

A Dream for All Time

BY ESTEBAN MENESES

Bach Festival Society of Winter Park commemorates the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. with its "African-American Masterpieces."



Krysty Swann



Othalie Graham

COURTESY BACH FESTIVAL (4)

The significance of the African-American people in the history of American music can hardly be overstated. The music from the American heartland, from jazz and blues to gospel and spirituals, shares a lineage parallel to the history and emancipation of the African-American race. Once disenfranchised and subjugated, black Americans established an influential presence in the center of American arts and culture.

Fifty years after his assassination, the heritage of Martin Luther King Jr. echoes in every Black Lives Matter demonstration, in our persisting racial tensions, and in every attempt to fulfill what once seemed an idealized dream of social justice. This is the historical platform for "African-American Masterpieces: Symphonic Spirituals," a first-of-its-kind program by the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park to commemorate not only the 50th anniversary of King's assassination, but also three remarkable pieces by African-American composers premiered in his lifetime.

With the intention of "opening a dialogue about the civil rights movement," says Artistic Director John Sinclair, these performances also bring to our discourse a neglected side of the history of classical music in the United States: the contribution of black composers.

The program, featuring performances by soprano Othalie Graham, mezzo soprano Krysty Swann, tenor Samuel McKelton and bass-baritone Kevin Deas, includes William L. Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*. A choir director and composer of spirituals, Dawson is known for his 25-year association with the Tuskegee University Choir. Years after the symphony's Philadelphia Orchestra premiere in 1934, a trip to Africa to study indigenous music inspired Dawson to revise it. It is likely that King knew of Dawson and his Tuskegee affiliation; in 1957, King gave a speech at the Tuskegee Civic Association.

William Grant Still, perhaps the most well-known African-American composer of the early 20th century outside of jazz, collaborated with poet Katherine Garrison Chapin on the oratorio *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, of 1940. The controversial narrative piece calls for a contralto as the mother of the victim of a lynching, a white chorus as the lynch mob, and an additional black chorus that reflects on the violence. For the performance, the chorus comes via collaboration with the Bethune-Cookman University Concert Chorale.

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our performances throughout the years here in America,” says Curtis Rayam, instructor of applied voice and opera workshop at Bethune-Cookman in Daytona Beach. Also an adjunct professor at Rollins College, Rayam was the crucial link between both institutions and worked with Sinclair on the program.

Rayam, a tenor with a stellar opera career, is a product of Jones High School Choir, one of the community partners the Bach Festival invited to the dress rehearsal. Rayam graduated in 1969 and was in the choir. Currently held by Andrea Green, the choir’s directorship has been passed on from one Jones graduate to another over the past 50 years. The acclaimed choir was one of the first to perform with the former Orlando Opera in the early 1970s, including a production of *Aida* with soprano Jessye Norman. The Jones High School Concert Choir and Wind Ensemble have been invited to perform at Carnegie Hall this April.

Operatic and masterfully orchestrated, Nathaniel Dett’s *The Ordering of Moses* is a triumphant work for chorus, four soloists and orchestra. The Bethune-Cookman choir had wanted to perform the piece for a long time, according to Sinclair, who welcomed the opportunity. Although the text — a retell-

ing of the Moses story — is less provocative than Chapin’s, the 1937 premiere by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra was also controversial: The NBC live broadcast was cut short with the pretense of technical difficulties. Allegedly, though, outraged listeners had called in to complain about the composer’s race.

“I’m not sure music dictates society, but I think it mirrors it,” Sinclair concludes. “All three composers looked at their heritage and wanted to demonstrate that they also were fabulous composers. They were just not given opportunities equal to those of other composers.”

Bach Festival’s “African-American Masterpieces: Symphonic Spirituals” is April 21 and 22 at the Knowles Memorial Chapel, Rollins College. For times and to purchase tickets, visit bachfestivalflorida.org or call 407.646.2182. **OAM**

Esteban Meneses is an Orlando-based freelance writer. A graduate student of humanities at Rollins College in Winter Park, Esteban became a “student” member of the Music Critics Association of North America in 2015. He has been a contributor to Orlando Arts Magazine since 2011.