

And Justice For All

The making of music goes hand-in-hand with addressing issues of social conflict, of systemic exclusion, and of justice. In America, political protest songs range back to the pre-Revolutionary war era, and into the 19th century a spate of protest songs – including abolitionist songs and music written for women’s suffrage – were sung in homes, at gatherings, and in acts of political defiance. African-American spirituals were songs that expressed resistance and radical remembrance and survival. The 1960s were an especially important era in the history of American music and protest, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, the ascendance of the counterculture, and opposition to the Vietnam War. Musicians wrote songs that spoke to current issues, and adapted older ones to new circumstances. Music can be an active, immediate, in-the-moment act of protest or political resistance that is an expression of a community and a statement of solidarity, as you have with music that is sung in public rallies. Music can be an emotional restoration of voice, healing from an act of harm. And music making - as we are doing here today -- is an active way of telling history, of expressing histories of people in order to keep those memories current. *And Justice For All* is a concert-journey from expressions of mourning and remembrance, through healing, and into taking action and rising up to fight for our future.

Sing About It

Moira Smiley inscribed the following on the cover of her 2015 composition “Sing About It”: *Reaching out of the echo chamber of our lives: Difficult. Necessary.* This is a piece about seeking community, sharing grief, and sharing responsibility. These actions require us to look outside of ourselves and reach for others, even if it causes us a moment of discomfort -- for the stakes are too high to ignore. The “soul” of the piece is in the lamenting melisma that anchors the first part; this lament eventually gives way to a driving rhythmic force on the word “gonna”, as a decision to take action is made.

Composer B.E. Boykin and poet Brittney Ray Crowell were commissioned to write “Stardust” by the Pershing Middle School Treble Chorale in 2021. Director Marcus J. Jauregui notes: “In “Stardust,” the singers call for “a home where we can run” in memory of Ahmaud Arbery, “a home where we can pray” in memory of the victims of the Mother Emanuel shooting, “a home where we can breathe” in memory of George Floyd, and a home to “sleep and dream without fear” in memory of Breonna Taylor. When we sing, we pray twice, and it is my prayer that this piece stirs all who hear it to call for justice for the people of color taken from this world before their time and without concern for their humanity.”

About her 2022 piece “Hear Me Roar,” composer Liv Grace writes: “This is a *protest* – a cry for justice and equality! In this piece, bring the rhythm and soul that has energized people of color throughout history...Every name in this score belongs to a son or daughter, a mother or father...a real person. I encourage you to choose one, or two, or three and read about them. Humanize them. Sing for them and for those who share their pain. Every time you perform this work, you are contributing to a movement. Through harmony, you are giving a voice to those who have been silenced...And know that there are many fighting alongside you, including me.”

Reflection

The spiritual emerged as a musical way to express faith, freedom from suffering, and hope for a new world, through the adoption of Christian messaging about enslaved people crossing the Red Sea and the exile of the Jews and captivity in Babylon. The lyric trope of crossing a significant River appears as a reference to Biblical imagery—the River Jordan – and doubles as a metaphor for an escape into freedom. The spiritual was one source in the development of blues, jazz, gospel music, and the form and function of the spiritual also figures heavily into the creation of Civil Rights Era protest music. Victor C. Johnson’s arrangement of African-American spiritual “I Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray” highlights a musical enactment of community coming together in support of each other. A soloist emerges from the chorus, and the two forces engage in a call-and-response: exploring emotion, sharing experience, and supporting each other.

“All My Trials” is a song of uncertain origin that became popular with American folk artists during the social movements of the 1960s. Gwyneth Walker’s arrangement leans into the poignancy of a woman saying farewell at the end of her life, thinking of the people that she must leave behind. About the composition, Walker writes: “The accompaniment of repeated 8th-note chords is marked *as if trembling or sobbing*. Although the harmonic language is tonal and consonant almost entirely throughout the song, a few dissonances appear near the end, reflecting the pain of parting.”

“Breathe in Hope” was commissioned by the Los Angeles Children’s Chorus in 2017. Composer Dale Trumbore writes: “Maya Jackson’s text for *Breathe in Hope* began as two Facebook posts responding to the violent deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Reading Maya’s words, I was drawn to her poetic call for action. When confronted with tragedy, we may instinctively search for hope and healing. In the face of violent injustice, though, maybe the hope we seek can only be found when we recognize our own accountability and ask what actions we can take to create lasting change.”

Pianist, composer, and bandleader Oscar Peterson first recorded “Hymn to Freedom” in 1962 as an instrumental piece in honor of the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. He drew upon memories of his childhood in the Baptist church, listening to renderings of traditional spirituals. Lyricist Harriette Hamilton added the words later, deliberately choosing simple, straightforward language to express a desire for unity and freedom.

Acts of Justice

We turn now to a reflection of the words and actions of the act of protest. In “Signs”, Ruth Huber draws upon the multitude of slogans that have become familiar to us from activist movements such as Black Lives Matter, and displayed on signs held aloft during the marches that have mobilized in response to Trump-era threats against civil rights, diversity, education, and equality. The musical writing draws focus to the lyrics, pithy phrases and powerful statements that have gone viral through campaigns and social media.

The Justice Choir is an organization dedicated to social and environmental justice, engaging communities through the act of singing together. We offer a selection of songs from the first volume of the Justice Choir Songbook: “¡No nos moverán!”, “Resilience”, and “Love Is Love Is Love Is Love.”

Ahmen Anzaldúa, co-editor of the Songbook, offers these notes on “¡No nos moverán”:
Originally from the African-American spiritual tradition, it was in the 1930s that “We Shall Not Be Moved” and its Spanish version “¡No nos moverán!” both became rallying cries for solidarity in U.S. labor and civil rights movements, often deployed by singers arm-in-arm in the face of repression. “¡No nos moverán!” would go on to become an important part of the Chicano movement of the 1960s as well as of the social justice and revolutionary movements across Spain and Latin America. It is sung all throughout the Spanish-speaking world in this version; it’s the one I grew up with.”

Executive Director of the Justice Choir Abbie Betinis added her piece “Resilience” to the songbook, reflecting that: “Resilience is a mindset born in the hardest days, when you’re scared or sad or tired, when progress toward your goal is slow, and the barriers seem impenetrable...and yet you keep going, because somewhere deep down you know that what you’re fighting for will be so much better. As a three-time cancer survivor, I continue to learn about resilience.”

Betinis’s “Love Is Love Is Love Is Love” takes its inspiration from several sources: Latin text from the *Ubi caritas* (“where there is charity and love”), the impassioned title from Lin Manuel Miranda’s speech at the 2016 Tony Awards (which took place the day after the mass shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando), and the Beatles’s signature lyric “All we need is love.” Betinis notes: “This song is dedicated to the victims, and survivors, of hate crimes everywhere, and specifically for those at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando on June 12, 2016. Love is often the bravest thing we do. May love prevail.”

Next, we combine Bill Withers’s 1972 hit and its call for community and support with gospel song and Civil Rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.” The modern version of the song has origins in the 1940s, when it was sung by the Food and Tobacco Workers Union during a strike in Charleston that resulted in unprecedented biracial cooperation. Both songs are striking in their simplicity: they are easy to sing, easy to learn, and as such they have the capacity to engage people in large gatherings, to endlessly improvise verses, to pass time during long marches and galvanize courage to face opposition.

Hope for the Future

Rosephanye Powell sets words from “To You”, a poem by American poet and Harlem Renaissance luminary Langston Hughes (1901-1967). The composer writes: “In *To Sit and Dream*, I sought to musically paint Hughes’s poignant poetry with jazz harmonic colors, rhythmic syncopation, and improvised speech. The song begins with a piano introduction comprised of a simple ‘quiet’ motive which depicts Hughes’s placidity as he sits alone disheartened while reading the newspaper headlines...In the last section...Hughes, still in a dream-like trance, finds himself on the streets of Harlem reaching out his hand to any who will join him in making “our world anew.” As each person joins Hughes, reaching out their hands to others, a growing crowd of people come together to create a new world characterized by love, peace, equality, and justice for all.”

Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933) was a Methodist minister who fought for social justice for the people in his community. He published the songs he introduced in his sermons (including

“I’ll Overcome Someday”, which was the inspiration for “We Shall Overcome”), and many of these songs became staples in the gospel music repertory. “The Storm is Passing Over” was first published in *Soul Echoes* in 1905. It is a celebration of the outcome of resilience, that courage has brought us through the storms of our lives.

Also known as the Black national anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was written by James Weldon Johnson in 1900 and set to music by J. Rosamond Johnson in 1905 as a hymn song of thanksgiving and an expression of faith and freedom. Zanaida Robles’s arrangement builds in forces and strength as it goes, starting with a soloist gently singing, the choir picking up her melody in unison at first, and breaking into harmony as tension builds in the piano. The tension breaks in a cry against injustice, voices reaching a point of disunity that still retains hope for unification as they echo one another. The soloist leads the group into a final statement of truth, freedom, and belonging for all to partake: “Lift ev’ry voice!”