The Classical power of the spiritual

by George Shirley

Following are opening remarks made by former Metropolitan Opera tenor and singing pedagogue George Shirley at the afternoon panel of a conference on the establishment of a National Conservatory of Music, held on May 28 at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

In recent years, the spiritual has come into disfavor amongst many in the African-American community. As a result of the rebirth of racial pride that obtained from the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, anything that appeared to reflect passivity and acceptance of the status quo was rejected by the young warriors who fought in the trenches and reaped the rewards of political activism. Spirituals were interpreted by the revolutionary generation as "slave music," and were supplanted in religious services with the more "up" tempo, boisterous melodies and rhythms of twentieth-century gospel music.

While spirituals and gospel are both characterized by strong rhythmic influences, the music of the former generally reflects more of the quiet dignity with which our ancestors met and conquered the cruelties of the New World. The "good news" message of gospel—salvation and power *now!*—is borne upon an exuberant, highly ornamented vocal line that is musically inseparable from its secular parentage—blues, jazz, race/rhythm and blues.

The spiritual, offspring of primal African ritual musics, most notably the three-line stanza sorrow song (which probably gave birth to the blues), and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European musical influences, projects a *relatively* understated, but no less fervent message of hope, trust in God, and eventual salvation.

Slave music or not, it was the power inherent in *this* music that nurtured the spirits of our forebears, highlighting the personal relationship with God that enabled them to survive the monstrous attempts of slavemongers to leech their dignity and crush their souls.

There is a power inherent in music that helps mortals to live with dignity and affirmation. It was this power that brought the slaves through the trials of involuntary servitude, and it was this power that helped encourage Europeans who were devastated by the destruction of World War II, to rebuild their shattered societies.

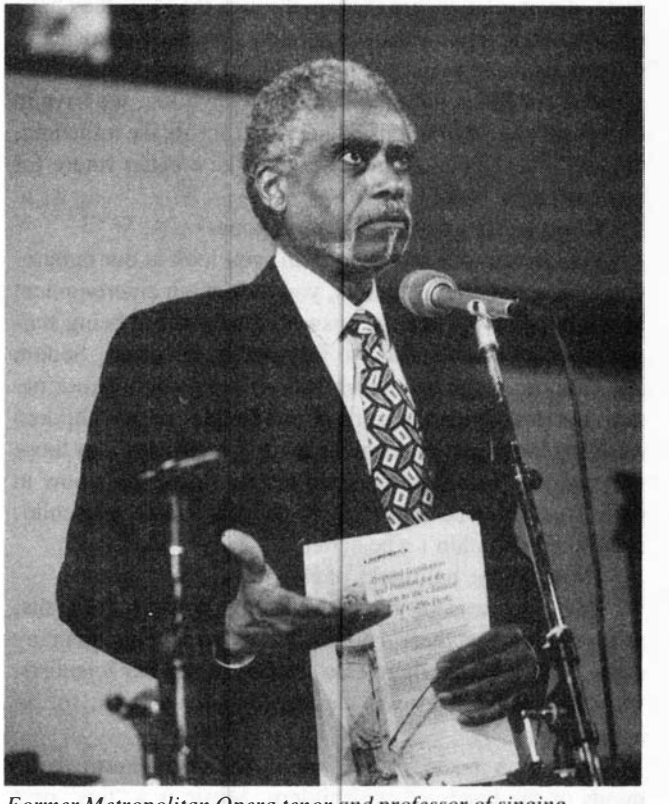
It is this role played in our lives by music that we need to highlight today, and bring forcefully into the collective consciousness of our society, so that the power of music is employed not only to shock us out of our complacency when needed, but with equal force to awaken and affirm within us the dignity that is our divine birthright.

Dignity: defined in the dictionary as "the state or quality of being excellent; worthy; honorable." Dignified: so descriptive of many Americans who have long suffered the indignities and traumas of violence against their persons and psyches; who have endured the miseries of slavery, poverty, and disease—malnutrition, despair, hatred, disenfranchisement.

Dignified: Martin Luther King; Thurgood Marshall; Ralph Bunche; Mary McCloud Bethune; Malcolm X; Roland Hayes; Leontyne Price; Jackie Robinson; Maya Angelou; Joe Louis; Paul Robeson; and most assuredly, Marian Anderson.

Slavery could not rob the displaced African of dignity. Organized assaults designed to dehumanize and destroy them only served to encourage black men and women to cultivate their faith in the Christian God Who promised them a robe and a crown of salvation, and eventual triumph over the wickedness and savagery of their oppressors.

The vocalizations that carried forth this life-sustaining message of salvation were impassioned shouts, cries, and melodic outpourings that recalled the homeland and imbued the singer with extraordinary powers of survival. The more exuberant songs and utterances, the jubilees and ring shouts,



Former Metropolitan Opera tenor and professor of singing George Shirley.

Baritone Robert McFerrin, the first black singer to be hired by the Metropolitan Opera, signs autographs following his inspired recital, which included spirituals arranged by his friend and mentor, Hall Johnson.

were balanced by the spiritual, the simplicity, hypnotic beauty, and sacred power of which spoke with dignity and grace of one's personal relationship with God.

In spite of the slave master's unrelenting efforts to destroy and defile, our ancestors held onto the belief that they were indeed excellent, worthy, and honorable enough to eventually be redeemed by their Maker.

The Classical art music of western Europe shares common ground with the black spiritual in that many of the principles that governed its creation also served to define the spiritual. There is quite often an air of formality that hovers over the spiritual, for it follows certain rules that determine its form.

Lena McGlyn teaches high school music in Chicago. During a seminar on black music held at the University of Indiana in 1969, Lena McGlyn expressed the opinion with which I concur, that the spiritual must be sung basically without alterations to the vocal line, as opposed to gospel music, which *must* be sung in an improvised fashion, because the style demands that the performer worry the pitches.

Eileen Southern, in her seminal book *The Music of Black Americans: A History,* identifies various poetic forms that characterized the spiritual. She cites the "call and response" as one of the most common, where a leader sings the verse, and the chorus sings the refrain. Another form is the "strophic," typically consisting of four-line stanzas of varying form, and four-line choruses boasting a typical structure of three repeated lines, and a refrain.

The African tradition in the family of spiritual forms is probably best represented by the three-line-stanza "sorrow song," which, according to Dr. Southern, became in all likelihood the archetype for the blues.

The texts of spirituals are strong, poignant, moral, and reverent. They communicate their message in no uncertain terms with an affecting simplicity that is ultimately poetic. They gain direct access to the soul of the listener; their appeal is universal.

If we look at the music of one of the European composers who shared the compositional idiom termed Classical, we discover that Franz Schubert's opus embodies many of the same principles and characteristics reflected in the spiritual. The great strength of his music lies in its universal appeal. It commands this appeal in large part because of the directness and accessibility of his musical language—a language which goes straight to the heart of the poetry that inspired his music. His melodies are memorable, disarming in their simplicity, yet profound.

Schubert's lieder were composed in strophic, modified strophic, thorough-composed, and *scena* form. There was no expectation that alterations of any kind would be made by singers who performed them—even though, to the composer's discomfort, it did happen on occasion.

Like the spiritual, Schubert's songs exude a dignity and grace that are transcendental. Both speak to the heart with rhythmic power, clarity, elegance, nuance, and above all, honesty. They are both Classical; they are both spiritual.