

MUSIC

# ‘Save the African-American Spiritual!’

## A Dialogue with William Warfield and Sylvia Olden Lee

On the weekend of Jan. 19-21, 2001, William Warfield and Sylvia Olden Lee were featured in a series of events in Houston, Texas, which offered to those privileged to be in attendance, precious insights into how to convey beautiful ideas through the performance of Classical music. Maestros Warfield and Olden Lee have a combined total of more than 140 years of experience in

such activity, as they have devoted their lives to art. Both are still energetically involved in teaching and performing, driven, in part, by a passionate desire to keep alive the American Classical musical tradition, which reaches its most powerful height in the African-American Spiritual. It was no less an authority than the great Czech composer Antonin Dvořák who described the Spiritual as the authentic American Classical form.

In his autobiography, *My Music and My Life*, Warfield wrote that, as a young man born into humble circumstances—a family of sharecroppers in Arkansas—he knew he “wanted to teach music to bring a new generation the lessons of my art in life. I wanted to play a role in world culture.” Although he has performed everywhere, singing parts from grand opera to Broadway, his real passion has been presenting German Classical Lieder and their American counterpart, the African-American Spiritual. In a career that took him around the world many times, his inspiring work earned him the honorary title of “America’s Musical Ambassador.”

**Spirituals are the basic folk-song music of the Blacks as they were expressing the desire for freedom.**

—WILLIAM WARFIELD



ERNS/Stuart Lewis

*Sylvia Olden Lee and William Warfield, Washington, D.C., 1994.*

Duckens, who is a featured singer with the Houston Ebony Opera Guild, participated in this portion of the program.

Warfield performed three sets of Spirituals, accompanied on the piano by Olden Lee, the first two of which

Sylvia Olden Lee broke the color barrier at the New York Metropolitan Opera, when she was hired as a vocal coach in 1954. She was later Professor of Vocal Interpretation at the Curtis Institute of Music

in Philadelphia. She followed in her parents’ footsteps as a part of the tradition of Classical music at Fisk University, where African-American students learned to sing Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, as well as Spirituals.

The weekend events in Houston, and similar events in Los Angeles and New York, are part of an ongoing collaboration of the two with the Schiller Institute—of which Dr. Warfield is a Board member—in a campaign to “Save the Spiritual.”

### Concert and Workshop

The artistry of Warfield and Olden Lee was on display at the concert on January 20, the second half of which consisted entirely of Spirituals. In addition to Warfield, Houston baritone Dorceal

were preceded by his poetic recitation of the text. The songs included in each set were composed or arranged by three of the greatest composers in the field: Harry Burleigh, Hall Johnson, and Roland Hayes. All the songs shared a common theme, the longing of man to achieve a personal relationship to God, with a Jesus whose suffering unto death is real for the singer, and yet, at the same time, who is still alive in his heart and mind. There is an identification with the pain, as well as with the promise of triumph over death.

The most effective pairing of these songs was that of “Take My Mother Home,” arranged by Hall Johnson, with “Ain’t Got Time To Die,” which Johnson composed. The former tells the story of the Crucifixion, following Jesus on his final journey to Calvary. Despite the abuse and suffering imposed on Him, He maintains His dignity—His primary

**It’s a rare African-American who knows anything about Spirituals today. They’ll sing ’em, but they’ve got the overdone speech, and you know, they’ll say, ‘Well, I’ve just never done this before.’**

—SYLVIA OLDEN LEE

**In his autobiography, Warfield wrote that, as a young man born into humble circumstances, he ‘wanted to teach music to bring a new generation the lessons of my art in life. I wanted to play a role in world culture.’**



*Dr. Warfield instructs Schiller Institute chorus, Leesburg, Virginia, May 1995. Chorus director John Sigerson is at right.*

concern is that His mother be spared seeing the agony He is facing. When Warfield finished this song, the audience was completely still, and many were choking back tears.

He then leaped into a joyful rendition of “Ain’t Got Time To Die,” which tells how one who is “servin’ his master,” is too busy and full of life to pass quietly from this world. The tears of sorrow from the previous song were transformed instantly into “tears of joy.”

To fully appreciate the ability of a teacher to evoke thoughtful emotion in others, which comes from dedicating one’s life to developing the capacity to convey, with passion, beautiful and profound ideas, one must see Warfield and Olden Lee conduct a workshop with voice students. While it is impossible to convey the breadth of the teaching which occurred at the work-

shop at the University of Houston, there was a single underlying theme to their comments: Both were insistent that a performer begin by determining the idea of the composer. If one does not know what the composer—and poet—were intending to convey, do not waste time standing before people to “perform.”

Olden Lee was particularly sharp with this message, asking several singers who sang Spirituals, if they thought they were singing opera arias: “This is not about your voice,” she said, “it is about ideas.” One singer, with a beautiful voice, but little in the way of phrasing, drew a biting comment. “Such a beautiful voice,” Olden Lee commented. “You would really be able to do something, if only you would think before you sing.”

Warfield picked up on this, when asked how to prepare to sing a particular piece. “This is what I believe Lyndon LaRouche refers to as ‘thorough-composition.’ If I understand him, it means that, before you sing the first note, you have the whole piece in your mind, you know where it is going. In that way, there is a direction for each phrase, each is shaped by knowing where you are going with the whole

piece. That is how I prepare myself to sing,” he said.

Again and again, both teachers would ask the student performer to recite the song’s poem, before singing it. In most cases, what was demonstrated was that the singer did not really know the poem. Another theme of Warfield’s was, that one must understand a musical line as a complete phrase, even when there is a steady, conflicting rhythm from the piano, or from the words themselves. “You must emphasize the idea,” he stressed. With a good composer, the tension between the steady rhythm of the piano and the contrary emphasis from the meaning of the line, makes for great drama.

There was much laughter and joy during the workshop’s three hours, as both the young performers being coached, and the audience, which included singers, music students, and faculty, made discoveries for themselves.

#### **Dialogue on the Spiritual**

*What follows is a partial transcript of an informal roundtable discussion on the African-American Spiritual, held at Texas Southern University (T.S.U.) on January 19. In addition to Dr. Warfield and Mrs. Olden Lee, participants included Débriaa Brown, Professor of Voice and Artist-in-Residence at the University of Houston; Dr. Jason Oby, Voice Professor at T.S.U.; and Bernadine Oliphant, of the T.S.U. Fine Arts Department. Harley Schlanger and Leni Rubinstein of the Schiller Institute also participated.*

**Dr. William Warfield:** It’s hard to corral thoughts into a comment, to say something about my religious experience. Being raised as a Baptist minister’s son, I was introduced to the Spiritual at a very early age, and grew up with it, so my concept of the Spiritual is that of a necessary thing one does, like eating and sleeping.

I was singing soprano in my father’s church choir before my voice changed, and I would do all of the high notes that the sopranos didn’t. I can’t remember not being associated with Spirituals, because my mother—I remember her favorite Spiritual was [singing] “This

EIFNS/Stuart Lewis

Little Light of Mine, I'm Gonna Let It Shine"—and it was very interesting that years later, when I married, I found out Leontyne's\* mother's favorite Spiritual was "This Little Light of Mine," so we both had that in common.

My father was in the Baptist church back in those days, and, at the regular Baptist church, the standard Baptist church, we could not play a jazz record. Jazz was considered the work of the devil. As a matter of fact, there's nothing new about that, they wouldn't allow instruments in the chapel when they first started, because instruments were the work of the devil.

So, the basic thing we had was singing, and what did we sing? We sang those things that came out, that helped us as a race, cope with slavery, and cope with inequities, whatever was going to give hope, to give understanding. And that's basically why Spirituals came about.

And Burleigh<sup>1</sup> sat down and made arrangements of Spirituals, which finally we all started singing as solo; but basically, they are the songs of people, and the people sang them together. Only in retrospect have we characterized them as "choral and response," and whatever we want to call them. . . .

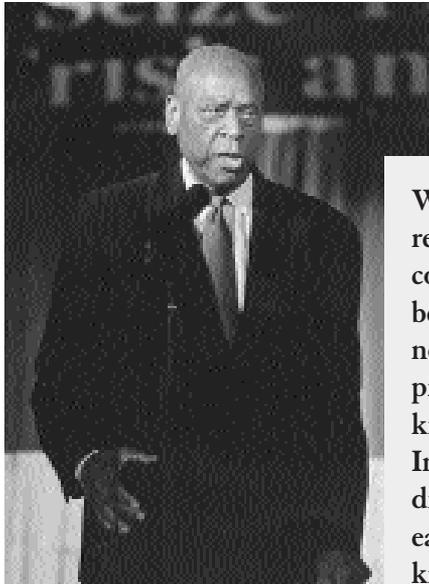
Many have said that the Spirituals didn't die because they were used by the slaves, who used them to find a way to freedom through the Underground Railroad. They were used for that—for example, "Steal Away" became a code to say that tonight, the Underground Railroad was running, so you should get ready to go; or "There's a Meeting Here Tonight," to let you know when to go.

\* Soprano Leontyne Price.

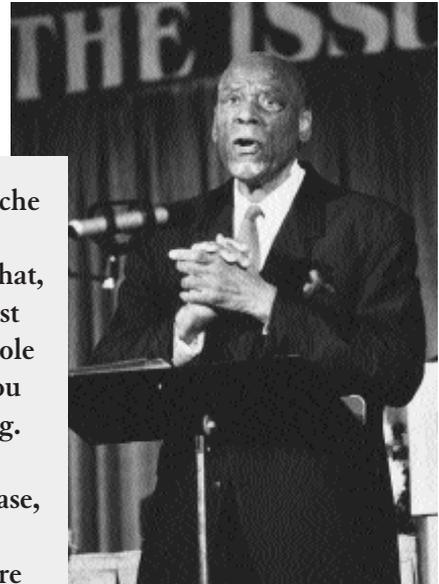
But this was just incidental, they weren't originally written for that.

They worked pretty well for that, however, as all of this was going on under the nose of the white plantation owner, they were planning their escape, and the plantation owner would say, "Aren't the Blacks"—only they wouldn't use that name—"singing nice and all?" These kinds of things were going on with the Spirituals at that time, as a thing of hope, and at the same time, as tribulation.

When I work with young people now—especially young Black people—I work with them in the sense of getting to know what the Spiritual was all about in the first place, and why they're singing it, so they know what they are singing in all its aspects. Then



*William Warfield in performance, Sept. 1999 (left), Feb. 2000 (right).*



**What Lyndon LaRouche refers to as 'thorough-composition,' means that, before you sing the first note, you have the whole piece in your mind, you know where it is going. In that way, there is a direction for each phrase, each is shaped by knowing where you are going with the whole piece. That is how I prepare myself to sing.**

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they can know how to approach singing it. Then we can go into various kinds of things to approach later on, so they can get its full meaning and emotion across. I have found working with white students who are starting from scratch, is sometimes easier than some of the Blacks who don't know anything but gospel, they don't know the difference, and it affects how they sing Spirituals.

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of what key it was, or what the voice was, and pretty soon, they would start singing "Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho."

They did not know anything about music, what they did just came straight from folks. They weren't musicians, but they were just expressing what they heard from the preacher, in their own way.

As for gospel, some of it has a spiritual similitude, and some of it makes sense, like hymns that have been written—but when it gets to be bumping and grinding, and going through all this

### Gospel vs. the Spiritual

**Audience:** What is the difference between Spirituals and gospel music?

**Sylvia Olden Lee:** I am the daughter, granddaughter, and great granddaughter of Baptist preachers. My grandfather was a slave and ran away as a young teenager when he heard about the War, on a plantation in Kentucky where he grew up. These people didn't know anything about music or composition, they'd just be out battling in the mines, or doing some kind of hard work, and one of them might think of what he had been able to hear from the visiting preacher on Sunday, preaching for the master in the front. And he was then allowed to come around the back and listen, and then to say something from that Biblical reference, without any idea

yelling “Jesus!” about fifty times, that has no relation to anything in the Spiritual, *ever!*

Because in the Spiritual, we have never had anything like losing yourself, in just getting worked up sensually. To me, I just haven’t been able to gather how gospel has a spiritual content. It might, from the text, because sometimes it has a text that is quite harmless, but when it gets all violent and everybody’s going on like this, and it goes over into the sensual, the carnal side, then I don’t want you bringing up God, and Jesus, and the Saviour, in the text. So I don’t know, I’m not too good on that.

**Audience:** Could I just comment on that, Sylvia? The Spiritual, of course, some people thought it was secular, and some people thought it was . . .

**Olden Lee:** How could anyone think it was secular? [Laughter]

**Audience:** Well, long ago, they used to have something called the “shouts”

after church, where they would sing the Spirituals, and there would be all this dancing and gyrating, and so forth.

**Olden Lee:** Yeah, but not all the shouting, not the sensual, in the Spiritual!

**Audience:** Yes, but you see, they couldn’t have it in the church. They would have to have it after church. This is the whole thing about it, even some of the Spirituals. They couldn’t sing it in the church.

But when they would have this shouting, it was like a thing that went around in the community, whispering, “We’re going to have a shouting after the service.” It was frowned on by the church. They would get there and they would dance some kind of a dance described as a shuffle, and I thought about it today, and I think I’ve seen it before. But there was the shouting, and gyrating, that you talked about . . .

**A performer must begin by determining the idea of the composer. If you do not know what the composer—and poet—were intending to convey, do not waste time standing before people to ‘perform.’ Olden Lee was particularly sharp with this message. ‘This is not about your voice,’ she said, ‘it is about ideas.’**



EIRNS/Debra Jambor



EIRNS/Debra Jambor

*Voice workshop, University of Houston, January 2001. Warfield and Olden Lee coach voice students.*

**Olden Lee:** There’s gyrating, and gyrating. You said “Praise God” with the timbrel and dance. I feel that there’s such possibilities of praising God, but not with that gyrating!

**Audience:** But this is why it was condemned in the church. The gyrating and shouting was frowned on.

**Audience:** Don’t you think the Spirituals came out of slavery, and the gospel came afterward?

**Warfield:** If you really want a simple definition of gospel, Spirituals are the basic folk-song music of the Blacks as they were expressing the desire for freedom. There was another thing developing that had to do with jazz, Louis Armstrong, and that whole Memphis and New Orleans thing. Later on, there became a fusion of the jazz and the religious thing, and that is what is commonly known as gospel.

**Audience:** Was that in the ‘20’s?

**Warfield:** Yes, with Thomas Dorsey.

**Olden Lee:** The Spirituals started in the 1600’s, out in the fields, with people who didn’t know Do from Mi, and didn’t know anything about reading and writing, or anything. They would just start singing. And the people who were with them would all come chiming in.

**‘The Work of the Devil’**

**Warfield:** The Spirituals had rhythm. Dr. Nathaniel Dett,<sup>2</sup> who made many important contributions to the devel-

opment of the Spiritual, was in Rochester, New York, and I was in his chorus. And it was one of the most wonderful periods of my life. I was a senior, and I sang in Dr. Dett’s choir. Every Spring, his chorus would give a concert, and he once said to me, “You know, my introduction to the Spiritual got me the worst beating and whuppin’ I ever got in my life. I was standing in the back of the church, and my mother was playing the organ, and she was playing this Spiritual, and it sounded so wonderful, I danced all the way up to the organ, and she grabbed me, and gave me the whuppin’ of my life. That was my introduction to the Spiritual.” And the very fact that it had that rhythm—he didn’t know of anything religious that had that kind of beat—that made him want dance, and he responded in kind.

But at any rate, when Thomas

Dorsey and the whole group came along, and I'm not telling you anything you don't know, the church looked completely down on this. You couldn't even get started in the church. He had to do it on his own, because it was a new approach and the idiom of it was so jazzy, that anyone in the Baptist church thought of it as the work of the devil.

I can even remember when we used to go to the Sanctified church, and my father was preaching, and there was a Mother Thorpe who came around with her daughter Rosetta, and they had the tambourines, and all of that. I experienced this in Rochester, New York. And I would get back, and every once in a while, I would throw in a little lick at the piano, and up at the podium, I saw my father looking at me, saying, "Uh, uh. We ain't having any of that." And I knew what that expression was about. And that was in the Sanctified church, they were absolutely that straight with their own.

So when Dorsey came along, I thought, "We can't have this in the church." It was that kind of reaction. You know what I'm talking about.

**Bernadine Oliphant:** Yes, I do know what you're talking about. I had some of the same experiences. Also, I grew up in the church in the '40's and '50's, and we had a choir director come to us when I was probably in the ninth grade, and she felt the same way about Dorsey. She had never heard it before. She was from the South. I still, to this day, remember the first gospel song I ever heard in my life, and how I felt. If I had been white, I would have been red all over. It was sung by a ten-year-old girl, and I was about the same age. It was "Our Heavenly Father's Children," and I wondered, "Oh, my God, should I leave the church, or what should I do?"

And it was at one of the Baptist conventions that used to travel all over Texas, and all the churches would come together. And when this music teacher came, and we were all ready to get the choir going, and she said to the minister, "We will not have gospel music in the church."

And that was it! So I am a person who did not grow up with gospel music, and even today, when I go to church, it's pitiful with the gospel music there. They're trying to be modern, and then you get into swing, bebop, and the blues. So you have gospel mixed with blues, and then they have what they call contemporary gospel, which is jazz mixed with bebop and rock'n'roll.

**Olden Lee:** Whatever it is, it has text to it, text which should be spiritual in its content. It's sacred!

**Warfield:** As long as the text is expressing religious things, it can be called gospel, and it can be straight out of a jazz book, and as long as the text is religious, and praising God, then it's gospel as far as they're concerned.

**Audience:** As we're going through this, it reminds me of the whole history of music. You know, when cavemen got out, and started banging on rocks and what-have-you, then started putting words to music, those intents were for godliness, to express a relationship between man and the divine. Later, as civilization developed more, then we

started saying, "Okay, I'm going to look more toward myself, and personify myself, and get more away from God," this was almost an attack on the church, at least that's how it seemed. Then there's instrumental music. You had a development where the orchestra was important, and then you had a development where the solo was more important. . . .

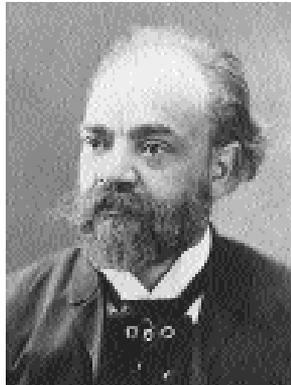
As I see the gospel, on the spiritual question, the intent, originally, was more spiritual, godly thoughts, but as we started looking more to ourselves, and adding that introspective intent to the music, and started moving away from the intent of godliness, to our own feelings with the gyrations, and "let me express some more emotional things that I originally wasn't so concerned with," and the gospel, even though they still have that spiritual text, they also put this more selfish aspect into the music.

**Olden Lee:** Sensual, sensual.

**Warfield:** Of course, when you get right down to it, gospel, as we hear it today, has evolved into so many different styles, that, for instance, the people who were with James Cleveland, were

All the songs shared a common theme, the longing of man to achieve a personal relationship to God, with a Jesus whose suffering is real for the singer, and yet, at the same time, who is still alive in his heart and mind. There is an identification with both the pain, and the promise of triumph over death.

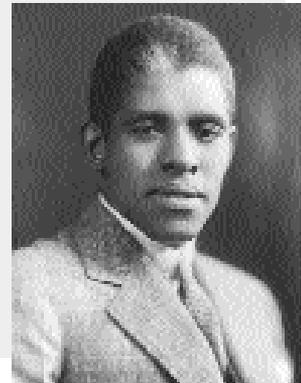
*Counter-clockwise from top left: Antonín Dvořák, Harry Burleigh, Hall Johnson, Roland Hayes.*



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shocked at gospel which had modern choruses and stuff, they'd say, "Oh, that ain't gospel!" Even within the realm of people who were into gospel, they criticized the other performers.

### Gospels and 'Gettin' Happy'

**Débriaa Brown:** I have a question, because I'm really here to learn tonight, because my experience with the Spiritual came so late in life, which is another story that I may tell later.

But I have a specific question. I used to hear, when I was growing up—there's a wonderful man named Edward Hogan, who was the uncle of the now very well-known Moses Hogan, who was an expert in the Spiritual and very learned. And I grew up as a Catholic. I had no background. And I met this wonderful man at Dillard University, and asked him to teach me how to sing this wonderful music, because I went to Mass. I didn't have any gospel background, or Spirituals—I didn't have any of it.

So he helped me, and his remarks were very much that in Louisiana, especially, much of the gospel music is text taken from the Protestant hymns that the slaves overheard in the different churches, and they would just use those words, which they liked, and would simplify them, and make their own songs.

But, my question is, I would hear different people, if someone would "get in the spirit" and doin' that dance, and

people would say, "That's a holy dance, now. You can't do that dance. You just sit down. This person has the spirit, and that's a holy dance." Until this day, I want to know what that is.

**Dr. Jason Oby:** It's called "gettin' happy."

**Olden Lee:** You can move your hips around in

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—BERNADINE OLIPHANT



*Roundtable on the African-American Spiritual, Texas Southern University, January 2001. Left to right: William Warfield, Sylvia Olden Lee, Débriaa Brown, Harley Schlanger, Barbara Morgan.*

EIRNS/Debra Jambor

**As for gospel, some of it has a spiritual similitude, like hymns that have been written—but when it gets to be bumping and grinding, and going through all this yelling 'Jesus!' about fifty times, that has no relation to anything in the Spiritual, ever! Because in the Spiritual, we have never had anything like losing yourself, in just getting worked up sensually.**

—SYLVIA OLDEN LEE

a holy way, or you can do it in a sensual way, that takes on really quite a different meaning, but to be saying "Jesus!" while you're doing it, is, to me, a blasphemy.

**Audience:** I know what you're saying.

When I was a little kid, we went to A.M.E. church, but my father was a Baptist, and that's where I go now, and just as you said, I remember when I went to church with my grandmother, people would "get happy." The preacher would go and stir them up to where they couldn't sit down any more, so they'd have to get up and shake it off, just dancing and shaking, and it's almost a Pentecostal kind of thing.

**Olden Lee:** But, what is that? They're happy and they can't sit down?

**Audience:** Well, I always wanted to experience that. I remember as a young girl in high school, "If I could just get that feeling." [Laughter] I used to think they were putting on airs, myself, that this couldn't be real, and it goes along with this kind of stuff like speaking in tongues, it's like something that they've been given, like a mantra or something to get them all whipped up. It's planned, it's very planned.

**Olden Lee:** To go back to the original topic, of the Spirituals—some of them were solo. Now gospel got joined in by the crowd, but the Spiritual got joined in by the chorus, but the first thought of Spirituals came from somebody in the field, and I get the idea, back in the 1600's and the 1700's, they were allowed to have a religious service somehow, by

**On this dialect thing, I did a class on Spirituals, and about the second day, I asked them, ‘Do you know any Spirituals?’ And the hands went up. But not a single one knew the Spirituals. They were singing gospel.**

—BERNADINE OLIPHANT

themselves, or with an itinerant preacher, who came to the master’s big house, and they were allowed to sit out on the big lawn, and hear the minister preaching for the family, the ruling family, and then after he had done with the sermon for the big house, then he was allowed to come out and do some preaching for us.

But the slaves weren’t allowed in the church. If you lived way out on one of these 200-or-more-acre plantations, and you weren’t allowed to leave, then your only training was when you heard the Bible being quoted, when you heard the preaching. Then the next day you got up and went to do your job picking the cotton, or whatever. You are absolutely a nobody. You are untrained. You don’t know anything, except what you heard. And that is where it started, with singing the texts while working, to express your devotion. Now, that does not happen with gospel.

### The Rhythm of Work and Thought

**Harley Schlanger:** To pick up on that thought, Dr. Warfield was talking in L.A., about the relationship between singing and work, the motions of work, and I wondered if you’d say something about that.

**Warfield:** Well, this is part of it: that when I work with youngsters, I can remember that most of the work songs and Spirituals, they were all things that people did while they were working. And so, even if you had something that is a slow-moving kind of a thing, look for a rhythmic pulse in it. [Dr. Warfield

demonstrates moving in rhythm while singing.] It’s always there, no matter how slow it is, and that goes back to them working, and basically, if you think about it as work accompanying an emotion, then you’re on the right track of trying to recreate these things.

And the faster it goes, the bouncier it gets.

**Olden Lee:** And it’s usually some kind of heavy work, like a sack of cotton. And Roland Hayes<sup>3</sup> would do the same thing.

**Warfield:** And Hall<sup>4</sup> would always say, “People don’t have the right idea of what syncopation is. You can’t sing syn-

where I don’t necessarily hear that in their music.

**Olden Lee:** The bounce is not necessary. Well, there’s certain Spirituals, for instance, if you’re singing [sings]: “I feel like, I feel like,” that’s already established a rhythm in the words. Or [sings]: “I feel like my time is gone.” But, if you’re doing [sings]: “Swing low, sweet chariot,” it gets to be less trouble. The text is not loaded. It doesn’t call for it to be heavy in thought. Or [sings]: “Over my head, I hear music in the air,” there’s nothing that is wearisome about that [sings]: “There must be a God somewhere.”

And then, some of the Spirituals have no rhythm to them. They are



*Voice workshop, University of Houston, January 2001. Dorceal Duckens conducts choral version of “Ain’t Got Time To Die,” with Dr. Warfield as soloist (left).*

copation if you’re going too fast. Most people take these Spirituals too fast, and they run away with it, and you just can’t do that.

**Schlanger:** Do you want to demonstrate that?

**Olden Lee:** I want him to demonstrate it.

**Warfield:** No, that’s for tomorrow.

**Audience:** Don’t you think accompanists also need to feel that?

**Warfield:** Of course!

**Audience:** I hear so many accompanists playing Spirituals, and this is

like a soliloquy.

**Warfield:** You stop, and you’re talking, and you’re thinking and fantasizing about a better place, you’re expressing ideas.

**Kids in Louisiana were ashamed. They said, ‘I don’t want to have to talk like that.’ Or they have told me, ‘I want to learn music, but I don’t want to sing all that stuff.’ Any dialect, like ‘dem’ or ‘dat.’ They immediately connect Spirituals with that, so they don’t want to do them.**

—DÉBRIAA BROWN

**Audience:** The first Spirituals, I guess, if you go back to it as folk songs, were obviously not accompanied, anyway.

**Olden Lee:** That's why I insist on everyone doing it, *at least once*, unaccompanied, and I really mean that. Because a soliloquy, I think the way that's done, is unaccompanied and in a rhythm that's at the speed of your thoughts.

**Schlanger:** When did the piano start being brought in as accompaniment?

**Warfield:** With Burleigh, around then.

**Olden Lee:** And Mr. Burleigh didn't know much about Spirituals, he just loved them, and wrote them, because so many of his don't have the Spiritual color.

**Warfield:** As a matter of fact, I have a very good friend that I want to quote; "This is some of the most primitive harmonization that I've ever seen. Why Burleigh decided to put this chord here, I don't know."

**Audience:** And Dvořák was encouraging Burleigh, really, to transcribe the . . .

**Olden Lee:** . . . And I'm telling you, it's a rare Black, African-American, who knows anything about Spirituals today. They'll sing 'em, but they've got the overdone speech, and you know, they'll say, "Well, I've just never done this before." In Philadelphia! I've come across so many of them in my last thirty years in Philadelphia. Of course, gospel is very popular, but the Spirituals being done solo in many concerts, they over-pronounce them and everything.

**Warfield:** I sure do agree. I've shared it with several people before, but I haven't told you. You'll get a kick out of this. I had a student, in Southside Chicago, who had the worst drawl. You know, "Ah'hmmm this," and "Ah'hmm so-and-so," drawling and carrying on. And he gave me one of these, "Oh, Ah'hll bring a spiritshul t'marrow." I said, "Okay, what have you brought?" And he said, "Oh, ah'hmm goin' sing, mmm, 'Honah, honah,' by Hall Johnson." [Warfield

sings in a rapid, exaggerated manner, in perfect English, without dialect, accompanied by howls of laughter from the audience.]

I said, "You've got to be kidding!" All of a sudden, he was this great King George or something. I screamed, "You don't sing it that way. You must be joking."

**Bernadine Oliphant:** On this dialect thing, I did some lectures on singing right here at Texas Southern University.

**I was in Austria and Germany when the Berlin Wall came down, and I found that so many of the Eastern people, the Russians, and the people from the Balkan countries, are so in love with this music, it's uncanny.**

**I was doing *Carmen* in Romania, and this guy said, 'I'm having this recital, and I'm singing some of your music.' And I went and heard the recital, and this man sang these Spirituals with intensity and feeling. It was wonderful.**

—DÉBRIAA BROWN

I came here seventeen years ago, and I did a class on Spirituals, and about the second day, I asked them, "Do you know any Spirituals?" And the hands went up. I said, "Sing it for me." Not a single one knew the Spirituals. They were singing gospel. Oh, I was so embarrassed. I said, "I've got to do something about this."

I gave out little charts with the vowels on them and so forth. But it is so easy, because when I do these classes, they are for people of all ages, and it's as easy to teach whites and non-Blacks as it is to teach Blacks, sometimes, because of this problem.

In Oklahoma, there was a Black student there, and most of the students I worked with were white, but this Black student absolutely did not want to sing with us. Absolutely did not want to sing the Spirituals. So I worked with him, and by the time we finished, he could sing Spirituals.

**Brown:** I'd just like to make a comment about an interesting thing that happened in the Eastern European zone. I was in Austria and Germany when the Wall came down, and I found that so many of the Eastern people, the Russians, and the people from the Balkan countries, they are so in love with this music, it's uncanny. And they know it, and I tell you, they can sing it. It's wonderful.

It was thrilling for me to get to Romania, I was doing *Carmen*, and this guy said, "Well, I'm having this recital, and I'm singing some of your music." I said, "How nice." But I was thinking, as an American, singing "your music," could mean a lot. And I went and heard the recital, and this man sang these Spirituals with intensity and feeling. It was wonderful.

**Audience:** I have a Japanese friend, to whom I taught some Spirituals. She sings them all over the world, now. I know people really love them.

#### The Issue of Dialect

**Audience:** I know some Black churches in the United States don't associate with or encourage

the singing of Spirituals in the church. Why is that?

**Olden Lee:** The shame of the bad English, and the dialect.

**Oliphant:** The larger Black churches do, but you have a much larger congregation there, where they can have several different choirs. But the choir directors here, receive a lot of telephone calls from ministers, bemoaning the fact that they cannot find qualified musicians to play in the church. Generally, they pay very well. There was an article in the newspaper about four months ago, talking about the poor quality of music in the churches, and we get calls all the time, because the churches really want choirmasters that can do these things, and they hire people who don't have very good skills, because people really are clamoring for the gospel music, but at the same time they want to have quality, and it's difficult to have the two things co-existing. They don't have a

shared total idea, they don't have a shared goal.

And the singers, they want to take voice lessons because they want to have a stronger voice, so they can be the next pop sensation. So, when you're trying to help them, you don't even agree on what the outcome is, that you're working toward a common goal.

**Brown:** Kids in Louisiana were ashamed. They said, "Well, I don't want

trainee was blonde and blue-eyed, but she had such an ear, that I started working with her. She entered the door, walked around, sang the "Strawberry Woman," and went out. It was so authentic, one of my Black students said, "Uncle Bill, you oughta be ashamed of yourself, giving away all our secrets." [Laughter]

**Audience:** But even with that "Strawberry Woman," we forget that it was

"Ride On, King Jesus." And I introduced him to some "blue" notes, and that child got up there, and our chorus director said, "Are you sure he ain't got Black blood in him?" But he heard in his mind how it should sound, so he was able to sing it.

**Leni Rubinstein:** I have read that part of the very special quality of Spirituals comes from the tradition of African singing through oral communication. And that this was combined with the conditions of learning about Christianity, and using that together, that this special quality can be traced back to that. And I would like to know, how or where this can be demonstrated.

**Warfield:** Basically, in the scale, which is sort of pentatonic. That's from Africa, and also the rhythms.

**Rubinstein:** Can you show me an example?

**Warfield** [sings]: "Wade in the watah, in the watah, children, wade in the watah."

The word "watah" is sung slightly flat. And then the rhythmic patterns were from Africa, with the drumming and so forth.

*The evening ended with several demonstrations of Spirituals, including Dr. Warfield's beautiful rendering of "Li'l Boy, How Old Are You?" by Roland Hayes.*

—Harley Schlanger



ERINS/Stuart Lewis

*Informal discussion, Schiller Institute conference, January 1998.*

to have to talk like that." Or they have told me, "I want to learn music, but I don't want to sing all that stuff." Any dialect, like "dem" or "dat." Of course you realize, it's not absolutely essential, but they immediately connect it with that, and so they don't want to do that.

**Audience:** Some of the singers that they have, today, use fantastic embellishments. And people like Louis Armstrong do a lot of improvising, but when it's sung well, people really do love it.

**Oby:** But, I do hate to see these things come, particularly, into the Black church. Whereas other things could, and should be, preserved, these things take over and others decline.

**Warfield:** I want to share something. One of my students at the University of Illinois did a lecture recital on "street calls," and traditions like that. And he asked me if I would train someone to do the "Strawberry Woman," from *Porgy and Bess*, as an example. Now the

the Jewish George Gershwin, who composed it.

**Warfield:** If you go down there, and hear this, and relate to it in the right way, it comes. It comes from listening, from hearing the rhythm of the voice. I started a kid singing, one of my tenors, doing

**One of my students asked me if I would train someone to do the "Strawberry Woman," from *Porgy and Bess*. Now, the trainee was blonde and blue-eyed, but she had such an ear, that I started working with her. It was so authentic, one of my Black students said, 'Uncle Bill, you oughta be ashamed of yourself, giving away all our secrets.'**

—WILLIAM WARFIELD

1. Harry T. Burleigh, 1866-1949. One of the pre-eminent arrangers of Spirituals, he collaborated with Antonín Dvořák when Dvořák was the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, and Burleigh was one of the students.
2. Nathaniel Dett, 1882-1943. A renowned teacher and choir director, who arranged and composed Spirituals, he compiled "The Dett Collection of Negro Spirituals."

3. Roland Hayes was the first African-American singer to win recognition as an artist from American audiences and critics; he was an outstanding figure in the tradition associated with Fisk University.
4. Hall Johnson, 1888-1970, was known for his work as a choral director and arranger. Johnson was also a composer, who helped popularize the African-American Spiritual for a broad audience.