

The Cherwell Singers

present

“Feel the Spirit”

Music from the African-American tradition

James Brown	conductor
Steven Grahl	piano
Felicity Buckland	mezzo-soprano

Sunday, 26th June 2016

New Road Baptist Church, Bonn Square, Oxford

Programme

The Drinking Gourd

Traditional, arr André Thomas

A Duke Ellington Suite

Take the 'A' Train

Billy Strayhorn

Satin Doll

Duke Ellington & Billy Strayhorn

Things ain't what they used to be

Mercer Ellington

Perdido

Harry Lenk & Ervin Drake

Solace (*piano solo*)

Scott Joplin

Hymn to Freedom

Oscar Peterson

Ain't misbehavin' (*instrumental*)

Fats Waller & Harry Brooks

Walk him up the stairs (from *Purlie*)

Gary Geld

Interval

Feel the Spirit

John Rutter

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho

Steal away

I got a robe

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child

Ev'ry time I feel the spirit

Deep river

When the saints go marching in

Please refrain from applause between the movements of the Rutter.

Felicity Buckland

mezzo-soprano

Rhodri Taylor

clarinet

Steve Kershaw

double bass

Ben Twyford

drums

Steven Grahl

piano

James Brown

conductor

Feel the Spirit

Music from the African-American tradition

This term the Cherwell Singers pays a humble tribute to the immense influence African-American music has had on the history of modern music worldwide. While jazz (which gradually evolved from ragtime) is perhaps the most important form of music pioneered by African-Americans, rhythm and blues, soul, barbershop and rock and roll all owe their origins to this tradition, and the influence of these forms on world music has been enormous.

In the first half of the concert we acknowledge Duke Ellington who with his jazz orchestra and partner Billy Strayhorn, was a pivotal figure in the history of jazz, and also include piano music by ragtime composer Scott Joplin.

The second half of the concert is devoted to the uniquely indigenous form of the African-American spiritual, whose powerful sentiments evoke yearning for escape from the conditions of slavery and sometimes contain coded messages of escape. Although these were originally unaccompanied unison songs they have become best known in harmonised choral arrangements such as the suite *Feel the spirit* arranged by John Rutter in a version for piano, clarinet and drums which we shall present.

The fusion of harmonic and rhythmic features from Western and sub-Saharan Africa into European musical styles has made music from the African-American tradition one of the most exciting, sometimes poignant, but hugely popular forms of music there is. We hope you will enjoy this concert, given in the “Southern”-style interior of this Baptist church.

James Brown

Notes

The theme of the American folksong *Follow the Drinking Gourd* was first published in 1928. The song was supposedly used by an Underground Railroad operative to encode escape instructions and a map. These directions then enabled fleeing slaves to make their way north from Mobile, Alabama to the Ohio River and freedom. “Drinking gourd” seems to refer to the hollowed out gourd used by slaves as a water dipper. But here it means the Great Bear (or Big Dipper) constellation, which points to the Pole Star, and hence North.

The Drinking Gourd song played an important role in the Civil Rights and folk revival movements of the 1950s and 1960s. But re-examining the song as history rather than folklore raises many questions; nevertheless, it seems likely that some of its elements have historic origins.

“**Duke**” **Ellington** (1899-1974) was an American composer, pianist, and bandleader of a jazz orchestra. Though widely considered to have been a pivotal figure in the history of jazz, Ellington embraced the phrase “beyond category” as a liberating principle, and referred to his music as part of the more general category of American Music, rather than to a musical genre such as jazz. Some of the musicians who were members of Ellington’s orchestra are considered to be among the best players in jazz, and Ellington frequently composed specifically to feature the style and skills of his individual musicians.

Ellington often collaborated with other composers, most notably with Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967) – of tonight’s pieces, *Satin Doll* is one written by the pair of them - and also frequently recorded pieces by other members of his band, such as *Perdido*, also in the group we are singing tonight. Strayhorn wrote many items for the orchestra on his own too; his *Take the ‘A’ train* became the group’s signature item for a time. Ellington’s son Mercer (1919-1996) joined his orchestra, eventually taking over after his father’s death. He contributed songs such as *Things ain’t what they used to be*; in this song, the words “Look at the army fightin’ to be free, it doesn’t bar me!” remind us that war provided a cause for desegregation of negroes to be started.

Scott Joplin (1867-1917) was a pioneer of ragtime. This is most often associated with his many piano pieces, but he also wrote a ballet and an opera. Ragtime was a development of the march, popularised by Sousa, and was later supplanted by jazz; though after a while many jazz groups included some ragtime in their repertoire. Although typically lively and upbeat, ragtime can also present a gentler aspect, which *Solace*, the piece you hear this evening illustrates.

Hymn to Freedom is the last and longest track on the album *Night Train* by **Oscar Peterson** (1925-2007). Peterson was a Canadian jazz pianist and composer, and was called the “Maharaja of the keyboard” by Duke Ellington. He is widely considered to be one of the greatest jazz pianists,

Ain’t Misbehavin’ is a 1929 stride jazz composition which was created specifically as a theme song for the off-Broadway musical comedy *Connie’s Hot Chocolates*. In a 1941 interview **Fats Waller** (1904-1943) claimed that the song was written while he was “lodging” in alimony prison, and that is why he was not “misbehaving”. It is probably his best-known composition.

Walk him up the stairs is the opening number of the 1970 Broadway musical *Purlie*, with music by **Gary Geld** (1935-). The story of the musical is concerned with a travelling preacher in the southern USA during the time of the “Jim Crow” laws. The song refers to a funeral scene, and specifically to the idea of climbing stairs to heaven.

Whereas the jazz featured in the first part of our concert originated at around the turn of the century, spirituals go back to the middle of the nineteenth century. They were religious songs of hope and longing sung by negro slaves affirming their faith as a consolation in their hardship. The heritage of the African-American spiritual has fired the imagination of composers, performers, and audiences for more than a hundred years. Each generation has produced interpretations of many kinds, yet, curiously, rather few composers have combined the resources of soloist, choir, and orchestra. **John Rutter** (1945-) was inspired by the vocal artistry of Melanie Marshall to build an appealing set of arrangements of spirituals crafted to her personal style, partnered by choir, with the orchestra to supply an extra

dimension of colour and emotional depth. *Feel the Spirit* received its concert première in Carnegie Hall in June 2001.

Although the choir sing seven spirituals, Rutter actually provides eight, slipping a verse of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* into *Deep River*.

Biographies

Felicity Buckland mezzo-soprano

Felicity graduated in summer 2010 with a first class honours degree from the Royal Northern College of Music, where she studied with Thomas Schulze. She is currently living in London and working as a freelance singer and singing tutor.

Rhodri Taylor clarinet

Rhodri studied Clarinet at the Royal Northern College of Music before undertaking a Masters course at the Royal Academy of Music. Born and bred in Aberystwyth, Rhodri has always shown a great interest in music, specifically the clarinet and saxophone. He has a varied interest in all styles of music, ranging from classical to jazz and popular music. As well as working in Howarth of London, he is an experienced woodwind teacher, having taught clarinet, saxophone and flute both privately and as a peripatetic tutor in Aberystwyth, Manchester, Cardiff and most recently London.

Steve Kershaw double bass

“Kershaw, though, is often the key element - noticeable when he isn’t there - providing solid pillars of sound that hold the whole thing up.” (Jazz Review)

Steve has played jazz around the world for many years, and has a long-standing creative relationship with Russian virtuosos Nikolai and Leonid Vintskevich. He also teaches and lectures in Classics and the History of Art.

Ben Twyford Drums

After studying at Leeds Music College, Ben travelled Scandinavia and Britain playing with a variety of bands and musicians. Ben has worked in small and large bands, on TV and radio and in addition to work with 3bpm he is member of the Piccadilly Dance Orchestra. Ben has performed alongside some of the cream of British Jazz including Ian Shaw, Stacey Kent and Trudy Kerr.

Steven Grahl piano

Steven Grahl took up the post of Director of Music at Peterborough Cathedral in September 2014. Prior to this, he spent seven years as Assistant Organist at New College, Oxford, an appointment which he combined with the position of Organist & Director of Music at St Marylebone Parish Church, London. Steven was appointed Principal Conductor of the Guildford Chamber Choir in 2006.

A prize-winning graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford, and the Royal Academy of Music, Steven gained the Limpus (highest mark) and Dixon (improvisation) prizes in his FRCO examination, and is also a holder of the Worshipful Company of Musicians' Silver Medallion. In 2010, Steven was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM), an award offered to past students of the Academy who have distinguished themselves in the music profession and made a significant contribution to it in their particular field. He is currently a Junior Fellow in Choral Direction at Birmingham Conservatoire, and until recently held the post of Chairman of the Association of Assistant Cathedral Organists. Steven was an interpretation finalist in the International Organ Competitions at St Albans (UK) in 2011, and in Dudelange (Luxembourg) in 2013.

James Brown conductor

James Brown is a pianist and organist based in Oxford whose work takes him all over the world. A former organ scholar of Girton College, Cambridge University, he did further organ study at the Geneva Conservatoire of Music with Lionel Rogg.

He is currently Organist of the historic University Church of Oxford, and combines this with work as a classical pianist for the Fred Olsen and Swan Hellenic cruise lines. With the latter he appears as accompanist to opera singers and classical instrumentalists for formal concerts on board, and in 2016 travels to destinations varying from Bermuda to St Petersburg. Musicians he has played with include the singers Sarah Connolly, Rodney Clarke and Ed Lyon as well as the trumpeter Crispian Steele-Perkins.

As an organist he has given recitals in the UK, USA, Belgium and Switzerland and appeared on BBC television and radio as well as on several CD recordings.

He also sings as a tenor lay clerk in the internationally acclaimed boys and men choir of New College, Oxford.

James has conducted the Cherwell Singers since 2007.

The Cherwell Singers

Soprano

Vanessa Moir
Claire Scott-Dempster
Elinor Screen
Rhiannon Stubbs
Stephanie Sumner-Jones
Hannah Wight

Tenor

Simon Fisher
Guy Peskett
David Read
David Sutton

Alto

Virginia Allport
Rachel Bryans
Katherine Butler
Elizabeth Kreager
Lizzie Newton
Anna Orłowska
Joanna Poulton

Bass

Paul Hodges
Pierre Illien
Simon Jones
Jack Lovell
Iain Maclean
Jonathan Mapley
Simeon Mitchell

The Cherwell Singers is looking to recruit sopranos and tenors.
If you are interested in joining us please contact James Brown at:

director@cherwellsingers.org

Please visit our web site to learn more about the choir, and listen to some of our recordings online. Use the web form to register yourself on our email list, to ensure you receive notification and full details of future concerts.

www.cherwellsingers.org