

1-1-1980

The University Choir A Joyous Sound, A Noble Tradition

Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Scarupa, Harriet Jackson (1980) "The University Choir A Joyous Sound, A Noble Tradition," *New Directions*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol7/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

THE
UNIVERSITY
CHOIR

3



Choir — 1953

A Joyous Sound, A Noble Tradition

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

THE OCCASION: a program commemorating the publication of the first volume of the papers of Frederick Douglass, escaped slave, abolitionist, journalist, eloquent and prophetic spokesman against oppression in its various and sundry guises.

THE SETTING: Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., where the man responsible for the emancipation of many of Douglass's sisters and brothers in bondage met his doom.

ON STAGE: actress Ruby Dee weaves a forceful commentary on Douglass's life while a flute plays quietly in the background. "Douglass came to the conclusion," she reads, "that freedom for the oppressed could not be won without struggle."

As she speaks, a soft sound, a beautiful sound, a sound at once plaintive and defiant drifts down upon the audience from high up on the second balcony:

And before I be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be free

The voices behind the sound were those of the members of the Howard University Choir.

The selection of the choir to sing at that historic occasion last October in that historic place bore its own special brand of pertinence. For, throughout its long history, the Howard University Choir has played a foremost role in presenting and interpreting the songs which express the longing and hope of the American slave (and his descendants). Songs like "Oh, Freedom," and "Let Us Break Bread Together," "Who's That Yonder?" and "I Wanna Be Ready."

Observes J. Weldon Norris, director of choral activities and professor of music at Howard: "We feel a special commitment to sing the works of Black composers. [He includes spirituals and gospel in this category.] We really do. And we're

always on the lookout for new works to present. We were the first to do Noel DaCosta's "Ceremony of Spirituals" [in concert with the Symphony of the New World at Carnegie Hall in February 1977]. We did "Revelations" with the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre. This year we're doing some old style gospel music, the kind you don't hear anymore unless you go into old rural churches in the South and take along a tape recorder. All of this is part of a heritage people need to know about."

But the presentation and interpretation of songs of Black heritage is but one side of the choir's story. During the same three-month period in which it sang spirituals in honor of Douglass, for instance, it sang a traditional Bruckner choral mass at the historic service conducted by Pope John Paul II on the Washington mall during his trip to the United States; it welcomed members of the Howard community to the fall convocation ceremony with a joyous rendition of "The Pilgrims' Chorus" from "Tannhauser," composed by Richard Wagner, the 19th century German Romantic composer; and it joined with the veteran pianist-composer Mary Lou Williams in a performance of the acclaimed "Mary Lou's Mass," a pure jazz work.

Meanwhile, members of one branch of the Howard University Choir, the collegium, were working on Baroque and Renaissance scores, while the choir, as a whole, was practicing both an old gospel song—"When the Holy Ghost Fell on Me"—and Arnold Schönberg's "Frieden auf Erden" [Peace on Earth], a difficult, atonal modern work.

To say that the Howard University Choir is versatile, then, would be an understatement.

Speaking of this versatility, Norris says, "In some ways we pose a threat to most university choirs, especially choirs at white colleges, because they can sing the Bach and the Brahms and all the European composers but they cannot sing or will not sing the music of traditional Black composers. But we can

sing their [European-based music] and sing ours, too. There are a lot of myths about choral music that we disprove. Myths like 'Blacks can't sing Renaissance music because their voices aren't good enough' or 'Blacks can't sing a cappella because they can't stay on pitch' or 'Blacks can't sing in a foreign language because their diction isn't good enough.' We've shown all these myths are a lot of bull. So I feel here at Howard we need to explore all forms of music—because we can do it all."

In performing its diverse works, the choir is ever-careful to remain faithful to the intent of the composer, emphasizes Norris, who is also a music historian. "In other words," he says, "an Italian madrigal must sound like an Italian madrigal. It can't sound like a Negro spiritual. Nor can a Negro spiritual sound like a Verdian opera. The composition must sound as it is intended to be. At the same time, though, you work for a tone that is individualistic and distinctive, that communicates instantly, 'This is the Howard University Choir.' It's a very esoteric, intangible concept."

But it's a concept anyone who has witnessed a rehearsal of the Howard University Choir would instantly understand.

Consider that scene on a Monday evening [October 15] about a week before the Douglass program as the concert choir was working on the gospel song, "When the Holy Ghost Fell on Me."

Norris, dressed casually in a black turtleneck, black pants, black socks [shoelessness during rehearsal being one of his special trademarks], stood on the stage of Andrew Rankin Chapel keeping up a steady commentary while his hands engaged in their own vigorous choreography. He cajoled the basses to "go down a half-note" in one section, while he advised the sopranos "to come in softly" in another. He leveled a sarcastic "Would you please sing the right notes, gentlemen?," reminded the baritones he wanted to hear "unison singing not a bunch of solos" and told



J. Weldon Norris

each of the choir's sections, "I've got to understand the words." From time to time, he clapped out a beat with his hands or feet, went over to the piano to repeat a particularly difficult passage or burst into song himself to illustrate the phrasing he wanted.

"Went to the altar and fell down on my knees," the choir sang. "I want to feel the pulse of joy," Norris called out. "This is old style church music. It must have that pulse of joy." The choir repeated. "Went to the altar and fell down on my knees." "No," he admonished. "It's too pretty. You all sound like you're trying out for the La Scala Opera House." In a falsetto, he parodied an operatic soprano. "We'll get to opera later," he assured them, "but I don't want that sound now." The choir tried for a third time. "That's it now," Norris broke in. "Keep the pulse. Yeah, haaa!" By then he was clapping, smiling, nodding his head in rhythm. Then came his final assessment: "Not bad at all."

And so it went for the next two hours. And so it goes in any rehearsal as the choir works on realizing what Norris calls that "esoteric, intangible concept:" being faithful to the music while creating its own distinctive sound.

Someone once described the choir's special sound to Norris as "a golden bronze tone," one that has a dark quality and harmonies that appear to be "transparent." He likes that description. But he likes the subject of that description (the choir) far more. He quips, "Leontyne Price was once asked to describe her voice and she said, 'Honey, I just love the sound of my voice!' So, I tell many people, 'Honey, I just love the sound of my choir!'"

Norris, as director of the choir, is hardly the objective observer. But he is not alone in his affections. James E. Cheek, president of the university, seemed to speak for many when he remarked at a convocation program last October: "Our spirits are always lifted and our hearts warmed by the Howard University Choir." Earlier, Joseph McLellan, reviewing the choir's performance of Bach's monu-

mental "Mass in B Minor," wrote in *The Washington Post* of March 20, 1978: "Yesterday in the Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard University, the university choir showed how close a well-trained group of humans can come to the celestial ideal."

While the choir's voices, may, at times, seem to approach the celestial, it stands on a most solid foundation — a foundation constructed of history, and tradition, and continuity.

II

In 1867, the year of Howard University's birth, the Board of Trustees decided that "singing may be practical in the opening religious services of the school each day." In 1874, a choir was officially organized for this purpose and was placed under the leadership of a Michaelis E. Goldberg, who also taught Hebrew, German and French. "While many of our students — indeed all of our students — have excellent voices and would make most excellent singers, properly taught, there has been no suitable arrangement yet made for their instruction in a regular course of vocal music," wrote Goldberg in recommending the establishment of a choral group and regular music instruction. To buttress his recommendation, he cited "the refining influence of music upon the youthful mind."

Over the next three decades, the choir existed sporadically, with its leadership passing to various professors who had to juggle teaching some rudiments of choral music with their other responsibilities. Throughout this time, the role of the choir remained closely tied to that of the Department of Theology. "It was felt that music was necessary to help young ministers in the pursuit of their needs and to provide music for the services," explains Doris McGinty, chairman of Howard's Department of Music and a member of the faculty since 1947. "This meant the choir sang a lot of hymns, of course. But it also did spirituals."

It was not until 1904 that the choir

began to expand its focus. This coincided with the selection of a director for the choir who was not only formally trained in music but also was its most devoted mistress: Lulu Vere Childers.

Childers was a woman who "believed in beauty and nobility and insisted on behaviour and decorum that coincided with these beliefs," notes McGinty. She had earned a Mus. B. from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in 1896 and brought to Howard "a broader world view," she observes.

Under Childers, the choir tackled such works as Handel's "Messiah," Mendelssohn's "Elijah," Pierre's "The Children's Crusade" and Coleridge-Taylor's "Hiawatha," a particular favorite amongst Black Washington audiences.

But spirituals continued to play an important role in the choir's repertoire, viewed, as they were, as foremost examples of Black contribution to American culture. But to some faculty members and students, singing spirituals, especially before white audiences, conjured up images of the "good ole plantation days" when the "happy darkies" had to sing for the entertainment — and amusement — of their masters. A student strike, which began on May 7, 1925, was attributed by some to resentment against singing spirituals.

But historian Rayford W. Logan, in his book, "Howard University: The First Hundred Years," notes, while the singing of spirituals was a source of some discontent, it was not the real reason behind the strike. Students, instead, were upset about such issues as compulsory chapel attendance and a change in ROTC regulations and somehow the singing of spirituals got mixed up in the fray. As the tensions caused by the strike fizzled, the spirituals tradition remained intact.

Another tradition that remained intact was singing for religious services. Under Childers, Sunday evening vespers services in Andrew Rankin Chapel were a highlight of campus life. Logan, for one, ranked these services second only to football in campus popularity (archly at-



Lulu Vere Childers

tributing this popularity not only to the choir's fine voices but to the pulchritude of its female members). Walter Dyson, in his book, "Howard University: The Capstone of Negro Education," also referred to the capacity audiences the vespers services attracted. "In fact," he wrote, "not until the development of the automobile and the introduction of Sunday moving pictures and Sunday baseball did these audiences fall off."

Under Childers, then, the choir achieved popularity—and respect. She was able to prove to the many skeptics that a group of young Black students could sing. That they could sing not only hymns and spirituals but selections from the great choral literature of the world. After attending a 1925 choir concert, for instance, a writer for the Harrisburg (Pa.) *Telegraph* was moved to observe: "The Messiah' had been sung many times in Harrisburg by well-trained choruses, but never more brilliantly nor with more feeling than last night." It was a review that seemed to foreshadow one written 53 years later citing the choir for "approaching the celestial ideal."

As it was, Childers did pave the way for the Howard University Choir of today. Or, as McGinty remarks, "Childers was able to set a very high standard for the choir's future development." In appreciation of Childers' contributions, Howard's Fine Arts building was named in her honor and a portrait of her by Lois Jones Pierre-Noel, the noted artist and long-time Howard faculty member, was installed on the third floor of the building—home of the music department.

One of the last things Childers did before her retirement was to appoint Warner Lawson as her successor. It proved a brilliant choice. "Lawson was a man of great nobility and talent also," McGinty says, "and it was under him that the choir achieved its greatest fame."

III

Warner Lawson came to Howard with a love of music instilled since birth. His

father was a distinguished pianist and teacher. His mother, also a music teacher, had been a soloist with the Fisk [University] Jubilee Singers. Lawson's own education was earned at Fisk, Yale and Harvard, where he studied under Archibald Davison, then considered the dean of American choral directors. An accomplished pianist, he had also studied in Berlin with Artur Schnable before serving for seven years as director of the choir at North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro.

IV

At Howard, then, he was able to combine a strong musical background with the sheer force of his personality to mold a choir whose accomplishments would have been unimaginable in the previous century. Under his leadership of 28 years, the choir not only expanded its repertoire to include such works as Schumann's "Free Song," Villa-Lobos' "Choros. No. 10," Verdi's "Te Deum" and Orff's "Carmina Burana" as well as folk songs from around the world, but it sang such works before an unprecedented number and variety of audiences. It gave an annual concert at Constitution Hall with the National Symphony Orchestra, for instance, kept a full touring schedule and cut several records. But its greatest exposure came during an 80-day, 18-nation tour of Latin America in the summer of 1960. By the end of the tour, which was sponsored by the U.S. State Department, the contingent of 60 Howard students had traveled nearly 27,000 miles and performed before an estimated 222,000 people, leaving a medley of critical praises in its wake.

But a review of such achievements still doesn't fully measure the impact Warner Lawson had on the development of the Howard University Choir. For that, one must look at the man.

Lawson was a strict disciplinarian who pushed and pushed his students relentlessly towards one shimmering goal: Excellence. "You can get anything

done," he would say, "if you're willing to work at it hard enough." Sitting on his stool on the stage of Andrew Rankin Chapel on a Tuesday evening or a Saturday morning, he would remind his students again and again of the importance of blending their individual voices to achieve a perfect whole. He would drill them on the meaning and pronunciation of foreign phrases. He would repeat a particular section over and over until it met his own high standards. For all this, his students loved him.

"Oh, he was a slave driver," recalls Wilma Shakesnider, an alumna of the choir who is now a successful concert and opera singer. "A slave driver and a sweetheart. Being in the choir made me know I had to do the very best. We learned the value of working hard so when we performed we had no doubts. That discipline has stayed with me. It was all part of that wonderful training."

Shakesnider went on to get a master's at Julliard, to tour the U.S. and Europe, to sing with the Houston Grand Opera and to become an affiliated artist with the United Church of Christ.

Among the choir's other notable alumni from the Lawson era are: Roberta Flack and the late Donny Hathaway, in the area of popular music; Jessye Norman and William DuPree, in the area of classical music.

Evelyn White, now a professor of music at Howard and director of the respected Evelyn White Chorale, was associate director of the choir under Lawson and is probably the best person to assess Lawson's impact. "Lawson had a conviction about the ability of the Black man to sing all styles. Many of the students from the rural South had never heard of Bach. But he showed them; he opened the world to them. Oh, Lord how many people he inspired because of his tremendous love for music!"

Lawson poured that love for music, too, into his continuance of the spiritual tradition. At chapel services, he would "raise a spiritual" at the end of the program, carefully selecting one that would



Warner Lawson

heighten the message of the sermon. Among some of his favorites: "Let Us Break Bread Together" and "By the Waters of Babylon."

During the height of the civil rights movement, he also found in the spirituals fresh relevance. In an article on "Music and Negroes" in the December 1962 issue of *The Progressive*, he wrote: "This great gift of song has come full circle — for these same songs, which for years have gnawed at America's conscience, have become now a vital and powerful weapon in the hands of the Freedom Riders and the 'Sit-In Kids.' . . . They are using hymns and spirituals as the emotional base for a holy crusade — a holy crusade whose ultimate goal is freedom."

"Yes," says White. "Lawson never ignored his heritage. He *honored* his heritage." Despite this, Howard's esteemed choir director did not pass through the tumultuous 60s unscathed. During the days of Black Power sloganeering, there were some students who felt that the choir should not sing "whitey's music." But Lawson firmly disagreed. As White recalled, "His answer was, 'We are musicians who are supposed to understand and appreciate all styles of music.' That's what he believed and that's what I continue to believe. As teachers, we must present choices. Otherwise, we limit our students." Here, a contradiction surfaces: One genre Lawson most decidedly did not embrace was gospel. In fact, he fought it. That this is still a touchy subject seems evident from the responses of some of his close associates when asked about the whole "gospel music controversy." "Oh," protests Evelyn White, "don't ask me about that!"

In the view of Paul Gatling, director of the current Gospel Choir and former associate director of the university choir, "Lawson felt gospel was an inferior type of sacred music and this was the view that prevailed in the music department at that time." Lawson also feared that if his classically-trained students sang gospel, which involved a more spontaneous

style of singing, they would ruin their voices. (An opinion still held by many in classical music.)

However, many Howard students saw the singing of gospel as but another part of the Black heritage that cried for larger exposure. They embraced gospel, too, as a way to identify with those poor, struggling Black folk who sang it with such fervor, and as a way to keep themselves in touch with their *own* spiritual roots. As Gatling observes: "Many Howard students came from churches with a strong tradition of gospel music and they wanted to continue singing it, not have it dismissed as 'inferior.'"

Despite the opposition and reservations of Lawson and many of his colleagues, a Gospel Choir was formed at Howard in April 1969, one that continues to have a popular following to this day. (The Gospel Choir, for instance, sang at the White House last September.) While the relations between the Howard University Choir and the Gospel Choir are harmonious today, and Norris [since he took control in 1973] has even introduced some gospel music into the choir's repertoire, relationships between the two choirs were strained at first. A university staffer who was in the Gospel Choir in 1969 remembers the time the group was unable to rehearse because the piano in Rankin Chapel was locked. The consensus of the students was that "someone over in Fine Arts made sure it was locked."

In September 1961, Lawson, who had been appointed dean of the School of Music in 1942, was named dean of the College of Fine Arts, an appointment indicative of his contributions not only to music but to the arts in general. As it was, despite the rumblings of some over "the gospel music controversy," when Lawson retired in 1970, his stature remained undimmed. To several generations of Howard students, he remained the admired "Dean."

Nowhere was this more apparent than at his funeral.

Recalls Evelyn White: "Dean used to

say, 'When I die, I want the choir to sing over my body.' When he was very ill, his wife said, 'Evelyn, you remember what he used to say.' So I was forced to think about it."

At Lawson's memorial service in Rankin Chapel, 200 current and former members of the Howard University Choir came from all over the nation to sing, under the direction of Evelyn White. "I told my husband, 'I don't think I can go through with it,'" White recalls. "And he said, 'Think of it as a concert.' And that's what we did. We sang all his old favorites and not until the choir sang the seven-fold amen ["amen" repeated seven times], which was Lawson's way of ending a service, did we begin to weep. The finality of it all dawned on us. There was a tremendous outpouring of love."

And, with that seven-fold amen, one chapter of the story of the Howard University Choir came to a close. But another remained to be opened.

V

To follow in the footsteps of Warner Lawson could not have been easy. This was the position J. Weldon Norris found himself in in 1973 when he became director of the choir. [In between Lawson and Norris, the choir had two interim directors: Evelyn White and Mark Fax.]

"When you follow behind anyone who has developed such a reputation, it takes a long time for you to be accepted on your own worth," acknowledges Norris. "That's only natural and I expected it; but eventually, you do come into your own."

Under Norris' direction, what is known as "The Howard University Choir" actually encompasses four different choral groups. The Concert Choir, or Chorale, which does most of the touring and sings the more difficult literature, consists of about 60 singers who are chosen through a rigorous audition. The Chapel Choir, with 26 singers, performs at the Sunday morning services in Rankin Chapel. The Collegium, with 12-15 members, specializes in Renaissance and



Choir — 1953

Baroque music and is the only Black collegium in the country, according to Norris. The 120-strong University Choir sings large works appropriate to its size and has a very diverse membership. As Norris describes it, "If someone can carry a tune in a bucket or pail I'll usually take them [in the University Choir] because I feel if a person really wants to sing, he should."

The reason the choir was divided this way, he explains, is that "each group has a different purpose and the big choir gives everybody—serious musicians as well as people who just enjoy singing—a chance to mix which, I think, is very rewarding."

Another organizational innovation under Norris is the formation of a Choir Council, composed of section leaders elected by students. The council distributes the music the students are to learn, sets deadlines for its mastery, discusses discipline problems ("which are few" says Norris) and makes suggestions on the literature that is to be performed—all a sort of musical manifestation of the "student power" demands of the 1960s.

It's only natural, too, that the choir's

repertoire should reflect the changing times. The most noticeable change in the repertoire under Norris, of course, is the singing of some gospel songs because, he says, "it's a part of the heritage people should know about." The choir doesn't do a large number of gospel songs, he adds, "because we have a Gospel Choir which is doing a fantastic job." Nor does it do what he scornfully dismisses as "religious disco," slick, commercialized renditions in the gospel genre.

In the future, Norris hopes to do more original compositions by Black composers. "We've done some William Grant Still, for instance, and Mrs. Still has written me and asked me to look at some of her husband's other compositions that she feels need to be performed." "We can't keep stagnating. We have to do new scores all the time." His future hopes for the choir also include "getting it heard more." "I never want them [students in the choir] to feel that we're so big or commercial that we can forget grass roots," he observes.

"Singing at churches and Black colleges is a service we still need to do. But I would also like to do performances with

large orchestras in places like Kennedy Center and I'd like to do a combined tour of Western Europe and Africa." [Under Norris, the choir has already sung in Paris and Rome while participating in the 1973 International Choral Festival, and in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico during a 1976 tour.]

When Norris defines his mission as choir director, his words are reminiscent of those of Lawson—or of Childers. His goal, he says, "is to help my students understand that their goal in life, regardless of their major, is excellence." If some of his students decide to become professional musicians, fine. If not, that's o.k., too. As he puts it, "I hope that the same excellence they put into their singing, they will put into their chosen profession."

One student who *is* planning a professional career in music is Kevin Williams, Sr., a graduating senior majoring in musicology with an emphasis on voice. A tenor, he has been a frequent soloist at choir concerts and hopes someday to do some choral conducting himself. "Dr. Norris is a standard for me," Williams says. "One of the things that most im-



presses me is the degree of preparation he brings to rehearsal. He is constantly striving for perfection, always saying, 'No matter what you are, be the best at what you do.'

It was a similar encouragement and inspiration from the Howard faculty that helped launch Norris on his musical career.

Norris had received his B.S. in chemistry from South Carolina State College in 1955 but all along he was interested in music, having taught himself to play the piano when he was three. His family had discouraged him from pursuing this interest, feeling he would never be able to earn a decent living if he did, and had tried to steer him into medicine.

After college, though, he decided to do what *he* wanted to do. He came to Howard, "poor, so poor," he says, to study music, receiving his B. Mus. in 1959 and his M. Mus. the following year, both in music history. [In 1975, he received his D. Mus. from Indiana University.] His experience at Howard helps explain why Norris today is one of the university's ardent boosters. "I just received a fantastic background here," he

says. "Dr. McGinty, Dr. Butcher [Dr. Vada Butcher, a former music department chairman and former dean of the College of Fine Arts], Dean Lawson, Mrs. White ... I'm so proud to have studied with them."

As a Howard student, he auditioned for the choir, a time he remembers well. "I sat through a rehearsal on a Sunday morning and I was just awed by the splendor of the choir. I knew that it [working in choral music] was what I wanted to do." The influence of Lawson, Evelyn White and Robert Shaw of the Robert Shaw Chorale further reinforced this resolve.

After he finished at Howard, Norris spent 13 years as director of choirs at Morris College in Sumter, S.C. before returning to Howard to direct the choirs and teach music history.

His decision to go into music instead of medicine, is one he regards with no regrets. "How many people at 44 years of age can say 'I am actually doing what I want to do in life?'" he asks. "I love my work. I look forward to seeing my students every day in rehearsal and meeting them in the classroom and I fuss with

'em and rake 'em out and get angry with 'em. But they know I don't mean it. They are some of the finest and most talented people I've ever come into contact with."

If the director of the Howard University Choir and members of the Howard University Choir seem partners in a "mutual admiration society," it is not the first time. Nor is it likely to be the last. While musical fads come and go, the tradition of choral music continues strong at Howard, with each new student generation embracing it anew. □

The writer is publications specialist in the Department of Publications.