

Dundas Valley Orchestra
A Celebration of Black History

January 25, 2015

The next set of pieces will include the Dundas Valley Orchestra and the Dundas Celebration Singers. This is a choir of experienced and enthusiastic singers from here at St. Paul's United Church, from St. Mark's United Church, the Mohawk College Singers, the Bach-Elgar choir, the Strata Vocal Ensemble and many individuals from Dundas and the surrounding area. The choir has come together just for the purpose of helping the DVO explore the rich variety of music by composers of African descent.

In this set of spirituals, we invite you to join us on a journey through time and space, back to the terrible days of the enslavement of Africans in North America. Music will be our mode of travel. This music is rooted in the rhythmic traditions of African folk music, born in the suffering that found voice in the blues, and influenced by the harmonies of European music.

We'll listen to three of the spirituals that stand as a testament to the resilience and creativity of the slaves in the Southern United States.

The people displaced by the Atlantic Slave Trade were not taught to read or write and they were forbidden to congregate after their work hours. How then, in this harsh life, could they communicate with one another? The answer was so amazingly simple, that it went unnoticed by the plantation owners for decades. Through simple songs that spoke in codes of religious metaphors and railroad terminology, information was shared regarding planned escapes, routes north, and places of safety. Slaves were alerted to the presence of "conductors" who were those courageous people like Harriet Tubman who came from the north to assist the escapees.

Coded spirituals came in two categories. First were signal songs that indicated that the time was good for a planned escape. Secondly, there were map songs that relayed valuable information to aid the runaway on the journey north.

The first song that the choir will sing is one of the earliest map songs. It is entitled "*Follow the Drinking Gourd*" and is an excellent example of how information was passed along to hopeful runaways. The text, "*When the sun comes back*" refers to the winter and spring seasons, when the path of the sun through the sky begins to move

higher each day. This is when an escapee should begin the journey. The Ohio River will be frozen and can be easily crossed in the winter. Quail are mentioned in the text; they are migratory birds that winter in the South. This is another sign to begin the journey. The Drinking Gourd is the shape of the Big Dipper, which contains the North Star, the chief pointer to the fleeing slaves. The old man in the song was Peg Leg Joe, a Conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Other songs could pass on important information to escaping slaves. In the second the spiritual, *“Wade in the Water”*, the instruction is simple and clear. It is more difficult for bloodhounds to trace a scent if the escapee travels in the water.

The enslaved peoples were always mindful of the punishment that could result from discovery of escape plans. Using creative metaphors, many Southern Blacks sang songs that in one context were recognizable as a biblical reference, and in another could signal that conditions were good for an escape attempt.

The third song the choir will sing is the spiritual, *“Keep Your Lamps”*. It is clearly based on the story from Matthew, Chapter 25, v 1-13 – the story of the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom. However, if you were waiting for a signal that a conductor would soon be near – this signal song’s message is clear – *“the time is drawing nigh”*.

The last song in the choir’s set is a rousing arrangement of three spirituals entitled *“Morning Glory”*. If you were a slave in the Southern U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries, and you were ready to try the dangerous journey north, you would wait for a sign that an Underground Railroad conductor would soon be near.

You would understand the codes, including the use of the word “chariot” and “train” for the Underground Railroad itself and text from these spirituals would be clear to you:

“gonna ride up in the chariot soon a in the mornin’ ”,

and

“going home on the mornin’ train”

and

“in a that great gettin’ up mornin’, fare ye well”

They all mean the time is near, a conductor will arrive soon, and your perilous journey to freedom is about to begin. Safe travels.