

“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing”

JOHN ROSAMOND JOHNSON (music)

B. August 11, 1873; Jacksonville, Florida
D. November 11, 1954; New York City

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON (lyrics)

B. June 17, 1871; Jacksonville, Florida
D. June 26, 1938; Wiscasset, Maine

Premiered February 12, 1900 at the Stanton School, Jacksonville, FL

Arrangement scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, with four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings (approx. 8 minutes).

“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was first performed in commemoration of President Lincoln’s birthday February 12, 1900 by a choir of 500 schoolchildren from the segregated Stanton School in Jacksonville Fla., hometown of the sibling creators John Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson. The song quickly gained popularity, as it became a way to protest racism, violence towards African-Americans, and discriminatory Jim Crow segregation laws. The NAACP adopted the song as “The Negro National Anthem” in 1919. Copies could be commonly found in black churches nationwide, often pasted directly into the hymnals. “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” regained popularity during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and was entered into the Congressional Record in the 1990s as the official African-American National Hymn, inspired in part by Melba Moore’s hit recording.

Graduating from Atlanta University in 1894, lyricist James Weldon Johnson became principal at Stanton, where his mother had taught and he had received his early education. While principal, he studied for state’s bar exam on his own and passed, becoming the first African-American lawyer in the state of Florida since Reconstruction. His younger brother John Rosamond Johnson studied voice and piano at Boston’s New England Conservatory (graduating in 1897) and became a successful vaudeville performer. The two brothers had some early success in songwriting for New York theaters, such that, in 1902, James resigned his post to join his brother and Bob Cole as a songwriting team. In 1906, James secured a U.S. consulship to Venezuela, allowing him more time to write, and, indeed, he completed *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* during a second post at Corinto Nicaragua in 1912.

In his second autobiography *Along this Way*, James described the emotion in writing “Lift Ev’ry Voice.” “I could not keep back the tears, and made no effort to do so,” he writes, and goes so far as to report that creating the lyrics of this song became the greatest satisfaction of his life.

The first stanza of the song is a call for hope, liberty, and faith through a ringing of heaven and earth until “victory is won.” The second stanza recalls images of slavery’s

dark and bitter past only to be brought back to a reinforced theme of hope and victory in the final lines. The song concludes with the final stanza of unity and patriotism voiced in a call for spiritual strength and guidance.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Johnson and Johnson's "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" Feb. 22-24, 2007 with DSO Resident Conductor Thomas Wilkins conducting.

Program note by Aja Wood, an ethnomusicology graduate student at the University of Michigan, School of Music, Theatre & Dance.
