense of tempos; able to make a choir just do what he wishes; should be filled with enthusiasm;

should have a knowledge of piano or organ, so that he may become thoroughly acquainted with the accompaniment score of his coursework; he should have a knowledge of voice and a requirement of the art of singing; the following requirements are most necessary and if any of you are not well prepared in these subjects you should begin now. This knowledge I find so terribly lacking among so many of our musicians. Harmony, Counterpoint and Form. We wouldn't dare attempt to read or interpret a poem in German without a knowledge of the grammar of the language, and yet we have a hesitancy in attempting the same sort of thing in the language of Music. With the knowledge of harmony, one understands the construction of chords and is able, if necessary, to detect typographical errors in the score. A knowledge of counterpoint helps one unravel and divest contrapuntal music of its mystery. From the study [of] Forms we learned how music is built up, how it grows from a figure, motive, phrase, period, and form a Part into one of the larger forms. I imagine someone among you are saying to himself, "If a person needs to know all that in order to become an efficient choir director, I'll never become one" To be a leader one must give the most service. We are classified as teachers. To be a teacher means to be an example. A conductor may let an ensemble do less than he knows it should do, but he'll never make it do more than he knows it should do.

And then again, this doesn't mean that, because a conductor is lacking in some of this equipment he cannot make a success of his chorus work. Many excellent singing groups have been developed by conductors deficient in one or more of these necessities. Be this as it may, everyone who works with the chorus should strive to know as much as possible about his task.

Now that we know what should be the equipment of the conductor and what he should aim for in his coursework, let us begin with the taking in of the members and developing them into a good singing organization.

1. Examining and classifying the voice.

- a. Make up two groups. Good and fair etc. 1st and 2nd choir.
- b. Sight singing
- c. Ear test (response quick or slow)
- d. Range of voice
- e. Durability of voice
- f. personality for solo work, leadership etc.
- g. Clarify voices by quality and not by range etc., explain.

The Blending of the Voices

One of the first elements of choral conducting is to make the voices blend into one round, rich, full, and smooth quality of tone. This can be done by getting over to each singer in the chorus the following points:

First: the principle of correct breathing and correct breath control; without breathing

correctly good vocal tone is impossible. The breath begins tone, sustains it, and ends it.

To express it concisely – breath is voice – the breath must be controlled by means of the

diaphragm. As breath is inhaled, the diaphragm sinks and protrudes; the ribs move

forward, outward and upward and the lungs fill up from below. The throat must be

absolutely free and relaxed. When the breath has been inhaled, the abdominal muscles

controlling the diaphragm must be firmly set, and slowly contracted as the breath

escapes. This grip, or hold, on the diaphragm is necessary to control the air current and to keep the body resonant. Every part of the body above this diaphragm should at all times remain free and relaxed.

Placement of Tone

The tone is to be directed toward the hard palate, just back of the upper front teeth. Every tone, high or low, all vowel sound should be focused towards this point, in order to preserve the vibrations of the fundamental tone generated through the vocal cords. The primary tone is unsatisfactory unless reinforced by the cavities of the chest, throat, nose head and mouth. This reinforcement is called “vocal resonance.” Explain Harmonics. In correct breath control, proper placement of tone, and in the correct use of vocal resonances, we have the means of producing around, rich, full and smooth quality of tone.

4. Precision of attack and release

The way a note is started is what we mean by attack. And the way we let go of it, is release. Think the tone before singing it! Hit it on the nose, don't slide up to note. Quite noticeable on upper notes. “Click of the glottis.” Use staccato more.

Attack correctly, by releasing the breath in starting the tone at exactly the same instant the breath strikes the vocal cords at exact instant they are in position to form a tone.

5. Use of pitch or intonation

Ear training and note singing

Unaccompanied singing.

Striving for quality rather than quantity

Thinking the tone before singing it.

Proper placement of tone

Most important of all think! and Listen!

6. Expression and beauty of tone

Study the words carefully.

Each song has a message etc.

study rhetorical aspect of the Harmony

and melodic curve of each part.

Cultivate your imagination and use it.

Phrasing –

Two bar rhythms = My Country Tis of thee

Listen to the Lambs (stop) all a crying (stop) etc

(Listen to the Lambs all a crying)

7. Diction

The enunciation of vowels -> (mouth position)

the articulation of consonants (moving positions)

the pronunciation of words properly - Don't move them

out of shape. Rhetorical accent of words etc.

Hallelujah. Beautiful. (is as in mute)

Holy (if as in lyric or “i” as in “pity”)

“Deep River” → explain the singing of the “p” even singing

8. When and Where to Breathe

Breath may be taken after a period, colon, semicolon, comma; Before a preposition.

When two prepositions follow each other as in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” “comin’ for

to carry me home. A adverb, a relative pronoun, and for emphasis, before an adjective which comes after the noun as in “City Beautiful”

9. Characteristics of vocal composition

Part Song

Madrigal {proper = contrapuntal
 {Ayre = music repeats itself (part song style)
 {Ballet = “fa la” refrain

Glee {solo phrases and prolonged passages in each voice
 “The Summer” by Garrett
 “When Winds Breathe Soft: by Samuel Webb etc.

Motett = same as madrigal {words sacred or secular

Chorus = Built on bigger lines.
 Includes all the attributes of the four types of mentions of above.

10. Solfeggio {Explain _____, “Do” etc.

11. Some Final suggestions to Conductors

a. Beating time

Beat time in units and not by syllables. Explain and give an example of exceptions.

Example of 4/2, 4/4, 4/8, etc. Also

Compound time 6/4, 6/8, 9/8, 12/8, 5/4

Explain how to beat alternating time signatures use “Balm in Gilead” as an example.

4/4 to 6/4 to 4/4 to 5/4 to 4/4 etc.

Show no favoritism to singers in your chorus.

Observe strict impartiality.

Each singer is a pipe in an organ

Keep it in tune and playing condition.

And finally: Remember we are working with young voices. We must make them express their best qualities. Think of your choir as a world and its members as inhabitants looking to you as a leader to teach them the power and beauty of their voices.

And the beauty of song. With this thought in mind I close with James Russell Lowell's beautiful and thought arousing poem –

The Finding of the Lyre

There lay upon the ocean's shore
What once a tortoise served to cover;
A year and more, with rush and roar,
The surf had rolled it over,
Had played with it, and flung it by,
As wind and weather might decide it,
Then tossed it high where sand-drifts dry
Cheap burial might provide it.

It rested there to bleach or tan,
The rains had soaked, the suns had burned it;
With many a ban the fisherman
Had stumbled o'er and spurned it;
And there the fisher-girl would stay,
Conjecturing with her brother
How in their play the poor ecstasy
Might serve some use or other.

So there it lay, through wet and dry
As empty as the last new sonnet,
Till by and by came Mercury,
And, having mused upon it,
'Why, here,' cried he, 'the thing of things
In shape, material, and dimension!
Give it but strings, and, lo, it sings,
A wonderful invention!'

So said, so done; the chords he strained,
And, as his fingers o'er them hovered,
The shell disdained a soul had gained,
The lyre had been discovered.
O empty world that round us lies,
Dead shell, of soul and thought forsaken,
Brought we but eyes like Mercury's,
In thee what songs should waken!

APPENDIX B

WILLIAM DAWSON SPEECH TO THE AMERICAN CHORAL DIRECTORS

ASSOCIATION, MARCH 7, 1975

Dr. Hayes, Dr. Swan, Ladies and Gentlemen of the panel, members of the ACDA Convention and friends:

I wish to thank Dr. Hayes for inviting me to be part of this panel because for a long time I have had great respect and admiration for its members and their outstanding work. I am pleased to be associated with them on this occasion.

When I first the subject for this panel: “Our great American Choral Tradition: Where Have We Been”, the question came to mind was...”From where do we start?” However, when Dr. Swan sent me a copy of the proposed format for presentation, I then learned the point of departure was from late 19th to the early 20th century.

I have been asked to relate what has been going to in choral music by the American Negro – where has it been and “where is it now? What are its contributions and influences through choral composition – choral performance, personalities, etc?

The Negro in choral music in America began in 1871 when the Fisk Jubilee Singers began a concert tour of the Mid-West and eastern United States and Europe. The purpose of the tour was to earn money for the University through concerts. It was they who introduced the Folk song, commonly called “spirituals” as an American contribution to the world of music. They were trained by George L. White.

In London, England where they spent several months, Queen Victoria greeted the singers individually and testified to the sincerity of her expression of pleasure in listening to their songs by honoring their public concert with her presence. She also gave each of the female singers a diamond ring. One of these diamonds was made into a stickpin and given to me by one of my former teachers, Mrs. Jennie Chethe Lee, who was the Choir Director at Tuskegee Institute for twenty-five years. Mrs. Lee was a graduate of Fisk

University and knew the members of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers. Of course, I pride this precious stone beyond description!

Their tours of Europe in 1871, 1874 and 1877 were great successes artistically, and Jubilee Hall at Fisk University bears witness to their financial success. The following is a review from the “Berliner Musik-Zeitung”, a severely critical journal.

Of “Steal Away,” it exclaims: what wealth of shading! What accuracy of declamation! Every musician felt then that the performances of these singers are the result of high artistic talent, finely trained taste, and extraordinary diligence. Such a pianissimo, such a crescendo, and a decrescendo as those at the close of “Steal Away” might raise envy in the soul of any Choir-master”.

On their triumphant tour of Great Britain and the continent in 1873, the history-making Jubilee Singers posed for a monumental 10 x 14 foot portrait by Edmund Ravell, Jr., artist in the Court of Queen Victoria.

The next pioneers were the Williams Jubilee Singers, a professional group. During 12 years of unprecedented success, this group toured the United States and sang in all the capitals of Europe. They gave 130 performances in London, England!

Other professional choirs that made an impact on choral in this country were: the Eva Jessye Chorale. Miss Jessye was the choral director of the 1935 premiere of Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess”. There was also the Hall Johnson Choir in the Broadway play “Green Pastures”. The Leonard de Paur Chorus also did outstanding work.

The following college choirs became known nationally and internationally: the Hampton Institute Choir, under the direction of the late R. Nathaniel Dett. Its European tour was in 1930. For those who may not know, Nathaniel Dett was a great musician and

composer. His choral compositions are magnificent! I recently recorded his oratorio, The Ordering of Moses, with the Talladega College Choir, Frank Harrison, director, and with the Mobile, Alabama Symphony Orchestra. The Howard University Choir, conducted by the late Warner Lawson, toured South America several years ago. The Morehouse College Glee Club conducted by Wendell Whalum toured Africa. The Morgan State College Choir, under the direction of Nathan Carter, has just returned from a successful European tour. I need not relate its work to you. We listened to it this afternoon and each of us, I am sure, has made his appraisal of that excellent chorus.

Lastly, the work of the Tuskegee Choir of 100 voices. On December 27, 1932, Radio City Music Hall opened. After the opening performance, the Choir became the main attraction. On the following morning, the headline in the New York Newspapers read: Tuskegee Choir stops show at the opening of Radio City Music Hall. The Choir was in New York City for six weeks.

The singing of the Tuskegee Choir has been described as “rich” in an unusual manner. It has been compared to a fine orchestra in its execution, tone quality and other aspects of ensemble singing. I quote a review from the Philadelphia Inquirer:

“The singers from Tuskegee did have 100 but did not lack – instrumental accompaniment. So skilled was the direction of their leader that while the melodies were sung in higher register by sopranos and baritones, the organ-like accompaniment was supplied by altos and basses. Mr. Dawson’s orchestration of human voices frequently gave the ardent listener a sense of many instruments being blended.”

In subsequent years, the Tuskegee Choir appeared on the following T. V. shows: Ed Sullivan’s “Toast of the Town,” twice on the Eddie Fisher Show, “Coke Time,” the

“Arthur Godfrey Show,” the “Kate Smith Show,” “Friends of Faith,” N.B.C. Television Show.

In 1937-38, we gave a series of half-hour broadcasts each Sunday afternoon over N.B.C. These programs were broadcast internationally. Each program was sung a cappella: there was no speaker or instrumental solo! I wonder now, how we did it!

Almost 40 years ago, a style of singing a cappella came into vogue in this country. A cappella singing is a tradition with the Negro. He sang in the cotton fields, in the church, in his Wednesday night prayer meeting. He created his folksongs, and sang them without instrumental accompaniment.

There is more, so much more! But, ladies and gentlemen, with these comments, I hope that the question asked about Negro in choral music in America – where has it’s been and where is it now have been at least partially answered. Thank you for listening.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In May of 2013, Vernon Edward Huff completed his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in choral conducting at Arizona State University, where he studied with Gregory Gentry and David Schildkret. His secondary cognate studies were in music education. While at ASU, he held a teaching assistantship (2010-13), during which time he conducted the ASU Men's Chorus, taught basic choral conducting, and served as assistant conductor of the Barrett Choir, Concert Choir, and the Symphonic Chorale. He also worked as choral ensembles coordinator for the department for the 2012-13 academic year. The focus of his doctoral research has been the music of William Levi Dawson, choral arranger and choral conductor of the Tuskegee Institute Choir. For eight years, Huff taught choral music in Charleston County Schools in South Carolina. Choirs under his direction performed twice for SCMEA conventions and regularly ranked in the top three places at the state choral festival. He also regularly placed 25 - 35 students into the South Carolina All-State Chorus. Huff also was lead choral director for the Charleston County School District and he has served as clinician for numerous state-wide middle school SATB, TTB, and 6th grade choral festivals. He has presented on a wide variety subjects at SCMEA conventions, the AMEA convention, and the National ACDA convention, the latter in Miami, FL, in 2005. Huff is a nationally board certified teacher in Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood Choral Music. He earned his Master of Music degree in choral conducting from The Ohio State University (2000) where he studied with Hilary Apfelstadt. While there he received the Outstanding Graduate Student - Performance Division Award. His Bachelor of Music degree (1997) is from Furman University in choral music education. He is a member of the American Choral Directors Association, the National Association for Music Education, Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, and the Society for American Music. His seven-year-old son, Ethan, is a constant source of amazement and joy.