

Honoring Music of our Past: Arranging Traditional African-American Spirituals



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Introduction and Background

The process of arranging these spirituals began with researching recordings of former slaves singing spirituals and songs' histories through diaries within the Library of Congress. Because spirituals were sung throughout the South, any plantation or region might have had its own variation of a spiritual with a melody and verses slightly different to a neighboring area. Recordings and transcriptions were conducted across the South following the end of the Civil War by early musicologists whose desire to document and preserve this music has kept the genre alive. While "Wade in the Water" has been made famous by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other folk artists, "Hammer Ring" exists as a handful of prison recordings and with archived lyrics in government records. The challenge of creating arrangements of spirituals lies in pulling information from many collections of varying types of sources, maintaining each song's 'original' feel for historical value, while also adding musical interest in the harmonization to give each piece a choral presence. My pieces will be performed at the Fall 2016 concert.



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"Hammer Ring"

About the piece: "Hammer Ring" was sung by male slaves laying down railroads, with the "hammer ring" being the stroke of the hammer against a metal nail. The text likens the railroad work to the building of Noah's Ark and the finished product delivering them to liberation. Work songs typically repeated a verse twice with a response after each statement by the caller at a steady tempo that helped slaves get through the grueling day's work at an even pace. As was a dual purpose of many spirituals, this work song spoke to the slaves' desire to escape their horrific circumstances and find peace and salvation in heaven.

The structure of "Hammer Ring" is simple call and response led by a soloist who improvises text and answered by workers who chant the same response.

Caller:
I'm goin' down to the bottom,
I'm gonna build this old building,
A-just to ring my hammer,
So it'll float on water,
I got a nine-pound hammer,
Well Noah got his hammer,
I'm gonna ring it in the bottom,
Oh can't you can hear Noah's
hammer?

"Well," God told Noah,
"You'se a-goin' in the timber,"
"You argue some Bible!"
Well Noah got worried,
"What you want with the timber?"
"Won't you build me an arc, sir?"
I says Gold told Noah,
About a rainbow sign, sir!
About a rainbow sign, sir!
That's what I'm gonna do, sir,
Get across that water, sir.

Won't you ring old hammer?
Won't you ring old hammer?
Got to hammern' in the Bible,
Gonna talk about Noah,

Chorus:
(Oh let your) hammer ring,
(Oh let your) hammer ring!

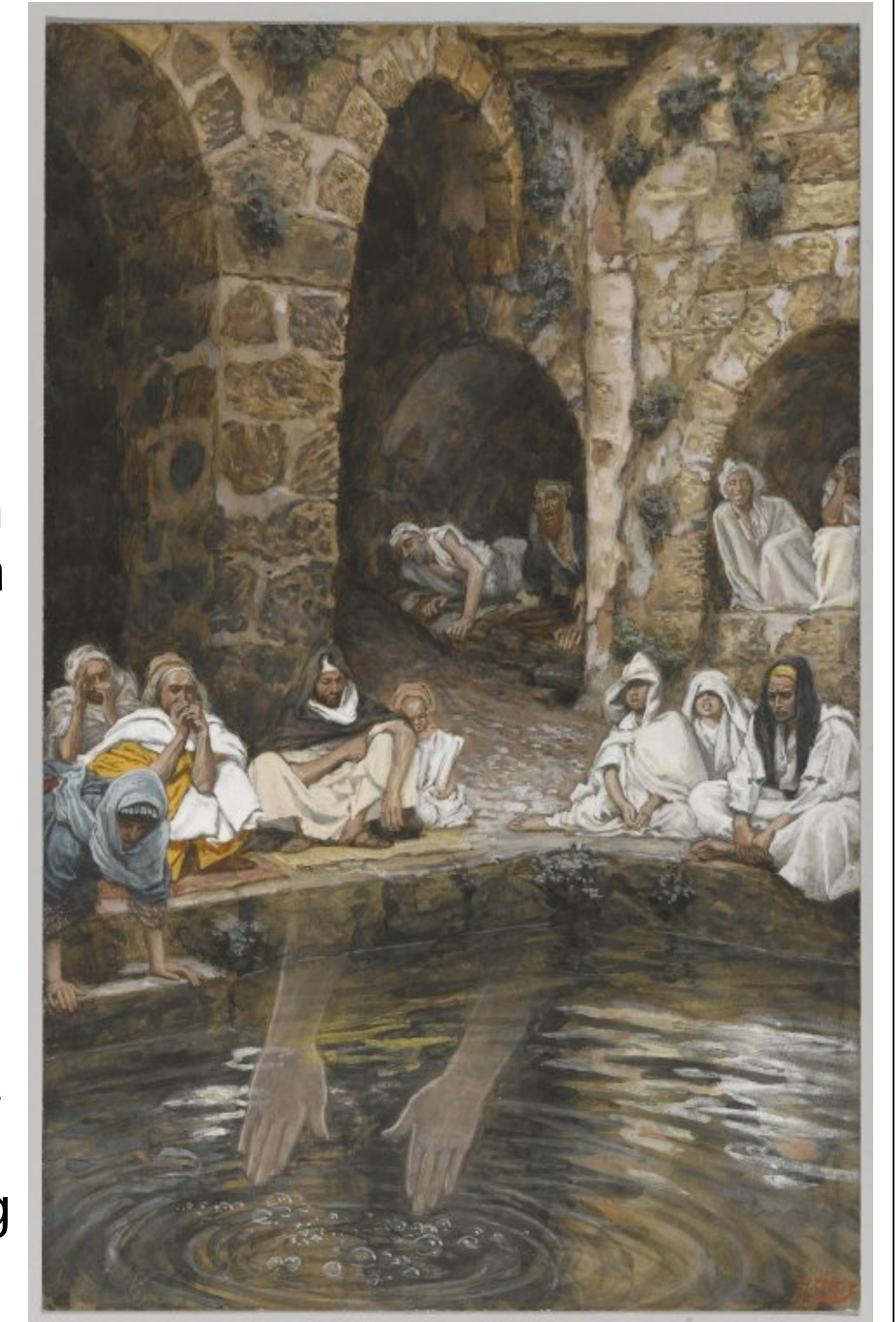


https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/bc/Anonymous%2C_Catalan_-_Noah%26amp%26Ark_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

"Wade in the Water"

About the piece: "Wade in the Water" was sung by enslaved women working indoors cooking, sewing, or at other domestic labor to help run the plantation. Women played a multiplicity of roles on plantations: as mothers, caregivers, and teachers educating their enslaved children in secret. On an unspoken level, women were providing emotional support for the men and husbands in the fields, carrying the stress of all in these horrible situations. This song comes from a place of quiet inner strength and radiates peace within the chaos of the outside world. It also represents the courage of being a wife or mother in dangerous and turbulent times.

This arrangement features sections singing in open fifths and octaves and in unison, historically prime features of spirituals, and in chordal harmony, a modern approach to restructuring these songs. The text is simple and repeating, referencing Jesus healing the sick at the Pool of Bethesda. New lyrics were actually added during the emergence of the Underground Railroad and passed around the South, which in code led escaping slaves North to freedom. Among these instructions was that one should 'wade in the water' of a river or stream to throw search dogs off their scent.



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Wade in the water,
Wade in the water, children,
God's gonna trouble the water.

References

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3. Work, John Wesley. *Folk Song of the American Negro*. Nashville: Press of Fisk University, 1915.
4. "Sweet Honey in The Rock - Wade in the Water." *YouTube*, uploaded by Riddle Films, 11 May 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRpzEnq14Hs>.
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