

Jester Hairston was best known to the public for his role as the spry octogenarian Rolly Forbes in the long-running NBC situation comedy, *Amen*. Less well-known is the fact that he had a lifelong career in film, radio, and television and was an active singer, composer, and choral conductor. A graduate of Tufts University in Boston, Hairston was a choral assistant to Hall Johnson and worked with him on the film score for *Green Pastures* in 1936. Other films for which he provided music were Dmitri Tiomkin's *Lost Horizons* and Ralph Nelson's *Lilies of the Field*, for which he wrote the song, *Amen*, and dubbed the singing voice of actor Sidney Poitier.

A native of Georgia, Hall Johnson was one of the prime choral conductors of New York City in the 1920s, thanks to his success as founder and conductor of the Hall Johnson Choir. He conducted the choruses for Broadway productions of *Green Pastures* and *Run, Little Children*, and provided the sound track for the Hollywood film version of *Green Pastures* in 1936. After ten years of choral conducting and film work in Los Angeles, Johnson returned to New York in 1946 to found and conduct the Festival Negro Chorus of New York. He published two collections of spirituals: *The Green Pastures Spirituals* (1930) and *Thirty Negro Spirituals* (1949).

Program notes by the New England Spiritual Ensemble
Adapted and edited by Elmer Booze

*During the months of January and February,
recent performances by the National Gallery Orchestra
can be heard Wednesday evenings at 9:00 p.m. on WETA, 90.9 FM.*

*The use of cameras or recording equipment during
the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that all
electronic devices are turned off during the performance.*

The Sixtieth Season of

THE WILLIAM NELSON CROMWELL and
F. LAMMOT BELIN CONCERTS

National Gallery of Art



2409th Concert

THE NEW ENGLAND SPIRITUAL ENSEMBLE

VINCENT DION STRINGER, *artistic director*
FREDERICKA KING, *pianist*

Sunday Evening, 10 February 2002
Seven O'clock
West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

PROCESSIONAL

Arr. John Andrew Ross Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
(b. 1940)

PROGRAM

I. O Black and Unknown Bards
(Poem by James Weldon Johnson)

Traditional Steal Away to Jesus
Jennifer Carey Hunter, *soprano*

J. Rosamond Johnson Nobody Knows de Trouble I See
(1873–1954) Milton Wright, *bass*

Harry T. Burleigh Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile
(1866–1949) Paula Elliot, *soprano*

Go Down Moses
Vincent Dion Stringer, *baritone*

William Dawson (adapted) Soon-Ah Will Be Done
(1899–1990)

J. Rosamond Johnson Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing

II. Biblical Songs

Roland Hayes I'll Make Me a Man
(1887–1976) Vincent Dion Stringer, *baritone*

John Andrew Ross Didn't It Rain
Stacy Scott, *tenor*

Ezekiel Saw de Wheel
Lit'l David Play on Yo' Harp

Moses Hogan Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel
(b. 1957)

INTERMISSION

III. Traditional and Contemporary Spiritual Arrangements

John W. Work III Done Made My Vow
(1901–1968)

John Andrew Po' Pilgrim
Vincent Dion Stringer and James Barnswell,
baritone and bass

Wendell Whalum God Is a God
Milton Wright, *bass*

John Andrew Ross Hold On
Paula Elliot, *alto*

John W. Work III Jesus Lay Yo' Head in the Window
James Barnswell and Jennifer Hunter,
tenor and alto

John W. Work III Rock in Jerusalem

Jester Hairston Home in Dat Rock
(1901–1999) Stacy Scott and Myran Parker-Brass,
tenor and alto

John W. Work III This Little Light o' Mine
Paula Elliot, *alto*

John Andrew Ross Nobody's Fault but Mine

Arr. Hall Johnson Ain't Got Time to Die
(1888–1970) Myran Parker-Brass, *alto*

The New England Spiritual Ensemble was founded by Vincent Dion Stringer, who has been its artistic director since its inception. Possessing a “first-class bass-baritone voice,” according to the *Boston Globe*, Stringer has a flourishing international career in opera and festival appearances and is currently receiving high critical praise for his recitals of German *Lieder*.

The ensemble has been heard nationally on *CBS Sunday Morning* and on National Public Radio’s *Performance Today*. Its first compact disc recording, *Comin’ Up Shouting*, features arrangements of spirituals and original works by John Andrew Ross. The music critic of the *Boston Globe* has pronounced the ensemble “excellent...blessed with performers who own good voices...daringly expressive.” In addition, it reported that the performance “brought a hush to the hall.” On another occasion the same critic reported that “the New England Spiritual Ensemble offered sophisticated arrangements that never disturbed the brilliant simplicity of the spirituals.”

The New England Spiritual Ensemble focuses on performing Black spirituals in both traditional arrangements and in arrangements by more modern Black American composers. At its core, the work of the ensemble is a tribute to those who through their enslavement, ingenuity, strength, and creativity paved the way for Blacks to live today as free people and to be represented at all levels of life in the United States. The members of the ensemble will forever remember their struggle and honor them.

The first group of selections on this program is a medley that was developed at the request of Syracuse University for the centennial celebration in February 2000 of *Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing*, written in 1900 by the brothers James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson. Their purpose was to include it in a celebration of Lincoln’s birthday that the brothers were organizing with their classmates in Jacksonville, Florida. Long after the Johnson brothers moved away from Jacksonville to New York City, the people of that city continued to sing the song and it eventually spread throughout the South. In the 1920s the NAACP adopted *Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing* as its official song and encouraged the singing of it throughout the civil rights movement.

The ensemble has taken this piece and combined it with another of James Weldon Johnson’s creations, *Black and Unknown Bards*, a poem that first appeared in *Century Magazine* in the early 1920s and was later used by the Johnson brothers in the preface of their book, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*. Upon reading this poem, Vincent Dion Stringer clearly felt that this work should be the basis upon which the ensemble could build the celebration around *Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing* and, at the same time, honor the Johnson brothers, who rightfully belong in the ranks of the Great Black Bards.

In the poem Johnson pays tribute to those Black bards who gave us this body of music we call spirituals. Although their names may not be known, their words and melodies live on in present-day arrangements. The ensemble uses the poem *Black and Unknown Bards* as a fabric through which it weaves some of those great melodies, a number of which are referred to in the poem.

The second group of spirituals on the program consists of songs the ensemble considers its biblical songs. The texts refer to biblical events that occurred in the Old Testament and exhibit an expression of faith and hope for freedom.

The third group of spirituals makes up the second half of the program and includes both traditional and contemporary settings of spirituals, some very familiar and some relatively unknown. John Wesley Work III, the arranger of three of the spirituals, was following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather as he dedicated his life’s work to the compilation of the songs of the Black tradition. A winner of Rosenwald Fellowships for continued study, Work studied at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, the Institute of Musical Art, and Yale University. A prolific composer and arranger, he published the collection, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*, in 1940.

Arrangements by John Andrew Ross appear in all three segments of the program. A composer, choral conductor, jazz pianist, and organist as well as an arranger, Ross is the ensemble master of the New England Spiritual Ensemble. He is also minister of music for the First Parish in Brookline, Massachusetts, and music director of the National Center for Afro-American Artists and the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts.