

Gospel Across America

Friday, May 21

Grades 9–12

11 a.m.–12 p.m.

Curriculum Connections: American History,
Language Arts

National Standards for Music: 6, 7, 8, 9



About the Performance

In 1871, a group of young singers from Fisk University made history when they toured the United States performing the songs and spirituals of African American slaves. At this performance, the current ensemble of Fisk Jubilee Singers continues that tradition by sharing the passion of this unique music.



The Fisk Jubilee Singers are students from Fisk University located in Nashville, Tennessee. These talented vocalists perform *a cappella*, or without instrumental accompaniment, in the tradition of the original Fisk University singing ensemble. The group, under the direction of Dr. Paul T. Kwami (left), has won numerous awards and recorded with popular artists like Hank Williams Jr. and Shania Twain.

The ensemble will perform a range of spirituals and spiritual-inspired songs demonstrating the music's characteristics and illustrating the spiritual's influence on later genres of music, like gospel.

“I heard them sing once, and I would walk seven miles to hear them sing again.”—Mark Twain, writer, speaking of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers

The Negro Spirituals

Born out of the experiences of African Americans as slaves, spirituals blended African styling with American religious teachings. This original American music expressed deep yearnings and sometimes coded messages. Most slaves were not taught to read or write, so singing offered one of the few means of expression and communication.

The spirituals also reflected a community effort. Groups often developed the songs together, creating or adding lyrics as they sang. They often improvised structures and harmonies, using what sounded right at the moment.

When the Jubilee singers and others prepared to perform the spirituals for wider audiences, they adopted more Western-style musical structures. That styling endures to this day. Some of the most well-known spirituals include “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Steal Away.”

The Fisk Story—A Legacy of Courage and Music

The story begins six years after the end of the Civil War and slavery. To raise money for their university, a group of mostly teenage singers, many of them former slaves, began a concert tour. After initially singing European classical and popular songs, they turned to singing spirituals, songs created by African American slaves that had been sung mostly in the fields or among themselves. Their talent and songs moved audiences. Taking the name Fisk Jubilee Singers, a reference to the Biblical year of the Jubilee (a year of joy and restoration), the ensemble toured the United States and Europe.

The singers achieved their fundraising goal (which funded the building of Jubilee Hall, now a National Historic Landmark), but also much more. By giving voice to the spiritual, they preserved a uniquely American art form.

“Like tears, [spirituals] were relief to aching hearts. Personally, I think these spirituals did more for our emancipation than all the guns of the Civil War.” —W.C. Handy, blues musician and composer

Instructional Activities

BEFORE THE PROGRAM: ACTIVITIES

- ♪ What are times when we sing? Are all of these events happy occasions? Explain.
- ♪ Spirituals generally fall into one of three styles: call-and-response, sustained phrase, and segmented melody. Define each of these styles and their characteristics. Listen for examples of each type of spiritual during the performance.

OBSERVE/DISCUSS

- ♪ Deep emotions are a common characteristic of the spirituals. Of the performed songs, what emotions were conveyed? What song or passage made the biggest impression on you? Why?
- ♪ Many of these songs have been sung for over 300 years. Why do you think these spirituals still resonate with people today?

HISTORY/RESEARCH

- ♪ What does it mean for something to have a legacy? Do you think the Fisk Jubilee Singers have a legacy? What is that legacy?
- ♪ The words in spirituals often were code words related to a means of escape from slavery. Research the Underground Railroad and choose one way slaves communicated with each other to share with the class.
- ♪ During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s a significant number of the “freedom songs” were new versions of old spirituals. Why do you think such songs resonated for this campaign? How did the meanings of the songs change? How did they stay the same?

EXPLORE/CREATE

- ♪ How do you think the spirituals compare with contemporary music, like country, pop, and rap? Choose a contemporary song and a spiritual you heard performed. Compare and contrast the music, themes, and emotions of the piece. How are they similar? How are they different?
- ♪ How might spirituals be rewritten today? Adapt a spiritual to a cause you feel is important.

THINGS TO LISTEN FOR...

- ♪ Call-and-response patterns between vocal groups or a soloist and group
- ♪ The song leader’s role
- ♪ Lyrics drawn from the Bible, the natural world, and personal testimony
- ♪ Vocal improvisation and its effect
- ♪ Similarities between the spirituals and gospel music
- ♪ Song dynamics (such as an increase in loudness or force) that add emotion
- ♪ Simple melodies, which eased the teaching of songs

Resources



SELECT BOOKS

Abbott, Lynn and Doug Seroff. *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.

Epstein, Dena J. *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Marsh, J.B.T. *The Story of the Jubilee Singers, Including Their Songs*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898.

Newman, Richard. *Go Down Moses: A Celebration of the African American Spiritual*. NY: Clarkson Potter, Inc., 1998.



SELECT INTERNET RESOURCES

Fisk University: fisk.edu

Fisk Jubilee Singers: fiskjubileesingers.org

PBS on the Fisk Jubilee Singers: pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/

History of Negro spirituals: negrospirituall.com

NEH lesson plan on spirituals: spedsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=318



SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

Fisk Jubilee Singers. *In Bright Mansions*. Curb 78762 (2003).

Wade in the Water, Vol. 1: African-American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition. Smithsonian Folkways SFW40072 (1994). Available from: folkways.si.edu/index.html

Fisk Jubilee Singers, Vol. 1 (1909-1911), Vol. 2 (1915-1920), Vol. 3 (1924-1940). Document DOCD-5533,4,5 (1997). Available from: document-records.com