

From your High School R&R Chair: Theodore Thorpe

Diversifying Our Choral Literary Palette: A formal introduction, a transparent conversation, and an encouraging resource

It's the first day of school. The first full day of in-person learning in almost eighteen months. Wait, did I just say that? You mean no more virtual or hybrid learning? You mean no more requesting students to turn on their camera? You mean no more, at least not for now, constantly following up with students about turning in their audio and video files for our virtual choral "window-pane style" projects? You mean no more imagining or reimagining what our ensembles sound like collectively? Yes, like you I'm both nervous and excited. I'm pacing around the classroom making sure chairs and stands are sanitized and in the right place. Making sure syllabi, handbooks, singer's masks, and tuning forks are ready to be passed out, all while keeping optimism at the forefront as students make their way to the classroom. The bell rings, students take their seats, and I ask for an A-natural hum from the soprano and bass section. Altos and tenors soon find the third and fifth scale degree, respectively. A choral warmup begins, then ends. We take a thirty second pause to internalize and reflect on what we just did, and what we haven't been able to do in quite some time. Never again will we take for granted the privilege to do what we just did collectively.

"Good morning!", I say to my Advanced Choir Class, and they respond, "Good morning Mr. Thorpe!" "I've missed each and every one of you." And my heart delights to hear them say, "We've missed you, too." "My name is Mr. Theodore Thorpe III, and my students call me Mr. Thorpe." To those of you reading this, I am currently serving in my twelfth season as Director of Choral Activities at the Alexandria City (formerly TC Williams) High School "where excellence exceeds expectations." I am honored to serve in leadership as your High School Repertoire & Resource chair. Now that we've been formally introduced, let's have a conversation. A continuing conversation. One that is ironically built on the inquisitive nature of young student choral musicians. My students know that any piece of literature introduced in the rehearsal space is not only theirs to execute musically, but also theirs to historically and socio-economically digest. As a man of African descent, my choral curriculum will naturally include literature by Black composers. Yet still, without informing my students right away of the ethnicity of the composer, these scholarly musicians have a keen sense of being able to differentiate the breadth of music from the African diaspora, versus simply checking the proverbial box. With that being said, I invite you to join this continuing conversation.

"Wade in the water," "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel," "Elijah Rock," "Soon Ah' will be done," "My Lord what a morning," "Deep river," and "Ride the chariot." Any of those sound familiar? Yes, they are some of the many Spirituals that we as high school choral music educators have taught, programmed, and performed on the concert stage. Most of us understand the intrinsic value of the Spiritual and its overall importance to the diaspora of American music. We also are aware of the many contributions of African American composers and arrangers to said Spirituals. This is because these compositions are idiomatic to the usual canon associated with Black musicians. Other examples of this association would be jazz, rhythm and blues, funk, rap (hip-hop), and gospel music. While we certainly hold dear the idioms of American music by Black composers and continue to celebrate them, there was and is so much more!

"Atonement" Op. 53 by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and *"I Am Only One"* by Adolphus Hailstork were both written by black composers. Any of these titles sound familiar? How about *"Psalm For The Living"* by William Grant Still or *"Scenes from the Life of a Martyr"* by Undine Smith Moore or *"Arise Beloved"* by Rosephanye Powell or *"Music of Life"* by B. E. Boykin or even *"Stars"* by George Walker? The musical pieces mentioned here are just a taste of an existing, ever growing, and developing catalog of non-idiomatic compositions by black composers. This compilation is a resource for any music educator who would love to continue to broaden and diversify their choral literary palette. Herein lies my conversation with friend and colleague Dr. Marques L. A. Garrett, assistant professor of Choral Music at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and founder of the compilation of Non-Idiomatic Compositions by Black Composers.

Dr. Garrett, a Virginia native, conducts the University Chorale, Chamber Singers, and teaches courses in graduate choral literature and undergraduate conducting. In addition to these responsibilities, he is a renowned composer, vocalist, guest clinician, and lecturer. His lectures and presentations specifically on the non-idiomatic compositions of black composers have been sought after by state and regional conferences of the American Choral Directors Association. In our conversation, I asked Dr. Garrett what inspired him to research this topic as well as compile such a catalog. He mentioned while in his graduate studies at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, he was surprised at how many of his colleagues were unfamiliar with the non-idiomatic choral music of black composers. Many of these contributions have been around for decades and even centuries but have not received the recognition nor graced the stage as regular choral programmatic material for public consumption. These contributions include but are not limited to choral anthems, choral art songs, choral motets, cantatas, masses, suites, oratorios, rhapsodies, folk songs, and choral meditations.

With so many pieces of choral literature composed by so many Black composers, it begs the question: how could such treasures go unnoticed? Are they accessible? Is it possible that they're unpublished? Have they been performed regularly? Have they been given a national platform or main stage to be performed regularly? Are they a part of the literary teaching tools used in classrooms where choral literature is the subject area? While all of these are valid questions, they are a secondary topic for another discussion. The good news is, thanks to the research and work of Dr. Marques L.A. Garrett, we have a resource. See below.

<https://www.mlagmusic.com/research/beyond-elijah-rock>

Here you will find a full list of non-idiomatic choral music by black composers for SATB, SSAA, TTBB, and other voices. Some are accompanied, others unaccompanied, and even some settings are with full or chamber orchestra. You will also find the publishers of each piece as well as specific links for purchase. What's wonderful about this compilation of music is that it also shines a light on black composers both past and present. Musicians like William Grant Still, R. Nathaniel Dett, Undine Smith Moore, José Maurício Nunes Garcia, and Florence Price. Musicians like B. E. Boykin, J.S. Mzilikazi Khumalo, Ysaye Barnwell, Ken Burton, Jason Max Ferdinand, Marques Garrett, and yours truly.

Blake Morgan, an incredible composer, arranger, educator, vocalist, and member of renowned ensemble *Voces 8*, compiled a non-comprehensive list of thirty-one black composers that he advises should be on your programs and playlists. I certainly concur with his sentiment. As we continue to include the compositions of these great musicians in our concert programming, it is of equal importance to discuss in

our classrooms the historical significance of these composers, and the socio-economic reasons that inspired their writings. (See Below)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e49ef526b594c4c6ca3db0c/t/5f5539f636732345b4dfef5d/1599420945355/Black-Choral-Composers-Blake-Morgan.pdf>

I'm sure you would agree that teaching music through a pandemic has been both challenging and humbling. It has also given us a greater perspective on life as we fought to find the silver linings, while not knowing when or where our next performance would be. In full transparency, some of us weren't sure another virtual choral year was even fathomable. We have now reentered the classroom, with all those beautiful, partially covered faces looking to us to lead. It's now our responsibility to use as many tools and resources as possible to teach, inspire, build, cultivate, and unify with our hearts as well as continue to move the choral conversation forward.

From your Four Year College R&R Chair: Erin Freeman

The other day I saw a meme that captured my entire ethos this semester. A man is sitting at a table. To his left are multiple sized jars of lemonade. To his right is an unruly pile of lemons, with more lemons pelting him at rapid speed. He has his head on the table in defeat, allowing the lemons to continuously hit him on his head, shoulders, back, and arms. He has no more energy to catch and squeeze them, no more sugar to add, and no more jars in which to pour his homemade concoction.

I feel his pain—we all do. Since March 2020, we have caught the lemons midair, sometimes deftly, usually awkwardly, and turned them into something somewhat drinkable. Can't meet in person? Okay, let's invent a new form of choir called ZoomHearsal! Can't perform for people? Okay, let's get all dressed up, perform for an empty auditorium, and livestream for our families at home. Budget cut? Okay, let's learn GarageBand, Adobe Premiere, QuickTime, and Camtasia ourselves and create some palatable videos to give our singers some inspiration and motivation. Let's cheerlead, compromise, and pivot. Oh, how we'll pivot. And we'll do it with enough enthusiasm to mask our fear, anger, and dread.

At our best, we'll consider how all these new skills and outlooks can make the choral ensemble better in the future. At our most vulnerable, we'll break down sobbing on Zoom in front of our entire ensemble while singing "My Way" with alternate lyrics. (That may or may not have happened last year, and I think it was recorded!)

And now, we're just tired. Out of ideas, hit with random bits of news that threaten to derail our precarious plans at any moment. The lemons keep coming, and we, as choral leaders, are out of sugar and jars.

So, what can we do? Last semester, my mantra was "People First, Content Second, and Technology Third." This year, I'm still trying to live by those words, but given the inability to feel secure in any long-range planning I'm pivoting (yet again) to a secondary modus operandi: "The little things matter." Without confidence that a performance will actually manifest and with the novelty of meaningful videos