

# *Coming for to Carry Me Home*

David Demnitz

*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and *Go, Tell it on the Mountain* are two of the original Jubilee Songs. What we call Spirituals were presented by the Fisk Jubilee Singers to a broad section of American society when the Jubilee Singers toured shortly after Emancipation in order to raise funds for the Fisk School. The Fisk School was established in 1866 to educate everyone, including freedmen, but quickly became known as a school for African Americans. The Jubilee Singers began touring as a downtrodden, barely clad group of performers, but in seven years were able to erase the school's \$150,000 debt and build Jubilee Hall, still standing on the Fisk University campus in Nashville, Tennessee. They eventually met with international acclaim after being shunned and ridiculed when they began to perform. The songs they popularized were known as Jubilee Songs. They were also called Sorrow Songs. WEB du Bois, who attended Fisk University when the Fisk Jubilee Singers were presenting this precious repertory to the world for the first time in concert settings, called Sorrow Songs "the articulate message of the slave to the world", and in *The Souls of Black Folk* described them so:

"the Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which ...still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil... Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope."

*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* is included in du Bois's list of 'master songs', "songs of undoubted Negro origin and songs peculiarly characteristic of the slave". Du Bois calls *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* "the cradle song of death which all men know". *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* makes use of call and response (for more on call and response, please see *Go Down, Moses*, included in this collection). *Go, Tell it on the Mountain*, while part of the Jubilee Singers earliest repertory, wasn't published until 30 years later, by the director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers at the time. John W. Work II included it in his *Folk Songs of the American Negro* and probably contributed some of the verses.

There is a chord sequence which is remarkably useful in music. The sequence's earliest presentation, as far as I know, is in Pachelbel's Canon in D (in which I can hear not a whisp of canon. It's a passacaglia, or a chaconne, since the same chord sequence is repeated throughout the work.) Other songs which can be presented with the same chord sequence include *Jolly Old Saint Nicholas*, and *Piano Man*, the popular song by Billy Joel. (Close but not quite matches are *When a Man Loves a Woman* popularized by Percy Sledge and Michael Bolton, and the Beatles' tune *Let it Be*.) The chords sequence works with *Go, Tell it on the Mountain* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. Since these songs can be sung using the same chord progression, it's a wonderful opportunity to perform them as a medley. And by presenting them in the context of African American history and the important role the African American church played in organizing political and direct resistance to institutional racism, you can surmount the usual restrictions placed on the use of religious music in many schools.

The repeated bass line is playable by elementary instrumental music students. It's just a scale going down the white notes for the most part, with a couple of jumps at the end to turn things around. And with a little practice, they can learn to play the chords as well.

## ***Swing Low, Sweet Chariot/Go, Tell it on the Mountain***

*Time:* In one 45 minute class period you can perform this medley with students playing the bass part, singing the verses and responses, and playing percussion accompaniment. With some additional time, elementary instrumental students can play the harmonic accompaniment as well.

*Materials:* Any pitched musical instruments are welcome here, as long as they have the white notes of the piano on them. Instruments capable of sustaining musical pitches are helpful for the harmonic accompaniment. Percussion instruments of all stripes can be used

1. Sing the songs for the students, just the chorus and one verse. Identify the verses and the choruses. Ask them if they're familiar with the songs and if they know what kind of music it is, what it's used for, and where they've heard it.

# Go Tell it on the Mountain/Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Traditional Spirituals  
Arr. David Demnitz

## Go, Tell it on the Mountain

*Chorus*

Tenor

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere

Piano

5 *To Coda*

T

Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born

Pno.

5 *To Coda*

9 *Verse*

T

8 When I was a seeker I sought both night and day I  
9 He made me a watchman U - pon the city wall And

Pno.

2. Take advantage of the opportunity to discuss Spirituals, their origin, and tell the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.
3. Teach the students to sing the choruses to both songs (they probably already know them). Sing the songs and play the accompaniment as they sing the choruses.
4. Discuss call and response. Point out that in *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* every line ends with 'coming for to carry me home', even the choruses. This is the response. Sing the chorus and verse of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and have the students sing the chorus and the responses in the verse.

13

T

8 asked the Lord to help me and He showed me the way  
 13 if I am a Chris - tian I am the least of all

Pno.

*D.C. al Coda*

17

T

*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*  
 Chorus

8 Swing low, sweet char - i - ot Coming for to car - ry me home Swing

Pno.

21

T

8 low, sweet char - i - ot Coming for to car - ry me home. I

Pno.

25

T

8 looked o - ver yon - der and what did I see? Coming for to car - ry me home A

Pno.

The image shows a musical score for a Tenor (T) and Piano (Pno.) accompaniment. The Tenor part is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It begins at measure 29 with a melodic line that includes a dotted quarter note, followed by eighth notes, and ends with a whole note. The Piano accompaniment consists of two staves: a right-hand staff with a treble clef and a left-hand staff with a bass clef. The right-hand part plays chords, and the left-hand part plays a descending scale of white notes (C, B, A, G, F, E, D) with black notes (B-flat, A-flat, G-flat, F-flat, E-flat, D-flat) interspersed. The lyrics are: "band of an - gels coming af-ter me Com-ing for to car-ry me home". Both parts end with a "Fine" marking.

5. Review scale: two notes of the same name connected by steps arranged in order going up or down. Tell students that the steps needed to play the bass part in this accompaniment are the white notes and ask them how to locate a C by looking at the pattern of black notes.

6. Assign instruments. Students can share instruments; all they need is an octave.

7. Ask students to find a C, and then play a scale on the white notes going down until they get to D, and then stop.

8. Review intervals, which are the spaces between notes. Review steps and jumps. There are half steps (going from a keyboard key to the one next to it, no matter its color) and whole steps (made of two half steps). Any interval bigger than a whole step is a jump.

9. Have students play the descending C scale again, stopping at the D below the C on which they began. When they get to the D, show them that in order to 'turn the bass part around', they have to jump over two white notes to a G, and then jump over two white notes again to get back to the note on which they began. Have them hold down the notes D, G and C so they see the pattern.

10. Play the bass pattern one time, stopping at the end of the first four measures. Do this, pausing between each repetition until students are ready to play the bass part repeatedly.

11. Once students can play the bass part repeatedly, assign musical roles to students. Distribute the lyrics to the songs so some students can sing the verses, and if you have students who want to try the chords, and you think now's the time to teach the harmonic accompaniment to them, do that. If not, you can teach the harmonic accompaniment after the class has performed the song.

12. Rehearse the song and prepare for your performance!