



R. N. Dett, of Hampton Institute: Helping to Lay Foundation for Negro Music of Future

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In Retrospect

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*R. N. DETT, OF HAMPTON INSTITUTE

HELPING TO LAY FOUNDATION FOR NEGRO MUSIC OF FUTURE

By MAY STANLEY

HAMPTON, VA., June 12, 1918—If your summer journeyings should this year lead you to Hampton—and many are the roads which lead to Hampton these days and many people travel them—don't leave without a talk with R. Nathaniel Dett [1882-1943].

Mr. Dett has for the last five years been director of vocal music at Hampton Institute, but his name is linked in the minds of music lovers throughout the country with a group of widely known works that have the real American music—the plantation melodies of the South—as their inspiration.

In the last few years Negro music has passed from the stage where it was either regarded lightly or ignored to the second period of transition, where musical opinion is divided as to the best method of treating it. One school holds to the belief that it should be presented in its absolute, primitive simplicity, without attempts at elaboration, and that only in such manner may this beautiful music of bondage be preserved to America. Another group of musicians, of which Mr. Dett is one of the leading exponents, believes that the better way of preservation lies in development of the original themes, development that shall conserve instead of destroy the original characteristics and at the same time make them usable for presentation in concert form.

It was to talk over this viewpoint that I sought an interview recently with Mr. Dett.

The composer of "In the Bottoms" and "Listen to the Lambs" has a delightful setting for his inspirational labors. The broad grounds of Hampton Institute; the shaded walks; the satiny sheen of magnolia trees lifting up great, white blossoms to the June sunshine; the sparkling waters of Hampton Roads, seen at intervals through the trees, make up an ideal surrounding for one who is gathering and interpreting the melodies of the Southland.

"To those of us who believe with Dvorak that 'the future music of this country must be founded on what is called Negro melodies' it is gratifying to see the large number of composers who have recently turned to the use of Indian and Negro folk tunes, if not as actual themes, as the acknowledged source of their musical inspiration," said Mr. Dett. "In this country we are, musically, in much the same position as a man who owns a valuable mine. The fact that there are minerals in the ground, that he has that great



supply of wealth stored up, will mean little to the owner unless he utilizes it. We have this wonderful store of folk music—the melodies of an enslaved people, who poured out their longings, their griefs and their aspirations in the one great, universal language. But this store will be of no value unless we utilize it, unless we treat it in such manner that it can be presented in choral form, in lyric and operatic works, in concertos and suites and salon music—unless our musical architects take the rough timber of Negro themes and fashion from it music which will prove that we, too, have national feelings and characteristics, as have the European peoples whose forms we have zealously followed for so long.

“The Negro people as a whole cannot be looked to as a very great aid in the work of conserving their folk music,” Mr. Dett continued. “At the present time they are inclined to regard it as a vestige of the slavery they are trying to put behind them and to be ashamed of it. Moreover, the prevailing manner of presenting Negro music to the public—the ‘coon’ song of vaudeville or the minstrel show—has not tended to increase appreciation of it, either among the Negro or white races.

“There is great need of education, continued education, for the Negro, that he may properly appreciate the rare musical legacy bequeathed to him by his ancestors. At the same time there is a still greater need for doing away with the slavish admiration in which the average American musician has held all things European. Surely, when a Dvorak, a Busoni, a Coleridge-Taylor and a Laparra can come over here and in a few months gather themes for some of their greatest works—gathering them from our slighted and ignored native music—it is not too much to hope that an increasing number of our own musicians will come to appreciate fully the great fund of material that lies waiting at their hand. When they do we shall cease to be an ‘echo of Europe.’

“The argument is sometimes made that when one takes a Negro theme as the basis for an anthem, a suite or a choral work it robs the music of its original charm—that it is no longer characteristic, that it does not truly represent the old plantation melodies. Yet, no one argues that the music of Tchaikovsky is not typically Russian, and Tchaikovsky’s works forms one of the finest examples we have of the use of folk tunes in the more elaborate phases of art-form development.”

Something of His Early Years

Mr. Dett’s gifts of composition were evidenced at a very early age and were the cause of getting him into trouble at frequent times with his first music teacher.

“I played the piano ever since I can remember,” he relates. “No one taught me; I just ‘picked it up.’ I used to follow my two older brothers to the house of their teacher and sit, an interested spectator, while their lessons were in progress. On the rare occasions when the teacher happened to leave the room to get more music I would slide from my chair, fly to the

piano stool, and play until warned by my brothers that 'teacher' was returning. After one such absence she became curious as to who the performer was, saying that the music was 'better playing than my brothers did.' When they told her who it was that had been playing, she asked me to play for her, but I was too shy. Finally, she hid herself one day behind the curtains at the window and my brothers persuaded me to play some of the things I had heard her play. The result was that she offered to give me free lessons.

Youthful Independence

"And that was where some of my troubles began," Mr. Dett laughed, "because I never would play anything as it was written. I was always changing a composition and playing it in a way that I thought 'sounded better.' One day, in despair, my teacher told my mother of the very great dislike I had for following the score.

"'Send him home to me,' said my mother, 'and I'll see that he practices the music as it is written.' And she did—with a big switch, to emphasize my wrong-doing when I would stray to improvisation from the printed page. But it didn't cure me," he added, merrily.

Mr. Dett is Canadian by birth, a native of Niagara, Canada, and several of his better-known compositions are dedicated to leaders of Canadian music, notably the four-part chorus, "Weeping Mary," dedicated to Bruce A. Carey, director of the famous Elgar Choir of Hamilton, Ontario. One of his recent works, "O Holy Lord," an *a cappella* folk song anthem in eight parts, had its first presentation by the Elgar Choir last year, at the Field of Honor memorial service for Canadian soldiers fallen in battle. "I'll Never Turn Back No More," an anthem dedicated to the Hampton Institute Choir and Hampton Choral Union, is an excellent example of the use of the Negro long-meter as the foundation of a serious music composition.

One of Mr. Dett's unusual compositions is "Music in the Mine," in which he has vividly pictured a day in the life of a Negro miner. It is based on traditional Negro airs and is dedicated to Percy Grainger. Another descriptive composition which has found favor with many pianists is the Suite "In the Bottoms." Probably his best-known choral work is "Listen to the Lambs," which has been sung in New York by the choir of the Church of the Ascension, by the Columbus University Chorus and the Music School Settlement Chorus, and in Syracuse by the Syracuse University Chorus.

The Work at Hampton

Mr. Dett graduated from Oberlin Conservatory of Music in 1908 and was the first Negro in America to receive the degree of Bachelor of Music for original composition. His instructors expected that his brilliant pianistic gifts would lead him to the concert stage, but he turned his back on the more alluring prospect to take up teaching among his people in the South.

He was director for music at Lane College, Jackson, Tenn., for three years, and under his inspirational guidance the Lane College Choral Society became a potent influence in the musical life of that city. From Lane, Mr. Dett went to Lincoln Institute, Jefferson City, Mo., as director of music, where his work with the Lincoln Institute Orchestra is a widely known chapter of the history of that institution. From Lincoln Mr. Dett accepted the call to the wide field of service which Hampton Institute offers.

Anyone who has attended Sunday morning services at the Institute will recall the wholly delightful experience of listening to Mr. Dett's choir of seventy voices, which does unaccompanied singing for the church services. Some of the finest Russian liturgic choruses are included in its repertory. There is a large day chorus of about 400 voices, which meets for drill, under Mr. Dett's guidance, twice a week, and a chorus of night students, which meets once each week. Among the more ambitious works which have been given at the Institute may be mentioned Cowen's "Rose Maiden," which was sung as the third concert of the May Festival of 1916. During the last year conditions which have arisen from the war have made the holding of a festival series inadvisable, as many of the leading choir members have been called into service. One of the most important of the musical features of the present year was the spring concert given at Cleveland Hall Chapel on May 27, under Mr. Dett's leadership, when excerpts from "Elijah" and "The Rose Maiden" were sung by the chorus, with Bessie L. Drew, Clara D. H. Smith, Geoffrey O'Hara and Dr. J. T. Lattimore as soloists, and Mrs. R. Nathaniel Dett as accompanist. Many people who have not been privileged in visiting Hampton have become acquainted with the quality of its musical work through the annual tour of the Hampton Quartet, one of the three best known quartets in America, that has been heard from coast to coast in plantation melodies and the "Spirituals" of the South.

Where School and Community Meet

One of the admirable examples of the community spirit in music is exemplified in the Hampton Choral Union that is made up of colored singers, members of the different church choirs and music clubs of Hampton and the surrounding country, who gather at the Institute once a week for rehearsal. Under its auspices are given the artists' recitals, which are a feature of the school year at Hampton, and which have presented such well-known artists as Myrtle Moses of the Chicago Opera Association, Harry Burleigh, Roland Hayes and Clarence Cameron White.

Mr. Dett is fortunate in having a companion-worker in music in his wife, Helen Elise Smith, a post-graduate of the New York Institute of Musical Art and a pupil of Sigismund Stojowski and Percy Goetschius. Mrs. Dett has appeared in several concerts at the Institute, both as soloist and accompanist.

Writing recently in *The Southern Workman* on "Negro Music of the Present" Mr. Dett said: "A glimpse of the work of Negro musicians of the present day in handling their own folk tunes shows that they are at last awakening to the fact that there is a great truth in the words from Holy Writ, 'The kingdom of heaven lies within.'"

He was too modest to add a fact that is well known to those who have followed his work—that one of the main instruments in this awakening has been the young composer who turned his back on a more glittering career that he might aid in bringing to the world a greater appreciation of the beauties of Negro music.

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