

**14 Études on the Music of Black Americans** is inspired by melodies created by enslaved or recently emancipated African-Americans (my ancestors). These melodies were selected for their inherent beauty, melodic and rhythmic inventiveness, evocative lyrics, and potential for development on the guitar.

They come from two main publications: John W. Work's *American Negro Songs* (1940) and Allen, Ware, and Garrison's *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). Additionally, Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1997), DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), Langston Hughes' essay *Concerning the Singing of Spirituals Today* (1956), and *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) by J.W. Johnson & J.R. Johnson were informative.

**Duration:** 20 minutes

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*Commissioned by Cleveland Classical Guitar Society*

## Performance Notes:

This collection is ordered by difficulty level. Some works contain both a simplified version and a more advanced and fully realized “A” version. “A” versions should be used whenever feasible. Parts of the advanced versions can be added to the simpler versions when a player is between levels.

Historically, when composers reimagine a preexisting folk melody in a substantial way it is common for publishers to list them as composers rather than arrangers (e.g. Bartok's *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs*, Lutoslawski's *Folk Melodies*, Tippett's spirituals settings in *A Child From Our Time*, Ligeti's *Lakodalmi tánc*, Florence Price's *Five Folksongs in Counterpoint* etc). Several of the works in this collection are consistent with this tradition, so unless listed otherwise, works should be credited as follows in concert programs and recordings:

Name of song (omit the ‘A’ lettering)  
(African-American Melody)

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It is important to remain mindful that these are sacred melodies sung by a people who had collectively been kidnapped, physically abused, sold away from their children, impoverished, banned from education, hunted, lynched, and tortured — for centuries. As such, a somber demeanor should be adopted when performing. It would be disrespectful to be lighthearted and flashy as if these were mere musical entertainment. I encourage performers to first read some of the lyrics aloud and play the original melodies for the audience before performing the full works.

## Historical Background:

Over the past year, there has been a conversation known as “The Racial Reckoning” taking place across the United States. It includes questions about inequality, systemic oppression of marginalized groups, who has the

right to claim certain cultural traditions, and who should be held to account for appropriating traditions for profit in culturally insensitive ways. This comes in the aftermath of the graphic death of the Black American

George Floyd under the knee of the White police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020. As a result, many Americans have wondered how we might reimagine our society to be more just and inclusive. In the classical music world, this has meant trying to ensure that music by diverse American composers is included in prominent student repertoire collections and on the concert stage.

One solution seems to be to tap into the incredibly profound melodies of Black American spirituals. However, spirituals are sacred music, and it is valid to question the appropriateness and intentions of the person who is arranging or performing these works. Questions of appropriation are important, and there will always be a constructive tension between representation and appropriation in the arts. From my perspective, if the alternative to bringing these works to wider audiences is that the music remains obscure and untouched in many arenas (and the music of a dominant culture is the only music arranged for students), I find that to be a far worse outcome for students of the classical guitar. I encourage performers of all races to learn and play these pieces with the respect and humility that they deserve.

As one analyzes the 500+ extant spiritual melodies they soon discover the multiple versions of songs that developed over time. From the beginning, spirituals have been in a state of collaboration and change, with each community and era putting their own feelings and ideas into them. In this rich tradition, generations of prominent Black composers have created their own interpretations of the spirituals, including: Margaret Bonds, Courtney Bryan, H.T. Burleigh, Samuel-Coleridge Taylor, Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson,

Florence Price, William Grant Still, and more. Transcending racial barriers, luminaries such as the guitarist Christopher Parkening and the composer Michael Tippet have embraced spirituals and showcased this music in sincere and meaningful ways. This is the unifying work that our time calls for.

It is also important to note that the Black American experience was not universally one of ceaseless suffering. There was also joy, faith, family, and community —there was resilience. Some of the works contained herein try to express the joy of the early Black church (*The Old Ship of Zion*) and the beauty of a mother singing to her child (*Oh Mother Glasco*).

I am a descendant of enslaved Black Americans from Georgia and Tennessee. My family includes a long line of southern Black preachers who led the churches where this music was developed and preserved. My parents met at the historically Black college Fisk University —home of the most famous choir to ever sing and popularize spirituals, the *Fisk Jubilee Singers*. I feel honored to contribute to this musical legacy through this project and the works that I have created and melodies I compiled for this collection.

It is my sincere hope that people of good will from all backgrounds can embrace this music and lift up the profoundly beautiful melodies of early Black Americans and hold these melodies in the same high esteem as music from other traditions. Together, we can make concerts more representative of the full range of American musical traditions and human artistic expression.

Thomas Flippin  
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