

Craig Courtney’s Arrangement of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*: Analysis for Performance.

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Origin of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”

Who is the poet? James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), who was an American writer and civil rights activist. Johnson was a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1920, he was the first African American to be chosen as executive secretary of the organization.

Who is the composer? John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954), the brother of James Weldon Johnson.

When was the premiere? It was first performed in public in Johnson’s hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, on February 12, 1900, by a choir of 500 schoolchildren at the segregated Stanton School, where James Weldon Johnson was the principal.

What was the purpose for writing this song? For a celebration of Lincoln’s Birthday. As we know, Lincoln was remembered as the great emancipatory president who ended slavery in the US.

Why is this song called “The Black National Anthem”? In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) entitled it “the Negro National Anthem” for the liberation and affirmation of African-Americans.

Who is the Arranger Craig Courtney?

- Born in 1948 in Indiana
- He earned Bachelor and Master degrees in piano performance at the University of Cincinnati
- He composed more than one hundred sixty choral octavos, eight vocal collections, a piano solo collection and six extended works for choir and orchestra.
- He attends The Church at Mill Run, where he directs the choir and leads worship for several services on Sundays.

Who is the Texas State Men’s Choir?

It is a performance ensemble that consists mostly of non-music majors of Texas State University. There is no audition to enter this ensemble. Students can enroll every semester. Dr. Babcock is the professor and Esther Park is a current graduate assistant. This ensemble meets every Monday and Wednesday 2:00-3:20pm at Evans Auditorium. The Men’s Choir will have a Concert Broadcast on April 24, 2021, to which our university community is invited.

About the Original Text

What is this song about? The song is a prayer of thanksgiving for faithfulness and freedom. It is based on the Biblical Exodus from slavery to the freedom of the “promised land”. The poem says that we should all lift our voices and sing together with respect to liberty. One of the impressive literary tools used by the poet is the symbolism: Singing is the symbol of joy and freedom, while stony roads are the symbol of suffering. The lyrics consist of three stanzas.

Lift ev’ry voice and sing,
‘Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on ’til victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
‘Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.

What is changed in this arrangement?

One of the remarkable changes is that the third stanza is omitted. As its substitution, Courtney quotes the refrain of the well-known traditional Spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” in the introduction.

Nobody knows the trouble
I’ve seen
Nobody knows like Jesus
Nobody knows the trouble
I’ve seen
Glory hallelujah

Comparing the third stanza of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and the refrain of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”, personal pronouns are changed from the first-person plural personal pronoun “we” to the first-person singular nominative “I”. The limitation that “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was for Afro-Americans is dissolved, and this music is for everyone who is now suffering and can find no freedom or solution to the difficult situation. In my opinion, Courtney turns “Lift Every Voice and Sing” of the twentieth century to that of the twenty-first century for all people beyond racial boundaries.

How does Courtney arrange “Lift Every Voice and Sing” for men’s choir (two parts of tenors and two parts of basses-TTBB)?

In the introduction, a bass solo sings with text of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”, while the four-part chorus accompanies the bass solo by humming. This musical setting is effective to express personal emotion and prayer. Importantly, the introduction should be sung a cappella, without piano.

The introduction is followed by a piano interlude.

The music is changed with regard to key signature and meter: 1) from E Major to F Major 2) from 4/4 to 6/8. The key shift of half step up provides the audience with increased tension, more space and brightness. Also, the change between the rigid meter of 4/4 and the danceable meter of 6/8 is remarkable. In addition, for the first time, the piano appears to accompany the chorus.

The first stanza

Motive	A	B	C	B´
text	3 lines	3 lines	2 lines	2 lines
Scoring	Bass unisono & piano	Bass unisono & piano	Tenor unisono & piano	Tutti & Piano

The second stanza

Motive	A	B	C	B´
Scoring	Melody-Bass; accompanied by Tenor and piano	Melody-Tenor; accompanied by Bass and piano	Tenor begins, then Bass added	Tutti & piano