

## WHITE SPIRITUALS

SIDNEY ROBERTSON COWELL

A GOOD many years ago the southern uplands captured from Maine a professor of German, with musical leanings, and turned him into a uniquely picturesque phenomenon in the history of American cultural exploration. Dr. George Pullen Jackson, born Down East in 1874, with degrees from Vanderbilt University and the University of Chicago, and considerable music study in Dresden and elsewhere in Germany, came to Tennessee in 1918 and almost immediately founded and directed (but did not conduct, as *Who's Who* allows him modestly to point out) the Nashville Symphony Orchestra.

At a time in the middle 1920's when the orchestra was engaged in what he describes as "puning around, getting ready to fold up and make way for the commercially-packaged article," he was already wondering whether this country had any traditional music comparable to the German folksong he had studied abroad. Folklore research in this country was still following the emphasis of the ballad scholar, James Francis Child. Although the famous collection of American melodies made in the Appalachians by the English musician, Cecil Sharp, had already been published in England, it was almost unknown here. American folklore was temporarily in the hands of language scholars and students of folk poetry whose musical ignorance led them to regard the modal melodies which accompanied the latter as the tuneless mutterings of an unmusical folk.

Dr. Jackson received, therefore, less than no encouragement in his inquiries. But a lucky accident directed his energies to an investigation which was to absorb him for twenty years. The result has made all who wonder what American music is, infinitely his debtors. In the course of a casual conversation, a friend bet him that, despite his encyclopedic knowledge of musical history, he had never heard of the greatest musical organization America has ever seen. Dr. Jackson reports that he bit – and lost. For the first time he then heard described the singing of those many semi-rural southern groups who share a tradition which, in the years

between 1835 and 1860, swallowed up 600,000 copies of only one of its many published song collections. Groups like these – of which the Sacred Harp singers are perhaps best known – are to be found today in small towns from Florida clear across the South to California. They still absorb annually tens of thousands of copies of such books. They have their own notation, the famous “shaped-note” system, an American invention devised in 1803 by Andrew Law of New England. Itinerant teachers still conduct their own singing schools, exactly as in the period just following the American Revolution.

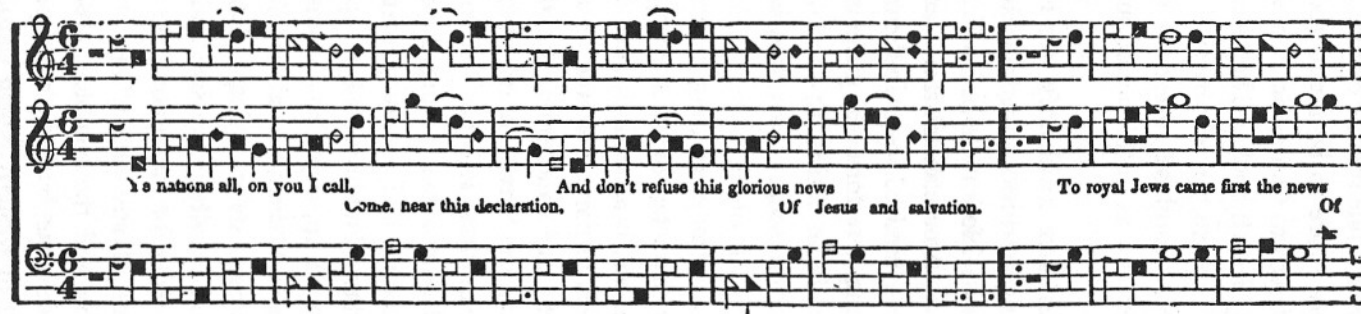
From this tradition Jackson was later to identify five hundred and fifty folk melodies as having been sung on this continent by large numbers of people for over two hundred years. Now melodies which have been sung here long enough to take on an American character are extremely rare. It is extraordinary to find several hundred songs in the oral tradition which can be shown to have been sung here for eight generations. These songs are, therefore, uniquely valuable in satisfying the curiosity most frequently expressed about American folksong. How does it differ from old country music? What is *American* about it?

It is not too early to say definitely, after examining the material Jackson has unearthed, that the harmony characteristics of the singing schools, as shown in their shaped-note songbooks, is an entirely new development in this country. This novelty proceeds in part, it is true, from a misconception of the “rules” but it is chiefly due to a feeling for the sound of massed voices which is as original as the Slavic choral tradition and as different from anything in European music as it is possible to conceive.


The harmonies are bare and strong, often lacking the third of the chord, full of parallel fifths and octaves, and sounding magnificent for the voices. There is likely to be octave doubling on every part, for you pick the part you find easiest and sing it up, if you’re a woman, down, if you’re a man. The original tunes, most of them modal, are in the middle or tenor part. The music is sung vigorously in a flat, rather nasal tone which seems instrumental rather than vocally expressive and which permits the singers to go on uninterruptedly for many hours at a time. The effect is incredibly strange and beautiful and greatly heightened by the universal participation in the singing and the complete absence of any passive audience. Guests are made welcome, but they are expected to join in. One Big Singing that I attended in western North Carolina brought together nearly four thousand people. The “moderator,” by exception

# THE BABE OF BETHLEHEM. 8. 7

Wm. Walker.



Ye nations all, on you I call, And don't refuse this glorious news To royal Jews came first the news  
Come, hear this declaration, Of Jesus and salvation. Of



As was foretold by prophets old, Christ the great Messiah, Isai - ah, Jeremiah.

AN AUTHENTIC AMERICAN CAROL  
Set down in the "Shaped-Note" System  
From WILLIAM WALKER'S  
*The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*  
Reprinted by permission of the publisher,  
Hastings House, New York

a woman, stood on a rock and led with a voice that carried far up and down the mountain.

The "shaped-notes" are an ingenious device intended to simplify the process of learning to sing at sight. Notes are placed on the staff as we are accustomed to see them, the rhythm indicated in the conventional way, but each note-head has a different outline (diamond, square, triangle, and so on) according to its relation to the tonic. Those trained in the system read briskly in three and four parts. The early forms of this notation used only four shapes, named (beginning with the tonic) fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi (hence the name fasola singers); later seven different shapes and names were used.

Jackson seems to have been struck first with awe at the phenomenon of a music so unknown to conventional circles yet so deep-rooted among its participants and of such widespread use. Then, after nearly ten years of investigation during which he obviously had a high old time visiting innumerable "singings" and joining in himself, he emerged with a volume entitled *White Spirituals from the Southern Uplands* (University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

He traces the history of the Densons and Walkers and other famous southern singing families, which produced generation after generation of hymn writers and song leaders. One warms to William Walker who followed his signature with the proud letters: A.S.H. (Author, Southern Harmony). They are inscribed with his name on his tombstone. The harmonizations were originally in three parts, a soprano and bass added (usually by the compiler) to what was frequently an already thoroughly familiar traditional secular tune. In the middle of the last century when Lowell Mason succeeded in levelling off New England hymnody into respectability, in accordance with his European training in raised sevenths and four-part harmony, the southern compilers felt they must compete with the new demand for four voices. It followed naturally that another singing school master should have inscribed on his tomb the legend, "Composer of 397 altos."

Such men still travel through small southern communities, combining carpentry, bricklaying, or helping as harvest hands, with the teaching of singing. They arrange ahead, through the churches, for singing-school meetings which last perhaps two weeks at a time in one spot and which children, parents and grandparents all attend together year after year.

Most of the shaped-note song books begin with a section on the

rudiments of music. Walker's forthright instructions for syncopation could hardly be bettered today by Mr. Robert Shaw:

#### OF SYNCOPATION

Pupil: What is meant by syncopation?

Teacher: Syncopation is any number of notes set on the same line or space and included by a slur; sometimes driven across or through the bar, and sometimes in the middle; one of such notes only are to be named, but sound the time of all the notes, whether driven across the bar or not, swelling the voice a little at the usual place of the accents.

#### III

Not least among the surprising byproducts of Jackson's singing-school investigations was evidence he uncovered to prove that texts and tunes of American Negro spirituals were derived, by an obvious method of simplification, from the spirituals sung by the Whites, and which were adopted and enriched by the Negroes in the course of their Christianization. This proof is so convincing that so far as I know the point has never been effectively disputed since.

That the Negroes reproduced exactly what they heard has never been part of Dr. Jackson's contention, however. Just what was changed or added and where the new elements came from is still a matter of warm dispute in certain quarters and increasingly detailed investigation in others. Jackson is definite in minimizing the effect of African influence on this country.

At the time his first studies were published, Jackson himself only dimly realized that the White Spirituals were traditional folk tunes which had secular parents in the British Isles as well as descendants in this country among secular and religious singers, both Negro and White. His original volume was followed by two collections reproduced with their complete texts but without the other vocal parts, five hundred and fifty songs in all. *Spiritual Folksongs of Early America* and *Down East Spirituals* (J. J. Augustin, 1933 and 1937 respectively) offer the melodies adopted from the oral tradition by the compilers of the shaped-note collections, as nearly as Dr. Jackson could determine them. The newest and fourth book, which Jackson firmly proposes shall be his last, is entitled: *White and Negro Spirituals* (Their life span and kinship; tracing two hundred years of untrammelled song-making and singing among our country folk, with one hundred and sixteen songs sung by both races). It will be published by Augustin this month. The vein Jackson has tapped here

is so rich and his enthusiasm so exuberant that important information jostles comment on entertaining odd bits through footnotes and appendices as well as in the body of his texts. The book is the extraordinary result of his extensive burrowings into the connections between these songs, the conditions which brought them about and the groups of White dissenters who put them to use. A few of his chapter headings give a clue to both story and flavor: "Old English dissent breaks out in American colonies," "Song purveyors to the Great Awakening mean well but muddle," "A free folk takes religion in hand," "Freedom in religion begets freedom in song – a religious folksong is born," "The carnal lover is plundered of his tunes."

When Dr. Samuel Johnson was taken to task by a lady of his acquaintance who wondered aloud how on earth a certain palpable error had crept into the famous Dictionary, he replied blandly, "Ignorance, Madam, sheer ignorance!" It is one of the most attractive aspects of Dr. Jackson's scholarship that he is able to contradict an earlier opinion with perfect affability when confronted by new evidence. He has already done this two or three times, correcting himself in successive volumes. The second half of this fourth book, which deals with "the whole story of American religious folksong as the Negroes sang it" contains so many statements based on insufficient information, particularly with respect to rhythm and African sources and the relation of Anglo-Saxon folk culture to that of minorities in this country, that adequate rebuttal would require a book.

Such a book, if it interested him, could safely be left to Dr. Jackson himself to write. Actually he seems to be somewhat tired of the whole subject, and is now devoting himself to setting machinery in motion for the return of the old folk-hymns to the urban hymnals. The concluding chapter of this "last" book has a fine title; it is Dr. Jackson's "Farewell to Africa." Unfortunately most students of acculturation in music will find it impossible to go along with Jackson so blithely. His contribution is not the less monumental however for being occasional vulnerable in such ways.