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The Performance Practice of Negro Spirituals on the Concert Stage

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Oral Presentation 2.1

**THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF NEGRO SPIRITUALS
ON THE CONCERT STAGE**

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Since the dawn of time, people have had experiences which they have either misinterpreted what they saw or heard or they refused to give credit to the people that created it. This phenomenon is evident in the history of Negro Spirituals. Before the 1960's, people of color did not receive credit for anything they invented, discovered, accomplished or artistically created. People of color were considered only good for manual labor. Starting with the origins of Spirituals there has been misconceptions on almost every aspect of their performance.

Since there are many misconceptions on the performance of spirituals, it is important to acknowledge these misconceptions and offer guidelines or suggestions into a more authentic performance. Originally, slaves learned spirituals by an oral tradition. Since this time has past, contemporary performers have to learn spirituals using a score. These scores were, at one time, committed to paper by someone like Harry T. Burleigh, who learned spirituals through the oral tradition and learned to compose music. Misconceptions can include many aspects of performance. For example, performers believed that Spirituals should be sung with proper English diction because they are in English. Spirituals are sung in English, but the diction was slightly different because they were sung by slaves who did not know proper English diction. Also, many performers do not fully understand what they are singing. They perform every song the same way even though these songs have specific functions, meanings, and nuances. This misconception highlights the belief that spirituals are only religious music meant to praise God because the text comes from mainly the Old Testament of the Bible. Performers also have misconceptions about the improvisation of spirituals, both rhythmic and melodic. Rhythmic improvisation includes, but is not limited to, foot stomping, hand clapping, and swing rhythms. While melodic improvisation deals with only the augmentation of the vocal line, the use melisma, slides, dynamics, etc.

Though there are many aspects of the performance practice of spirituals, this paper will only focus on two of these, the diction and interpretation. Using examples of specific spirituals, the song and text types, purpose and performance of spirituals will be discussed.