

“O, le’ me Shine, Shine like a Morning Star!” from Negro Folk Symphony

WILLIAM DAWSON

B. Sept. 23, 1899, Anniston, Alabama

D. May 2, 1990, Montgomery, Alabama

*The Negro Folk Symphony was first performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski conducting, on November 16, 1924. The composer revised the symphony in 1952.*

*Scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, chimes, claves, cymbals, gong, side drum, tenor drum, triangle, xylophone and strings (approx. 7 minutes).*

Anyone who has sung in a chorus – amateur or professional, has surely relished the arrangements of spirituals by William Dawson: idiomatic settings that make full use of the resources of the human voice. Indeed, much of his career was devoted to building up the choir of the Tuskegee Institute, where he founded the music school. Through its tours, the Tuskegee choir won a wide audience, and Dawson’s choral arrangements have remained in print over the decades.

He began work on the *Negro Folk Symphony* while in Chicago. While on tour with the Tuskegee choir in New York, he showed the manuscript to the conductor Leopold Stokowski, who made suggestions for its expansion. In this form, comprising three movements, it was first performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934. The critic for the *New York World-Telegram* was at the premiere, and he praised the symphony’s “imagination, warmth, drama ... [and] sumptuous orchestration.” In its overall shape, and especially in its orchestration, the symphony falls into the late-Romantic tradition. After a trip to West Africa in 1952, however, the composer revised it to embody authentic African rhythmic patterns, and it was in this form that Stokowski recorded it, and that is inevitably played today.

The symphony can be appreciated purely as a musical work, without and knowledge of the melodies or feelings that form its background. There are strong programmatic elements in the piece, however, as the composer’s own remarks, written for the world premiere, make clear:

“This Symphony is based entirely upon Negro folk music. The themes are taken from what are popularly known as Negro spirituals, and the practiced ear will recognize the recurrence of characteristic themes throughout the composition.”

In this composition the composer has employed three themes taken from typical melodies over which he has brooded since childhood, having learned them at his mother’s knee.”

Though many of the melodies Dawson used were those of his people, the method of symphonic development and the techniques of orchestration are those “used by the composers of the (European) romantic-nationalist school,” he said. It is not surprising, then, to hear echoes of the style of Dvořák and Tchaikovsky. Starting from the same

point as Glinka did with Russian folk material, Dawson came up with quite a different result.

The last movement has two principal themes, which are taken from African-American melodies. The first, with which the movement begins, and which returns in triumph at the end is the spiritual “O lem-me shine.” The second, sprightlier still, is “Hallelujah, Lord, I been down into the sea.” “Throughout the symphony,” writes Eileen Southern in *The Music of Black Americans*, “Dawson handles his musical materials in such a manner as to achieve a programmatic effect – suggesting such scenes as the shout, toiling in the fields, a burial, and the day of freedom.”

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Dawson’s Negro Folk Symphony Oct. 2-3, 1992, with Music Director Neeme Järvi conducting.

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Dawson, Negro Folk Symphony, Neeme Järvi conducting the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Chandos 9226.