

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot/Follow the River” Notes

During Harriet Tubman’s first escape in 1849, a farmer offered to carry her concealed in his cart all night. At dawn, he told her to “*follow the river*” - to keep following it to reach the next place where people would take her in and feed her. He also warned her to stay off the roads because the patrol would be hunting for her.

The encoded spiritual, "*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*" refers to Ripley, a "station" of the Underground Railroad, where fugitive slaves were welcome. This town is atop a hill by the Ohio River, which is not easy to cross. So, to reach this place, fugitives had to wait for help coming from the hill. The words of this spiritual say, "I looked over Jordan and what did I see/ Coming for to carry me home/ A band of angels coming after me." These “angels” refer to the Caucasian Abolitionists waiting to rescue her. This was one of Tubman’s favorite songs according to Sarah Hopkins Bradford’s biography, “Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman.” She also sang this song as a secret code to tell other slaves that she would be there to aid them. (*W.E.B. DuBois, “The Souls of Black Folks.”*)

I composed a melody on the farmer’s instruction to “follow the river.” I chose to accompany this melody with two instruments of west-African origin, marimba (related to the balafon) and the mbira (thumb piano, also referred to as kalimba). West Africans play the mbira when they want to connect with their ancestors for spiritual guidance. I thought it would be appropriate for Harriet to ask for help from her ancestors on the journey up river to freedom, so I combined this newly composed music with the music of the spiritual.

We will never know precisely how these spirituals were sung. There is scholarly evidence that the slaves did not sing in harmony, a musical characteristic of the European tradition. Thus, my arrangement tries to honor many of the West African musical style characteristics such as:

1. Rhythm is the most important element -- more important than melody
2. The love of bright sonorities (using one’s outdoor voice)
3. Ostinatos (a continually repeated musical phrase or rhythm) that are layered in one at a time
4. Polyphonic texture (multiple independent voices)
5. Call and Response (soloist leads, group follows)
6. Ecstasy (Getting “lost” in the music)
7. Music is interwoven with dance (movement)

There is no scholarly evidence that the slaves would have sung music in this fashion. My goal was to compose and arrange music in a style that is evocative of the slave’s frame of mind based upon their west African musical heritage.

The slave narratives of Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass relate that the Africans were forced to sing on board ship and on land to prevent them from planning escape, to prevent depression, prevent suicide, and to increase work output. Singing was one of the chief avenues of escape from a life that held little dignity and meaning. Every sound was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.