

American Choral Review

Journal of The American Choral Foundation, published by Chorus America | William Weinert, Editor

The Jubilee Songs of 1872 and 1884: Reconciling Reconstruction(s)

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Throughout the nineteenth century, minstrel shows provided white audiences with comic relief at the expense of African-Americans. Their popularity in America and abroad represented a shocking example of widespread racism and economic exploitation. Though the exact reasons for this popularity remain unclear, Eric Lott posits a plausible answer with a framework in which African-Americans are “othered.” He states,

Because one is so ambivalent about and represses one’s own pleasure, one imagines the Other to have stolen it or taken it away...Whites get satisfaction in supposing the “racial” Other enjoys [pleasure] in ways unavailable to them—through exotic food, strange and noisy music, outlandish bodily exhibitions, or unremitting sexual appetite. And yet at the same time, because the Other personifies their inner divisions, hatred of their own excess of enjoyment necessitates hatred of the Other¹

Lott, then, proposes that the deep roots of racist thought and action lie in one’s own self-concept. A marked shift, however, in the portrayal and presentation of African-Americans in American music occurred with the rise of The Jubilee Singers of Fisk University (Nashville, Tennessee), a singing group famous for their tours of the United States. The Singers’ live performances of spirituals, as well as their published songbooks, provided white audiences and readers with an alternative, emic (or “insider”) reading of African-American culture.

While the general history of the Jubilee Singers is well-documented—in particular, their initial struggles to raise money for Fisk University—a search for an analysis of the published songbooks of Fisk’s Jubilee Singers yields no results to the scholar. Dena J. Epstein relates information about such primary sources associated with the Singers, stating that “each appeared in multiple editions, some incorporating substantial changes. From work to work [edition to edition], the number of songs increased, a few being dropped and others added or rearranged. A careful study will be needed to identify these changes and interpret them.”² Accordingly, this study examines the song collection *Jubilee Songs: as sung by the Jubilee singers* (hereafter referred to as *Jubilee Songs*), in its two editions from 1872 and 1884. Such a study does not bypass issues of “Othering” previously mentioned, but rather embraces them. On the surface, a comparison of these editions seems to present the researcher with a complicated and potentially problematic development in the song collections. In short, biographies about the Jubilee Singers—such as *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: with their songs*—contain collections of spirituals as an addendum to the prose, and were written in the interim period between 1872 and 1884. This calls into question the decision to compare *only* the editions of the *Jubilee Songs*. However, *Jubilee Songs* contain a minute amount of prose in comparison to the biographies of the singers, and usefully delineates the collections into prose-based and music-based categories, thus providing feasibility for our analysis and comparison.

¹ Eric Lott, “Genuine Negro Fun: Racial Pleasure and Class Formation in the 1840s” in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 148.

² Dena J. Epstein, “The Story of the Jubilee Singers: An Introduction to its Bibliographic History” in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, ed. Josephine Wright, (Warren, Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 151-152.

Prior to an analysis of these song collections, however, general historical information regarding the formation of these books necessarily draws us into a discussion that includes two key institutions bolstering the Jubilee Singers: Fisk University, one of the first African-American institutions of higher education, and the American Missionary Association, an organization responsible for education at Fisk University and other African-American schools throughout the country. We shall, in turn, note these editions as progressions in a larger timeline of African-American song compilations.

The Founding of Fisk University and the Rocky Rise of the Jubilee Singers

The creation of the American Missionary Association (hereafter referred to as AMA) had its beginnings in the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening.³ Led by Charles Finney, a main goal was the conversion of people at a sinner-to-saint altar call. Finney also promoted action following conversion, stating “an important outward sign of one’s inward spirituality was the degree to which a Christian engaged selflessly in evangelical and benevolent efforts to impact the world.”⁴ Such a stance provided abolitionists—specifically those followers of Finney—with a divine calling to materially and spiritually assist African-Americans.

Formed in 1846, nearly 20 years prior to end of the Civil War, the AMA emerged from discontent with current stances on slavery among Christians.⁵ By 1874, seven colleges (including Hampton University and Fisk University) had been established by the organization. Concerning the enormous educational task of the AMA, Epstein aptly notes that “[t]hroughout the post-war years the finances of the American Missionary Association never kept up with its ambitious programs, of which Fisk University was a part.”⁶ More specifically, Fisk University, founded in 1864, was on the brink of a financial collapse by 1871. The formation of the Jubilee Singers and their lucrative tours played a large role in saving the financial situation of the school.

George White, the leader of the Jubilee Singers, initially took the group on tour in 1871 without funding from the AMA.⁷ The singing group did not experience

immediate success. Though the reasons for this were various, the absence of a clear definition of purpose caused the group to be lumped together with minstrel shows.⁸ During their first concerts, they sang the music of a “White America,” such as popular and patriotic songs.⁹ They soon discovered, however, audiences’ love of their renditions of “slave songs”, or spirituals. One ought to note that, due to the temporal proximity to slavery, “[p]erforming “slave songs” did not appeal to the students as these songs represented their former life...In time, public demand and White’s persuasion helped...the Jubilees...feel comfortable with the repertoire change.”¹⁰ As such a repertoire and cohesion amongst members continued to form, White decided that his traveling singers would also need a name to differentiate them from black minstrels. The group was named the Jubilee Singers, which references the “Year of the Jubilee” in Leviticus. Central to this year (which occurred every 50 years) were laws mandating specific release from slavery.

While 1871 was a literal Jubilee Year for White’s group—the year in which they received their new name—they began to achieve financial success only in 1872, when the “[AMA] became intimately involved in managing all aspects of the Jubilee Singers enterprise.”¹¹ Like many successful music groups of today, items and memorabilia were sold at the Jubilee Singers’ concerts. We shall now look at one of these items, the *Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers*.

Jubilee Songs (1872)

This publication contains a two-page preface by Theodore Seward, followed by twenty-four songs, and ends with three pages about the American Missionary Association. Seward, the transcriber of the spirituals, contributes an illuminating description of the songs and their Singers:

In giving these melodies to the world for the first time in a tangible form, it seems desirable to say a few words about them as judged from a musical stand-point...Their origin is unique. They are never “composed” after the manner of ordinary music, but spring into life, ready made, from the white heat of religious fervor...The Jubilee Singers, no doubt, represent the highest average of culture among the

³ Toni P. Anderson, “Tell them we are singing for Jesus”: the original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian reconstruction, 1871-1878, (Atlanta, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2009), 2.

⁴ Anderson, 2-3.

⁵ Anderson, 5.

⁶ Epstein, 152.

⁷ Anderson, 34-ff.

⁸ Anderson, 38.

⁹ Anderson, 39.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Anderson, 57.

*colored people, but the singing of these songs is all their own, and the quickness with which they have received impressions and adopted improvements from the cultivated music they have heard, only affords an additional illustration of the high capabilities of the race.*¹²

This quotation highlights two interconnected ideas espoused in Seward's preface. First, there exists a sense of discovery of the spirituals, themselves "created" through a spiritual experience (according to Seward). They are not "ordinary music", but religious music. Second, there is a racist—as opposed to racist—slant to the preface. The Singers show the "high capabilities of the race."¹³ Taking the preface as a product of its time, one notes that this seemingly bigoted comment may well serve the opposite purpose. Proponents of slavery maintained that African-Americans were not human, and thus had no obligation to be free. By noting the intelligence of the Jubilee Singers, he makes them not only human, but also representative of the "highest average of culture among the colored people."¹⁴

The twenty-four songs in this collection employ both unison and three- to four-part harmonization. The texts of many of the songs are quite familiar—"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Roll, Jordan, Roll," and "Steal Away"—and the text for songs containing multiple verses is printed below the music to aid in readability.¹⁵ While the ordering of the pieces could be arbitrary, one ought to note the text of the first and last song in the collection: "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See, Lord!" and "Steal Away." The first text mournfully declares "Nobody knows [the trouble I see] like Jesus" and implores "Brothers [later sisters, mothers, etc.] will you pray for me." Nine years after the Emancipation Proclamation, many white audience members were literally unaware of the trouble that African Americans had seen, especially northern audiences. The placement of this tune, then, could be symbolic of the plight of the Jubilee Singers former lives (seven of the nine members were former slaves).¹⁶

Similarly, "Steal Away" may have had a symbolic placement. It is well documented that this spiritual, in particular, was a favorite among audiences at

Jubilee Singers' concerts, and sometimes provided the closing spiritual.¹⁷ Those that bought these small collections at the concerts would visually and aurally recall this closing tune. Additionally, the text of the song places the reader/listener/singer in simultaneous modes of experiencing a type of end-time. On one level, there is an immediacy of "stealing away" as an event that is imminent. This would be particularly true if one reads the text as a coded language for an escape from slavery. On another level, "stealing away" is a metaphor for death and subsequent new life. While this could be interpreted as the singers' literal death, we might read the text as a sort of new beginning with constant changes (e.g. slavery to freedom). The song concludes with the sentiment that its singers 'haint got long to stay here'

Following these twenty-four songs, a three-page "Introduction by the American Missionary Association" highlights "the songs, the singers, and the interests they represent."¹⁸ In reading this document, one finds a polarization of ideas similar to the Preface:

*These songs, therefore, can be relied upon as the genuine songs of their race, being in words and music the same as sung by their ancestors in the cabin, on the plantation, and in their religious worship. By the severe discipline to which the Jubilee Singers have been subjected in the school-room, they have been educated out of the peculiarities of the Negro dialect, and they do not attempt to imitate the peculiar pronunciation of their race*¹⁹

We recall that in Seward's preface there is a distancing from African-Americans as the "other" race. In this introduction, the "othering" that occurs concerns the songs themselves. The AMA did not appropriate the former, dialectal style. The education of African-Americans by the AMA caused the dialect to disappear (by "severe discipline", we might note), effectively making the spiritual somewhat of a white creation. Nevertheless, E.M. Cravath, an AMA member and author of the "Introduction", attends to a careful reflexivity in his prose. He quotes Seward, stating that "Every melody was tested by being played on the pianoforte, and no line or phrase was introduced that did not receive full

¹² *Jubilee songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers*, (NY: Biglow & Main, c1872), 2-3.

¹³ *Jubilee songs*, c1872, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Jubilee songs*, 5. The prose on this page states: "In some of the verses the syllables do not correspond exactly to the notes in the music. The adaptation is so easy that it was thought best to leave it to the skill of the singer rather than to confuse the eye by too many notes... Whatever changes may be necessary in singing remaining verses will be found to involve no difficulty."

¹⁶ *Jubilee Songs*, c1872, 30.

¹⁷ Toni P. Anderson, "Tell them we are singing for Jesus," 50.

¹⁸ *Jubilee Songs*, c1872, 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

indorsement (sic) from the Singers.”²⁰ The aims of the AMA aside, one ought to mention the strong talent of the Jubilee Singers themselves. We must ultimately, however, acknowledge that the published musical form within this edition represents a type of hybrid spiritual and not an example of the original, wholly African-American expression.

Jubilee Songs (1884)

Jubilee Songs (1884) yields a sharp increase in the amount of music. This particular volume contains 140 songs—nearly six times that of its 1872 predecessor—and contained two parts, “bound in one

volume, board covers.”²¹ The organization follows a similar preface-song model, but contains no history of the American Missionary Association.

Two items should be mentioned concerning the ordering of the song tunes in the first part of this edition. The opening song in the collection—“Inching Along”—contains the following explanation of the piece: “[a]ttention is called to the appropriateness of the melody for the expression of these singular words. It is all embraced within the first three tones of the scale, and thus may be said to be itself not more than an inch long.”²² (See Example 1 below.)

Inching Along.

[Attention is called to the appropriateness of the melody for the expression of these singular words. It is all embraced within the first three tones of the scale, and thus may be said to be itself not more than an inch long.]

CHORUS.

Keep a inch - ing a - long, Keep a inch - ing a - long;
 Je - sus will come by'nd by; Keep a inch - ing a - long like a
Fine. SOLO.
 poor inch worm, Je - sus will come by'nd - bye. 1. 'Twas a inch by inch I
 sought the Lord, Je - sus will come by'nd - bye. And a
 inch by inch He blessed my soul, Je - sus will come by'nd - bye.

CHORUS. SOLO. CHORUS. D. C.

- 2 The Lord is coming to take us home,
 Jesus will come by'nd - bye.
 And then our work will soon be done,
 Jesus will come by'nd - bye.
- 3 Trials and troubles are on the way,
 Jesus will come by'nd - bye.
 But we must watch and always pray,
 Jesus will come by'nd - bye.
- 4 We'll inch and inch and inch along,
 Jesus will come by'nd - bye.
 And inch and inch till we get home,
 Jesus will come by'nd - bye.

Example 1: “Inching Along” from *Jubilee Songs* (1884)²³
 (A 1926 rendition of the Fisk Jubilee Singers performing “Inching Along”
 can be heard at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knQvjDgRZoM>)

²⁰ *Jubilee Songs*, c1872, 29.

²¹ Seward, Theodore F., and George L. White, compilers, *Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers*, (New York: Biglow & Main, c1884), 3.

²² *Jubilee Songs*, c1884, 5.

²³ *Jubilee Songs*, c1884, 5.

With the exception of the anecdotal explanation of “I’m Troubled in Mind,” “Inching Along” is the *only* piece in either volume that contains a detailed, musically-based, introduction. It is significant that the explanation suggests an ideal often associated with Western art music, namely, sophisticated text painting. The placement of “Inching Along” as the first piece is significant, therefore, as the prefatory musical explanation lends legitimacy to the rest of the collection and, by association, the genre of the spiritual.

The second part of the 1884 collection shows a definite merging of African-American music with White European music. The Lord’s Prayer, set up as a four-part chant setting, seems incongruent with the (mainly) unison spiritual settings previously encountered. (See Example 2 below.)

A “Benediction: [As sung by the Jubilee Singers]”—arranged in a similar manner—is also included. Such four-part music, common in predominantly white hymnals, shows the type of education the Jubilee

Singers experienced at Fisk University, as well as the quasi-Victorian ideals espoused by their former sponsor, the AMA.²⁵

**Slave Songs of the United States (1867):
The Best of All Possible Worlds?**

The collections discussed thus far share a common ancestor: *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). The editors of this volume organized the slave songs by region, and made every attempt to transcribe exactly what they heard. They realized however, that “[t]he best that we can do, however, with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original...the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper.”²⁶ A matter of extreme significance is that the editors relate that “[t]here is no singing in parts, as we understand it, and yet no two appear to be singing the same thing...”²⁷ The three- or four-part singing so prevalent in *Jubilee Songs* (1872/1884) and *Cabin and Plantation Songs* (a similar publication from 1874, published by the Hampton Institute) appears to be a vestige of a White, Victorian education for African-Americans.

Lord’s Prayer.

Example 2: The Lord’s Prayer from Part 2 of Jubilee Songs (1884)²⁴

²⁴ *Jubilee Songs*, c1884, 85.

²⁵ Toni P. Anderson, “Tell them we are singing for Jesus,” 15: “The “New England Way” was as important to learn as one’s ABCs. Rules of behavior in Victorian society were well prescribed, and knowing “how to be” and “what to do” was essential if one wished to walk the upward road.”

²⁶ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, editors, *Slave Songs of the United States*, (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867), 5.

²⁷ *Slave Songs*, 4.

²⁸ In *Jubilee Songs*, the title is “Many thousand Gone.”

“Many Thousand Go” is one of the few pieces that appear in both *Slave Songs* and *Jubilee Songs*.²⁸ In *Slave Songs*, the melody is curiously similar to Stephen

Foster’s song “Camptown Races.” Note, in particular, the similarities of the texted lines’ contour and rhythm. (See Example 3 below.)

64. MANY THOUSAND GO.



1. No more peck o' corn for me, No more, no more;



No more peck o' corn for me, Man-y tousand go.

- 2 No more driver's lash for me.
- 3 No more pint o' salt for me.
- 4 No more hundred lash for me.
- 5 No more mistress' call for me.

De Camptown ladies sing dis song

CHORUS. SOLO. CHORUS.

Doo-dah! doo-dah! De Camp-town race-track five miles long... Oh! doo-dah

Example 3: “Many Thousand” in *Slave Songs*²⁹ and Stephen Foster’s “Camptown Races”³⁰

²⁹ *Slave Songs*, Song 64.

³⁰ Stephen Foster, *Camptown Races. A Favorite Ethiopian Song*, accessed through Johns Hopkins University, Levy Sheet Music Collection, Box 067, Item 015, <http://jhil.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/30607>, (various dates of access).

On the other hand, the authors of *Jubilee Songs* render slight changes to the tune that make the Jubilee version much less like *Camptown Races*, particularly in the step-wise motion of measures 1-2 and 5-6. (See *Example 4* below.)

While we cannot establish a direct correspondence between “Many Thousand Go” and “Camptown Races,” we can note the extreme popularity of Foster’s song throughout America.³³ Hypothesizing regarding this connection may, in the future, shed light on musical borrowing among these myriad publications, but further discussion remains outside the realm of this study.

64. MANY THOUSAND GO.



1. No more peck o' corn for me, No more, no more;

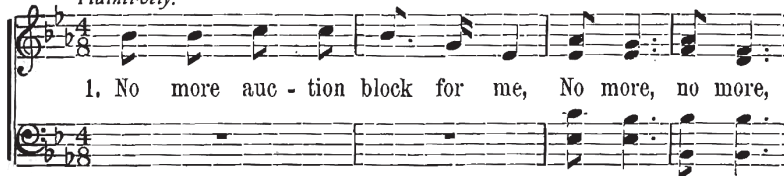


No more peck o' corn for me, Man - y thousand go.

- 2 No more driver's lash for me.
- 3 No more pint o' salt for me.
- 4 No more hundred lash for me.
- 5 No more mistress' call for me.

Many thousand Gone.

Plaintively.



1. No more auc - tion block for me, No more, no more,



No more auc - tion block for me, Man - y thou - sand gone.

- 2 No more peck o' corn for me, etc.
- 3 No more driver's lash for me, etc.
- 4 No more pint o' salt for me, etc.
- 5 No more hundred lash for me, etc.
- 6 No more mistress' call for me, etc.

Example 4: “Many Thousand” in *Slave Songs*³¹ and *Jubilee Songs* (1872/84)³²

³¹ *Slave Songs*, Song 64.

³² *Jubilee Songs*, 27. (Reference is to 1872 edition; selection identical in 1884 edition).

³³ Deane L. Root, “Stephen C. Foster”, entry in *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (various dates of access).

Conclusion

The examples given in this paper demonstrate a high degree of complexity when attempting to trace the history of the African-American spiritual and its myriad influences. The Jubilee Singers, a world renowned group (both in their early years and today) brought to predominately White audiences a type of hybrid spiritual—one that, on the whole, looked very different than the songs contained in *Slave Songs of the United States*. Authors of *Slave Songs*, an 1867 publication, succinctly state that “[t]he best that we can do, however, with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original.”³⁴ Such an attitude toward transcription paved the way for later songs that crossed the border into arrangement. This all begs the question: What is a true African-American spiritual, an authentic African-American song? Without patronage by Whites—itsself a complicated issue with respect to the Reconstruction era—the songs may not have been written down and transcribed at all. Yet, their remains a possibly disturbing issue at hand as one discovers the genre of the spiritual to be one that is inauthentic on some level, a genre that is not *solely* African-American.

André Thomas, the Owen F. Sellers Professor of Music at Florida State University, brings our discussion from analysis of nineteenth-century sources to present-day issues of actual performance. In a section titled “Toward Authenticity,” Thomas states “We’re [now] performing concert arrangements, not ‘authentic’ folk music. Like any folk music, the minute the Negro spiritual was written down, it was no longer authentic...Rather than asking, ‘can we create an authentic performance’...ask, ‘what can we create instead?’”³⁵ The general answer to this question among prominent African-American choral conductors and others is: the performance of concert spirituals by choral groups. This solution represents an ever more distant relation to *Slave Songs of the United States* or most of the *Jubilee Songs*, yet the pieces continue to move and inspire in spite of a history that once connected in a palpable way to minstrelsy. Rather than being paralyzed by issues of “Othering,” an awareness of the past by Thomas and others has allowed for the spiritual to be at once a remembrance of history and a performance of the present. Put another way, a quick judgment concerning authenticity or morality serves little useful purpose, but an awareness of these complicated racial issues may serve to foster greater equality. One hopes that this occurs sooner rather than later, since many in the world “haint got long to stay here.”

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³⁴ *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), 5.

³⁵ André J. Thomas, *Way over in Beulah Land: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual*, (Dayton, Ohio: Heritage Music Press, 2007), 96.

Recent Books

Christopher Page. *The Christian West and its Singers: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xxiii, 692 pp., 96 color plates, \$36.00.

More than thirty years ago, Christopher Page was asked by the BBC to compile a program of music by Hildegard von Bingen, the twelfth-century German Benedictine abbess, visionary, and composer of a highly individualized style of plainchant. This event represented the birth of Gothic Voices, the outstanding medieval music ensemble known for its polished sound and eclectic offerings of late-medieval repertory, captured on more than twenty recordings on the Hyperion label. Page retired from the ensemble several years ago, but his scholarly pursuits have hardly let up. Known as a philologist as much as a musicologist, Page has greatly impacted the terrain of medieval musicology, particularly in his monograph *Discarding Images: Reflections on Musical Life in Medieval France* (Oxford, 1995). His latest book, *The Christian West and its Singers: The First Thousand Years*, trounces all previous books on music of the early church, and presents the reader with a veritable summa of unprecedented proportions. This mammoth study traces references to Christian singing and singers from the scant second-century evidence of a Christian music ministry through the comparatively copious sources of the eleventh century, in which a literate musical tradition of notating plainchant was established. Characteristic of Page's research, he explores a wide range of sources to find testimony of Christian music-making and musicians, whether in saints' lives or the magnificent examples of ancient epigraphy (i.e. inscriptions). No stone is left unturned in his work.

The Christian West and its Singers is broadly organized into three main sections, each a major undertaking in its own right. The first section, "Mediterranean Beginnings: Lector and Cantor," explores the uneven formation of an early Christian tradition of music-making in and around Syria or Asia Minor. Amid many discoveries and well-founded speculation across the section's seven chapters, Page identifies the earliest named singer—'Gaios' from Dineksarai (Turkey)—lauded for his singing (or composing) of hymnody in a third-century epitaph. From these fleeting personalities about which little can be said, the author advances a broader argument about the development of a song ministry in the scope of

responsibilities held by the readers (*lectores*), who appear to have singing duties in the early Christian house-worship settings. Before the fifth century, these readers were generally young men, emblematic of the purity and childhood innocence that the faithful might wish to achieve.

The second main section, "The Kingdoms Come," is principally concerned with the major figures and institutions that led to the dissemination of Roman chant in the Frankish kingdom, creating a coherent body of song of joint Roman and Frankish lineage (*romanorum francorumque cantus*). Page devotes two entire chapters to the eighth-century Frankish king Pippin and the singing cultivated in Rouen and Metz, essential to the promotion of the emerging corpus of plainsong. Considerable attention is also given to the development of a *schola cantorum* (school of singers) in Rome during the sixth century and later. Page convincingly demonstrates that, in its earliest guise, a *schola* implied a mode of habitation, akin to an orphanage or hospital. In short space, the author also dismisses the view of James McKinnon, who, in an important monograph from 2000, suggested that a semi-professional schola of Roman church musicians coordinated the texts and music for the liturgical year in a large standardization "project" undertaken in the later seventh century.¹ As the notion of a cantor takes shape in the Carolingian Renaissance of the ninth century, Page emphasizes the high degree of literacy required of the cantor, whose status by then exceeded that of the lector or psalmist. The study of grammar, proper accentuation (*accentus*), and even the scrupulous observation of reformed Latin orthography (correct spelling) were increasingly sought in the finest cantors.

Part III of Page's tome, entitled "Towards the First European Revolution," focuses on new musical composition, the refinement of modal theory, and the unparalleled musical contribution of Guido of Arezzo in developing a system for the representation of diastematic (i.e. pitch-precise) notation on a staff. The author marshals unprecedented amounts of evidence that demonstrates the blossoming of new musical composition in the eleventh century and onward driven by the multitude of new (usually local) saints' feasts. New or revised offices of liturgical plainchant required the dual skill of composing music and supplying versified texts. Regarding the composition of plainsong at this time, Page illuminates the fact that new melodies that were highly chiseled into a single

¹ McKinnon, *The Advent Project: The Later-Seventh-Century Creation of the Roman Mass Proper* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

mode were regarded with greater favor than those songs (old and new) that wandered tonally. The extensive discussion of Guido is filled with welcome surprises, most notably a neglected fifth treatise (*Epistola Widonis*), which beautifully contextualizes Guido's invention of the staff as part of the larger trends of the eleventh century to reform the Church. With a firm notational apparatus, music-making would become more uniform in Christendom, acting as a kind of cleansing agent that roots out mistakes. Those who absorb the precision of Guido's method receive the benefit of increased time for prayer and devotion in daily life.

With such sound methodology, rigorous interdisciplinarity, wide-ranging contributions, and elegant prose, there is very little to criticize across this colossal volume. If there is just one area that seems uncharacteristically subject to criticism, it is within the discussion of the new plainchant offices of the eleventh century and their modal arrangements (spanning chapters 18 and 19). Page rightly introduces the idea of the systematization of the eight melodic modes with the creation of offices required for new feasts and saints in this period. As is well known, the antiphons and responsories from the late offices were often ordered in serial succession according to the eight melodic modes, typically in the service of Matins (and sometimes continuing into Lauds). Page reminds the reader that traditional 'Gregorian' chant hardly fit the eight-mode system into which it is sometimes forced. Increasingly with new plainchants however, modal identification is relatively uncomplicated, especially as mode became an increasingly prescriptive (rather than descriptive or classifying) parameter of monophonic composition.² In addressing the offices with serial succession through the modes, Page notes that the deliberate modal arrangement produces "a terrace of tessituras with the last chant placed considerably higher in the voice than the first" (p. 383). Similarly in a more direct discussion of mode, Page imagines that, in performing through these modally-organized chants, the singer can "hear or feel the chants ascending through the entire acknowledged range of melodic and tonal grammar during the course of the service" (p. 418). Statements like these, while attentive to the experience of the singer, presume that pitch is relatively fixed in this period. One could only "feel the chants

ascending" if successive chants were set at higher absolute (sounding) pitches. This practice is not inconceivable but also cannot be presupposed in the performance of plainchant.

From my own experience with singing office chant (if not borne out in source evidence), this music is pitched above all at comfortable levels for performance by a choir or monastic community that does not necessarily boast professional quality singing (or ranges). A mode 1 chant with a D final (concluding note) could potentially have the same absolute final as a mode 8 chant that in theory ends on a written G. Even if pitches were somehow fixed at relatively ordered levels of ascent (D-E-F-G), the plagal ranges of the modes (2-4-6-8) prevent a smooth climb through the eight possible modes, creating a rather jagged tour of the music instead of a feeling of gradual ascent.

For the music directors among us, *The Christian West and its Singers* offers surprisingly little to translate directly into performance. But this is not Page's project, and he rightly warns the reader that "this is not a book about what singers actually sang" (p. 5). Nor are we afforded, for example, new insights on vocal production. The scant source evidence simply prohibits a study of this nature. What I do find encouraging as a conductor of an early music ensemble that sings more than its fair share of plainchant is revived rationale for performing music of the Divine Office in concert. So much material from the late offices survives and is routinely ignored by ensembles so easily attracted (and with good reason) to the sonic innovations of late-medieval polyphony. One of Page's chief contributions is not just to highlight the corpus of plainchant that emerged as a result of new saints and feasts in the calendar, but also to connect this burgeoning repertory to the development of a notation that could accurately capture the new melodies.

There is much more to this pathbreaking study of course. Thanks to this outstanding piece of scholarship, we now hold an eminently impressive narrative that contextualizes the seeds of a music ministry that formed in the second century of Christianity and follows its coagulation into the eleventh century and beyond. Guido is a (deserving) hero in Page's account, as one usually portrays him in the first week or two

² The ordering by mode might have been influenced by tonaries (see Michel Huglo, *Les tonaires: inventaire, analyse, comparaison* [Paris, 1971], 122). In the later offices, the modal category is prescriptive for the composition of a chant, whereas in tonaries, the mode is descriptive of a pre-existent chant. See, for example, Andreas Haug, "Neue Ansätze im 9. Jahrhundert" in *Die Musik des Mittelalters*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus und Hermann Danuser, 94-128 (Laaber, 1991), 117-19. Whether this type of organization was employed as an intellectual game among composers, a challenge or means of edification for singers, or simply a systematic means of ensuring tonal variety in the office is not known. For the analyst, breaks in modal succession amidst these serial arrangements can sometimes reveal how offices were compiled, transmitted, and reorganized over time to suit different institutions. A classic study on modal ordering comes from Andrew Hughes, "Modal Order and Disorder in the Rhymed Office," *Musica Disciplina* 38 (1983): 29-51.

of a music history survey course. But a more detailed story emerges en route to the dissemination of the Frankish-Roman repertory and Guido's invention of staff notation. *The Christian West and its Singers* is a book that elegantly teaches us far more than we could imagine about the figures and circumstances that allowed for the remarkable transmission of a central repertory in the history of western music. It is a repertory that all directors dabbling in early music should be inspired to investigate and reclaim in performance on account of its astonishing richness and durability

to have survived a millennium or more. Perhaps this study might even spur the Page-less Gothic Voices to revisit late-medieval monophony, a genre that put the ensemble on the map a generation ago.

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Recent Recordings

Imagining Incense

Vancouver Chamber Choir
Jon Washburn, conductor
Grouse Records, 2010

The Vancouver Chamber Choir and director Jon Washburn have released *Imagining Incense* (Grouse Records, 2010), the third volume in a series of works by R. Murray Schafer, Canada's most original and arguably most important composer. The disc is a tour de force of singing and a wildly imaginative exploration of what the human voice can do.

Early in his career, Schafer noticed he was experiencing a constant bombardment of noise: the whine of jets, the hum of traffic, the beeping and clicking of machines. Concerned about the effects of technological sounds on the psyche, he wrote seminal books on the topic, such as *The Tuning of the World* (1977), thus sparking interest in the study of acoustic ecology. He set others to thinking and left the din to compose from a farmhouse in Ontario.

Imagining Incense offers a broad spectrum of styles in Schafer's choral work from 1990 to 2005. Some pieces defy categorization. Others prove the composer is fearless, undaunted by the prospect of pushing audiences too far.

In 2001, Schafer turned to sixteenth-century Japanese culture for inspiration when commissioned to write a work for Chifuru Matsubara and the Tokyo Philharmonic Chorus. The Vancouver Chamber Choir's recording of *Imagining Incense*, for which the recording is named, is impressive. The singers shriek, drone, whisper, and burst with explosions of jubilation during six short sections, each evoking the characteristics of wood incense. The texts are mostly made-up syllables. In "Kyara" voices writhe with

restless energy, sliding up and down scales like violin bows gliding over taut strings. In "Sasora," the Vancouver singers astound with their precision, sense of pitch, and evenness in shifting from tone to tone. The liner notes offer brief descriptions of each type of incense ("manaka," for example, is described as "light and enticing, a woman of changing moods"), but this writer recommends listening first without reference to a specific program.

In *Magic Songs*, the Vancouver Chamber Choir leads willing listeners back to the era of "tone magic," when the purpose of singing was to alter the material world. Here, again, the Vancouver Chamber Choir offers a marvelous variety of vocal effects: howling, buzzing, sneezing, sighing, stomping, and so forth. "Chant to make the stones sing" is a gorgeous incantation pierced by sliding sighs and a controlled warble that almost sounds electronically-generated. In "Chant for clear water" the music is water dashing over rocks, and in "Chant to make the fences fall down" singers alternate searing, hair-raising chords with barely-audible tones. This work fuses the 19th century romantic spirit with 20th century avant-garde. In the liner notes, Schafer explains, "The aim of these songs, with magic texts in a language spoken by no human, is to restore aspects of nature which have been destroyed or neglected by humanity."

Listeners most comfortable with traditional Western classical music might start with "Three Hymns" (2005), an excerpt from Schafer's large-scale oratorio *The Fall into Light*. The composer drew on Gnostic and Hermetic sources for the text, echoing Russian liturgical music and marrying beauty with surprise. The first, "Holy is God, who is before the first beginning" opens with a simple, chant-like phrase which repeats throughout. A soprano produces high tones like cirrus clouds on a warm, summer day. In the

second hymn, the singers burst into a unison declaration, "Holy is God, who gave us all a soul of light." Here Schafer drops in bluesy notes and tantalizing ambiguities. The theme is passed from one voice part to another, sliding from the bright key of C down to murkier depths below. The third hymn offers sharp contrasts between a straightforward fanfare and dense chords. The Vancouver singers project with force. Occasionally, however, during loud passages, the blend frays at the edges.

Other pieces on this disc demonstrate Schafer's boundless creativity. "Alleluia" is a glorious seven-minute state of suspension, written in 1999 in response to a letter from a friend. Schafer's affinity for women's voices shines in this luminous work, which begins with a series of musical phrases layered over

a low drone. The Vancouver singers, who premiered it in 2000, produce a creamy, warm tone, alternating urgent pulses with pure serenity.

Several shorter works round out this richly-rewarding recording. For a complete set, collectors will want to acquire the first volume, *Garden of Bells*, featuring Schafer's early choral music, and *Once on a Windy Night*, the second volume, which includes four of Schafer's major choral works. The Vancouver Chamber Choir and director Jon Washburn are to be commended for delivering so much brilliant choral music by one of Canada's original thinkers.

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Multiple back issues of the AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW and RESEARCH MEMORANDUM SERIES are available through Chorus America. Back issues of the AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW are available to members at \$7.50; back issues of the RESEARCH MEMORANDUM SERIES at \$2.00. Bulk prices will be quoted on request. All requests for back issues and index listings should be made to the American Choral Foundation, c/o Chorus America, 1156 15th Street NW, Suite 310. Washington, D.C. 20005. (202) 331-7577. An index to all volumes of the American Choral Review can be found at <chorusamerica.org>. Proposals for articles may be addressed to William Weinert, Eastman School of Music, 26 Gibbs Street, Rochester, N.Y. 14604, or <wweinert@esm.rochester.edu>.