—Notes on Slave Narratives & Spirituals—

Slave narratives are invaluable to spiritual singers, as they are primary testimonies filled with numerous details of slave life. Historians estimate that there are approximately 6,000 published narratives by African American slaves spanning 170 years of testimony, from book-length autobiographies to short newspaper accounts and interviews.

Many slave narratives are contained in modern anthologies, like Julius Lester’s To Be A Slave. John Blassingame edited an important collection, Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies, the largest modern collection of slave narratives, contains first-person accounts about culture, plantation life, sexual exploitation and psychological responses to bondage. These important eyewitness accounts are provided by a variety of persons: house and field servants; slaves docile and rebellious; urban and rural slaves, and runaways. Harvard University African American Studies Director Henry Louis Gates, Jr. insists that authentic slave narratives are of great significance since African American slaves were among the only enslaved people in the world to produce a body of writing that testified to their experiences. Perhaps the most famous narrative is that written by fugitive slave Frederick Douglass (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845). A fragment of his narrative is included in this program.

With the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the American Civil War brought freedom to over four million slaves in 1865. Nearly 100,000 of these former slaves were still alive seventy years later in the period of the Great Depression. During the 1930s, the Work Projects Administration, through its Federal Writers Project, recorded interviews with over 2,400 of these former slaves about their life experiences under the institution of slavery. Many of these former slaves were well beyond ninety-years old. Their oral narratives were recorded and transcribed as part of the living history of American slavery. Their words illuminate the timeless complexities of oppression, its permutations, and the fragile, universal dream that is freedom, and all resilient movements toward it.

African American spirituals are a unique genre unlike any other developed on the African continent or anywhere else in the entire African Diaspora under slavery. African American spirituals represent one of our nation’s great cultural gifts to the world. Numbering more than 6,000 examples in dialect, they remain one of the largest bodies of American folk songs to reach the 21st century. Additionally, spirituals have given birth to the great number of other American music genres, including blues, country, jazz, gospel...
and rock. Spirituals played a central role by energizing protesters during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 1960s. As a precious remnant of the encounter between African, European, and Christian culture in the American South, spirituals give eternal voice to the righteous hope for freedom, justice and understanding.

Singing was a vital dimension of the moment and situation of African American life. Whether in joy, in agony or sorrow, at work and rest, in worship, in defiance, in flight or danger, in remembrance and the ethereal, spirituals illuminate the singing soul at the center of the incomprehensibly stressful lives African Americans struggled to carve out for themselves under the yoke of slavery. Spirituals rose-up from a strong, sacred heart, complex, sophisticated, expressive and extemporaneously organic — and as such present a revealing look at the essence of African Americans — resilient souls otherwise disfigured by hundreds of years of unrelenting systemic characterizations as savages. Emanating from that soul is a surprisingly hopeful optimism that transcended even the wretchedness of the slave experience. This is central to the reasons all solo singers in America should study and learn to sing spirituals. It is an element critical to our transcendence—the act of soulful expression transforms the painful details and episodes of the slave’s experience. In Richard Newman’s article “Spirituals, African American,” he advises that singing from the heart transmutes “these songs of sorrow into songs of resilience and overcoming, and even into affirmations of divine redemption and human triumph.”

Spirituals have so much to teach us about the souls of enslaved African Americans. With these truths felt and sung, an undistorted exchange takes place in the minds and hearts of performers and listeners. This dialogue has power to transform us. This is among several important reasons so many people are deeply emotional and openly moved when they hear or sing spirituals: The truth sets them free. Frederick Douglass said, “The mere hearing of these songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.”

We have much to learn from these wise souls, for many were able to transcend an experience of extreme degradation, emerging from it as spiritually, morally and emotionally evolved human beings. Spirituals teach us, more effectively than any other means imaginable, the unlimited possibilities for human transformation and the manner in which the transformation process is aided and supported by the power of song and symbol.

Singers originally performed spirituals without accompaniment or audience: all in attendance sang. This program contains some of the most celebrated African American composers of spirituals in the 20th century. Pioneering arrangements, like those by Harry
T. Burleigh, add color and support to a relatively unadorned vocal line. Piano arrangements by Hall Johnson, Margaret Bonds, and Moses Hogan also add sophisticated counterpoint and an expanded harmonic language to a highly rhythmic texture. Singers should also remember that a long unaccompanied performance tradition exists for spirituals of every style and tempo. Virtually any spiritual can be performed effectively and stylistically in this manner. Careful focus on the text, form, scale, color notes, strong rhythmic elements, silences, and a text-inspired sense of improvisatory embellishment transform the smallest melody into a prayerful intercession. Many African Americans continue to believe that the unaccompanied spiritual is the pinnacle of the art. Sung either way, accompanied or unaccompanied, they remain effectively expressive.

Slave narratives and spirituals together are powerful witnesses to significant chapters in American history. Together in this program, I hope they will challenge us as perhaps they were meant: powerful remembrances, stories of motivation, determination, and inspiration that sustained African Americans through slavery, reconstruction and Jim Crow segregation; songs and stories of power and action that moved this nation through its third revolution — the civil rights movement — and beyond; songs and stories of conscience and transformation waiting to bring us to that place where we need to be — together. We can learn to embrace all they represent, taking them into our minds and hearts.

Our nation persists in the midst of a righteous struggle of the heart to reconcile its racial past for the sake of its future. The heart is the place where true change begins. The path to understanding and transcending our racial legacy passes through our shared joys, pains and sorrows, not by painfully forgetting or fearfully ignoring them. Learning to love, teach — and especially — to sing spirituals, brings us closer to humbly reconciling the truth of what we are, together.