



## So You Want to Sing Spirituals: A Guide for Performers

by Randye Jones (So You Want to Sing: Guides for Performers and Professionals), Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 288 pp., \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5381-0734-8

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## BOOK REVIEW

**So You Want to Sing Spirituals: A Guide for Performers**, by Randye Jones (*So You Want to Sing: Guides for Performers and Professionals*), Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 288 pp., \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5381-0734-8

This guide for the study and performance of spirituals provides not only a wonderful overview of the history of this musical style, but also practical suggestions and advice for the vocalist and teacher. As a part of the *So You Want to Sing* series, a project backed by the National Association of Teachers of Singing, this volume is an important addition to continue growing the diversity and inclusivity of different musical styles in vocal training programs. Randye Jones takes the subject in hand masterfully and does not shy away from some of the more complicated issues surrounding this particular style of singing. As an active singer, lecturer, researcher, and activist in African American song, Jones is responsible for the creation of the Afrocentric Voices in “Classical” Music website (<http://www.afrovoices.com>) and the online Spirituals Database (<http://www.spirituals-database.com>). Her expertise in the subject is clearly revealed in her writing.

Jones begins with a general overview of spirituals before delving deeper into the history of these songs. While recognizing the historical uncertainty of researching the origins of spirituals, she manages to discuss the importance of the oral tradition and the impact of spirituals on those who sang them. In addition to the debatable issues surrounding origination, she brilliantly addresses the controversial topic of using the term “Negro” in conjunction with spirituals. These first two chapters are important for setting the context for anyone wanting to accurately perform and emote the meanings of these pieces, which are often hidden in the lyrics to prevent understanding by plantation owners.

After setting the stage, so-to-speak, Jones turns the spotlight on how these songs transferred from folk songs of the American slave to concert hall performances of art music. Using examples from individuals (like Marian Anderson) and groups (like the Fisk Jubilee Singers), the journey from audience fascination to audience respect is demonstrated and the reader sees how the concert spiritual opened avenues for more formal training of African American musicians. Focusing from the early 1900s and on through the century, Jones uses the debate over performance practices to lead into the next topic in chapter 3, which provides brief biographies for three composers and three vocalists, including the significance of their contributions to bringing credibility to spirituals and to trained African American musicians. Performance practice itself starts being addressed in chapter 4, where suggestions are made for choosing and programming spirituals (such as lyrics, mood, or highlighting a particular composer). This is followed in the next chapter with a look at the use, or nonuse, of dialect in performance. In this important section, Jones weighs carefully the authentic versus the stereotypical representation of these types of songs. She encourages studying the text just as one would any other language and making a decision on whether or not to use dialect based on:

- (1) The text in the musical score,
- (2) An understanding of the composer’s intent,
- (3) The singer’s ability to enunciate dialect correctly without adversely impacting other interpretive or technical aspects of the performance (p. 75).

These criteria are true for all singers, as we find in the last of Jones's chapters, "Must you be black to sing spirituals?" This relevant and crucial discussion is dealt with professionally and pragmatically. She befittingly describes the conditions that have led to the belief in a "black voice" and the continued existence of stereotypical portrayals, stemming back to minstrelsy blackface. She inspires engagement in the study of spirituals as well as other activities that foster diversity, especially considering the need for a more global understanding within the field of musical study in general. She even provides practical, applicable ideas for achieving these goals (pp. 109–110).

While the chapters do build upon one another, this first portion of the volume, and indeed the entire work, could easily be used as a reference resource as well. This is not only true of the content within the chapters, but perhaps especially of the recommended recordings at the end of each chapter and the other supplemental resources provided online (all of which are marked with an eighth note throughout the work). There are also excerpts and charts that can be quickly located using the list of figures at the beginning of the book, not to mention the extensive index.

At the conclusion of Jones' section of the book, there are eight additional chapters by contributing authors. These include two chapters found across the *So You Want to Sing* series regarding vocal science and vocal health. The remainder are related to the topic of this particular volume and deal with choral arrangements, African American art song, collaborating with pianists, and spirituals as sacred world music. Perhaps the two most practically useful of these additional chapters are Barbara Steinhaus's "Spirituals: Interpretive Guidelines for Studio Teachers" and Felicia Barber's "Gaining Perspective: A Linguistic Approach to Dialect Found in African American Spirituals."

The first, by Steinhaus, offers an analysis of four recorded arrangements by Harry T. Burleigh as performed by baritone William Warfield. Her discussion of rhythm, tempo, phrasing, dialect, etc. is an excellent example of how to conduct an analysis as an individual or lead students through the process as an instructor. She further explores performance practice by using Warfield's own reflections on the similarities and differences of studying both Western European and African American art songs. This chapter concludes with three pages of very applicable teaching strategies for studio voice teachers.

The second, by Barber, complements Jones' chapter on dialect by offering further, alternative insight into the history and impact of the linguistics found in African American spirituals. Two charts and assorted helpful lists expand the understanding of altered diphthongs, softened consonants, and the unique modifications that can be found among regional dialects beyond the larger, more common performance practices. While it is a shorter chapter than most, its concise presentation is no less valuable in content.

On the whole, this is an excellent addition to the *So You Want to Sing* series. It brings light to one of the more diverse, and regrettably sometimes controversial, styles of singing and encourages all practitioners to invest in study and accurate portrayal of these songs and texts just as they would any other piece of vocal repertoire. It would be worthwhile to purchase and add to the shelves of a personal, public, or academic library.

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