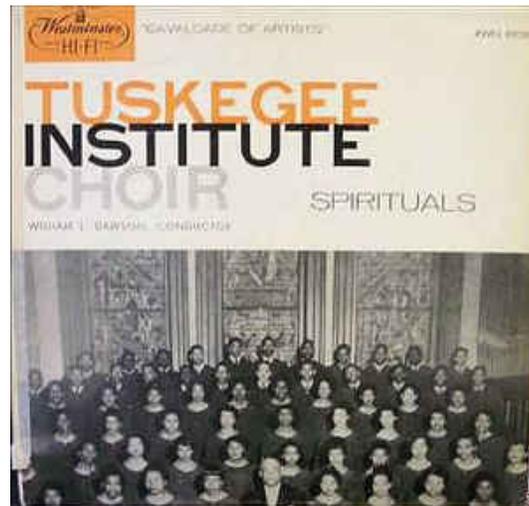


“Tuskegee Institute Choir Sings Spirituals”--William L. Dawson, director (1955)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Wayne A. Barr (guest post)*



Original album cover

I remember my first encounter with the 1954 recording “Spirituals” by the Tuskegee Institute Choir and its director William Levi Dawson as if it were yesterday! I discovered a lone copy in a CD bin at a music store in Flint, Michigan. Immediately, I knew I had found something special! From the clarity and richness of the basses, to the rhythmic precision and crisp articulation of the ensemble, to the emotional import of each track, this recording is timeless! I had no idea at the time of my discovery that I would be leading the Tuskegee Choir just a few years later.

Although the Tuskegee Choir was frequently on radio and television at the time, it is clear that Dawson wanted this recording to represent the very best of the choir's output. He therefore called on former choir members to add their voices to the project. The result is a group of singers who clearly understand his choral intent and a maturity in the choral tone that is quite invigorating. Dawson's tonal palate was grounded in the bass-baritone voice, lending a rich and dark quality to the choral tone as evidenced in each track of this recording. A masterful musician, Dawson had a well-honed ability to plainly communicate his musical ideas. Clearly on display here are his keen ear, impeccable rhythm and his deep understanding of musical line.

With this recording, Mr. Dawson also took the opportunity to inform his audience about the “Interpretation of the religious folk-songs of the American Negro,” an essay that was later published in “Etude” magazine in March 1955. This well-written essay, which was printed on the back cover of the album, explains the background for the creation of the religious folk songs (as he chose to refer to them), the various themes of the folk songs, as well as their unique dialect and rhythmic character. The article also hints at the ongoing debate as to whether anyone besides African Americans could genuinely interpret these songs.

Of the fifteen selections on the recording, “Listen to the Lambs” by R. Nathaniel Dett is the only one that is not truly a spiritual in its conception. As Dett's caption states, it is “A Religious Characteristic in the form of an Anthem,” constructed from snatches of Negro melodies. Dawson may have decided to include it because of the melodies, but perhaps more so because it had by that time been generally embraced as a spiritual.

The Tuskegee Institute Choir album, released in 1955 by Westminster Recording Company, was included in the “Best Selling Long Playing Records of the Decade” as listed in the March 16, 1958 issue of the “New York Times.”

Wayne A. Barr has been Director of Choral Activities at Tuskegee University since 2001. He earned a Bachelor of Music degree from Westminster Choir College, a Master of Music degree from Southern Methodist University, and Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Michigan.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.