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The Spiritual Arrangements of Alice Parker and Robert Shaw: Honoring the Music of the Black
Experience

The concert spiritual is regarded by many as one of America's richest and deepest forms of music. For centuries, choirs and vocalists have been performing concert spirituals for audiences throughout the world. Throughout history, there have been countless arrangers of these pieces. Among the most influential and prolific are people such as R. Nathaniel Dett, William Dawson, Harry T. Burleigh, Hall Johnson, Jester Hairston, Undine Smith Moore, Robert de Cormier, James Weldon Johnson, and some more modern arrangers such as Moses Hogan, André Thomas, and Stacy Gibbs. For years, due to our ever euro-centric leaning concert programs, the spiritual arrangements of those in the former group were not widely performed outside of the groups that they were writing for. Today's concert spirituals might not be as widely performed and as accepted as they are if it weren't for the compositional duo of Alice Parker and Robert Shaw. Between 1950 and 1967, Alice Parker and Robert Shaw created nearly two-hundred arrangements of folk songs, hymns, and spirituals. Their arrangements of black spirituals have stood the test of time with choirs around the world, and have served as a model for many current-day composers of the genre, despite them both being white. Due to their race, some raise questions about whether their spiritual arrangements are "authentic," whether or not they are

showing appreciation for, or are appropriating black music and black culture by arranging spirituals, or even if their arrangements should still be performed by choirs today. This paper will seek to express that Parker and Shaw's arrangements were created from a deep love, appreciation, and admiration for the genre, and the people that the music comes from, that they had integrity to create pieces that stayed true to what was widely understood as the "original source material," and that their arrangements gave voice to uplift black music as well as the music of their contemporaries that may not have been as widely performed or accepted as it was then or today.

To gain a greater understanding and context of Alice Parker and Robert Shaw's spiritual arrangements, there is some important backstory that one must know. Robert Shaw is regarded as one of the most prolific and influential American conductors of the twentieth century. From 1948 to 1967, he founded the Robert Shaw Chorale which was his own professional choir that would engage in many performances and tours. After the choirs' first tour in 1948, they were signed with an exclusive recording contract with RCA Victor. Subsequently, RCA Victor wanted the Robert Shaw Chorale to record light, popular music that would go over well with general American audiences. Shaw ran into a wonderful problem. He realized that he did not have ample time to delegate towards arranging these popular folk songs, hymns, and spirituals, so he called upon his previous graduate student at the Juilliard School, Alice Parker to create the arrangements, with his guidance and supervision. In order to find the source material for these pieces, she scoured the music division of the New York Public Library. According to Parker, she found "treasures" there. Once Parker and Shaw decided on the text and tunes that they would set and arrange, they got to work together. This meant Parker doing most of the heavy-lifting, and Shaw adding his expert ear to the near final product. According to Parker, "The collaboration is a

perfect modern example of the historic apprentice/master relationship: teaching by doing under close scrutiny of a master craftsman” (Taylor 34). Parker was quite thrilled and grateful to have worked with Shaw in this regard. Originally their arrangements were created solely for the intent to be sung by the Robert Shaw Chorale on their albums for RCA. Between 1950 and 1967, the choir recorded seventeen albums, and the compositions were put into publishing shortly after, putting these black folk songs and melodies into the mainstream concert sector.

During Alice Parker’s research and gathering of source material for her and Shaw’s arrangements, the melodies and themes present in the Negro spirituals resonated with her in particular. This could be due to her upbringing when her home cook would take her to the black church often when she was younger, but in an interview with composer and conductor André Thomas she states “What spirituals do for me is open up an avenue of expression, of soul expression, that I don’t find any other way” (Melodious Accord, 18:00-18:12). She, like myself feel that the subject matter found in black spirituals, though the music originates and will forever belong to those people, is universal. Spirituals are the songs of the people, the songs of human struggle, human faith, and human joy. It is America’s music, it is beautiful and must be shared and honored. With André Thomas she also expressed that “When people ask how I as a white woman can possibly imagine the black experience, I say ‘in a way the color of the skin has nothing to do with it because we have the same kinds of emotions inside’” (Melodious Accord, 17:18-17:31). Many choral conductors today, more specifically white choral conductors, shy away from programming spirituals for fear of cultural appropriation, being unskilled or afraid to navigate the genre or style, or for a completely different agenda. In turn, they are doing a great disservice to their singers and audiences by not exposing them to, and allowing them to experience this music. It all comes down to respect. Respect and acknowledgment for the origin

of the spiritual, respect for the proper performance practices, and most importantly, respect for the people and place that the music comes from. This respect and integrity for the genre can be seen in virtually every aspect of Parker and Shaw's spiritual arrangements, and they are worthy of analyzing in closer detail.

When examining the purposeful integrity and validity of the spiritual arrangements of Alice Parker and Robert Shaw, one must examine the melody and modality. The biggest question with arrangements of all types is usually how close is it to the original source material, and how far did the arranger delve from that. Due to the fact that most spirituals come from West Africa in the aural tradition, these songs were not typically notated. This means that the melodies were taught and shared by mouth to ear, and would vary slightly from place to place, and from generation to generation. What this means for us today, is that it makes it quite difficult to decide what the most "authentic" or "original" versions of these songs even is. Parker says herself that "There is no such thing as 'the authentic version' because that belongs to the first person that sang it, who, because it's a folk song, is lost in anonymity" (Melodious Accord, 25:57-26:08). With this idea in mind, Parker had to maintain the integrity and authenticity in a few different facets. Firstly, Parker judges the authenticity and originality of a spiritual by how pentatonic the melody is. One will realize that in many of the Parker-Shaw spiritual arrangements, the melodies and harmonies remain quite simple and stay within the pentatonic scale in major, with the lowered third or seventh occasionally serving as blue notes. For example, both *Sometimes I feel*, and *Deep River* are in E-flat major, with a lowered seventh, making them both in the mixolydian mode. Consistent among each of their arrangements of spirituals, Parker and Shaw avoid the leading tone, because that is getting into western European harmony territory, which is not what would have been sung by, or heard by the slaves in the fields. Along with melody and modality

staying true to how the tune was originally sung, it is important to note that every single one of Parker and Shaw's spiritual arrangements are unaccompanied, unlike many of today's arrangements. Melody was said to be the most important compositional element to Parker and Shaw, and that is the trademark of their arrangements. The melodies remain very much in tact, simple and straightforward, and very clear, unlike many of today's more modern and jazz-infused interpretations of spirituals, though wonderful in their own context, can be objectively examined as far less "authentic."

Regarded as the most distinctive elements of the spiritual are its rhythm and sense of pulse. "One of the most important factors in a correct stylistic performance of Negro spirituals is the rhythmic vitality. In most cases, whether fast or slow, a basic rhythmic drive must prevail" (Harris Jr. 16). Robert Shaw had a history of being quite a rhythmically oriented conductor. He was a stickler for precise rhythm with his choirs. Whenever Shaw felt that Parker was losing that sense of pulse in her pieces, he would surely let her know. Present in every single one of Parker and Shaw's arrangements is a strong sense of pulse. This relentless sense of pulse is prevalent in everything from the fast and upbeat *Same Train*, to the slow and somber settings of *Deep River* or *Sometimes I Feel*. Perhaps the most two most striking rhythmic elements that make a spiritual authentic is the use of syncopation and polyrhythms. Parker and Shaw have a consistent model and far as rhythmic development and complexity is concerned with their arrangements. Usually the first verse is presented quite simple, both melodically and rhythmically, as it was likely originally sung. Then by the second and third verses, the four voices start to play with each other rhythmically through, for example, one voice having a syncopation on a word while the another voice does not, created a layered, polyrhythmic texture. A perfect example of this technique can be found in *John Saw Duh Numbuh* in measures 73 to 76. The sopranos and tenors have a

rhythmic pattern of a dotted quarter, eighth tied to a quarter, quarter, dotted quarter, eighth, quarter, quarter, while the altos and basses have a constantly syncopated rhythmic pattern of dotted quarter, eighth tied to a quarter, quarter tied to an eighth, eighth tied to a quarter, dotted quarter, eighth. This creates a striking polyrhythmic texture in which the voices work in pairs to accent different areas of the beat at different times, creating fragments of 2 against 3. The rhythmic choices that Parker and Shaw made throughout their arrangements are rooted in the history of African polyrhythms and still keep the simplistic integrity of the original material. Above all, that strong sense of pulse is always there. In their interview together, André Thomas remarked to Alice Parker that in her and Shaw's arrangement of the spiritual *John Saw Duh Numbuh*, she had encapsulated the constant underlying motor rhythm perfectly. Thomas had expressed that to this day, "nobody has done it better" in reference to other composers and arrangers of black spirituals. He had even remarked, being a very successful 21st century black choral composer and arranger himself, that he "still can't do what you did back then," having an arrangement of *John Saw Duh Numbuh* himself.

Another important aspect to examine across Parker and Shaw's spiritual arrangements is their use of black dialect. Academics such as Dr. Felicia Barber have done extensive research and created phonetically based systems of categorizing black dialect in music, but simply examining the type of dialect and the amount is very telling across all types of arrangements of spirituals throughout history. Among her findings while visiting the music division of the New York Public Library, Alice Parker came across texts and songs from the Stephen Foster songbook. She was appalled with how some of those songs portrayed black people. They were truly minstrel songs. Parker has been very outspoken about her distaste for how black music used to be written down in places like the Stephen Foster songbook in which the language was written

in distorted English in order to portray Black people as uneducated. Due to their strong distaste and discussions on this, in all of their folk and spiritual arrangements in particular, Alice Parker and Robert Shaw were very meticulous, careful, and purposeful when choosing the spelling and dialect that they used in their arrangements. Parker stated “we made that conscious decision to make it look very dignified on the page” (Melodious Accord, 13:02-13:07). This intentional dignification of the Black dialect shows that Parker and Shaw had a passion and love for the spirituals and the people whom they came from and represent. *This* is how they wanted to show the world this music, in a dignified and respectable way, unlike many of their predecessors. This discussion of the inclusion of dialect can also tie into performance practice as well and the fine line of cultural appreciation vs. appropriation. “Comical effects result from the over-exaggeration of dialect, causing the performance to lose its effectiveness. Unless such effects are employed as a vital part of the deep meaning of the Negro spiritual, the performance becomes artificial” (Harris Jr. 16). Parker expressed that she and Shaw purposefully include some dialect in some places, and left some out in other places because they also recognized the variety of Black dialects even throughout different states. They wanted their spiritual arrangements to be sung by anyone, anywhere, and in the way that feels most natural to their choir. They thought of their inclusion of dialect as merely a dictional performance suggestion rather than an imitation.

Alice Parker and Robert Shaw’s spiritual arrangements are regarded as some of the most classic, respected, and accessible pieces of choral literature. They were written out of necessity at a time where this genre and style of song was not being widely presented in concert halls. Due to both of their platforms in the concert sector, combined with their absolute integrity and passion for the Black spiritual, they were able to present this music to the masses and in turn give voice to the people from whom this music came, as well as their compositional contemporaries.

For those who question the validity and authenticity of the Parker-Shaw spirituals, Alice says in her own words “Back to authenticity a moment. What do we mean when we ask that question? And I think that the word ‘respect’ has a lot to do here. That we are not making fun, we’re not doing it because we ‘ought to, we’re not doing it because it’s something that fills out our menu of offerings, but we’re doing it because we love the sound of it and releases something in us that nothing else does. That’s the only reason for doing it” (Melodious Accord, 30:24-30:54). Alice Parker and Robert Shaw’s arrangements continue to inspire and provide a basis for arrangers of spirituals today. Though the work may never be done, these arrangements have made us one step closer to concert music of all cultures being accepted and perceived as equal on a common ground.

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