

Verdi, *Nabucco* Overture
Adolphus Hailstork, Symphony No. 1
Spirituals

Just as he was starting his family and composing career, tragedy struck Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). He had married his sweetheart Margherita Barezzi in 1836, but by 1840, both she and their two infant children had passed away. This turn of events led Verdi to pour himself into his work, and by 1841 he completed the opera *Nabucco*, his first huge hit which would cement his reputation as a rising star composer of Italian opera.

The story of *Nabucco*, King Nebuchadnezzar from the book of Daniel in the Bible, has all the conflict you need for a juicy plot. You've got Nabucco, king of Babylon, who has decided to conquer Jerusalem and enslave the Israelites. Working against him is his treacherous daughter, Abigaille who schemes for the throne upon realizing that Ismaele, the king of Jerusalem's nephew, won't return her affections. In the end, Nabucco is struck by a thunderbolt and driven insane after which he prays to God for forgiveness and frees the Israelites.

Conflict, passion, catchy tunes, and climactic moments are the calling cards of Verdi's sustained and rewarding artistic career—all of which can be heard in the *Nabucco* overture where the musical themes are pulled from the opera itself. The opening solemn brass chorale portrays the steadfastness of the Israelites in the face of persecution. Next comes the fast-paced melody "*Il maledetto*" in which the character Ismaele is being cursed by the Levites. This is followed by the calming "*Va, pensiero*" where the Hebrew slaves long for their homeland. And Verdi uses the rousing chorus of Assyrian priests "*Noi già sparso abbiamo fama*" as a celebratory finale to the overture.

Adolphus Hailstork (b. 1941) grew up with violin and piano lessons in Albany, New York, and with the majestic sounds of an Episcopalian cathedral choir on Sundays. He continued his education at Howard University, at the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau in France, the Manhattan School of Music, and Michigan State University where he earned his PhD in musical composition in 1971. Hailstork's musical career as a composer and teacher has spanned five decades incorporating a mosaic of styles that include Western classical music, English choir, gospel, jazz, and blues.

Hailstork composed his First Symphony for a music festival in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, in celebration of the community's founding over one hundred years earlier. The symphony received its premiere in 1988 with the Shore Festival Orchestra performing under the baton of the composer himself.

The first *Allegro* movement opens with bold and confident chords that establish a constant forward impulse. Hailstork proceeds to brush this assertive energy with tenderness through the contrasting lyrical themes in the strings and winds. The second movement, *Lento ma non troppo*,

calms the vivacity of the first movement, and tender strings create a contemplative atmosphere. The long, flowing melodic lines and lush harmonies provide a meditative and serene character reminiscent of a Hollywood film score.

The third movement, *Allegretto*, is a playful scherzo that highlights the bright timbres of the upper winds and strings. Hailstork's light melodic gestures vibrantly flit about with mischievously shifting rhythm and meter. The fourth *Vivace* movement ties together the 1st movement's bold rhythmic drive, the lyricism of the 2nd movement, and the light energy of the 3rd movement, all into a united narrative arc with a finale that displays an unwavering and resolute vitality through to its triumphant conclusion.

One of America's considerable musical treasures is the negro spiritual. A hybrid of West African and Anglo-American music, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass described these slave songs as telling a "tale which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones, loud, long and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains... Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds."

Up through the 1860s, spirituals were never written down and only shared orally. The Civil War, however, allowed northerners a serious look at plantation slave culture, and detailed reports began to emerge of the singing, shouting, and dancing of this inspiring body of song. In 1871, an African American choral group known as the Jubilee Singers began arranging many of these slave melodies with four-part harmonic support creating a performance style more in line with the conventions of European concert music. This created the important foundations for the spirituals as we hear them today.

Every work on the second half of tonight's program—from "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (also known as "The Black National Anthem") to McCallister's "Hallelujah, You're Worthy"—embodies a sense of hope, resilience, and unity. These spirituals take the listener on an extraordinary journey from the solemn and prayerful to the victorious and triumphant. Each carries a deep weight that honors the past while looking optimistically to a future of freedom and equality. And their sounds of liberation move us all.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.