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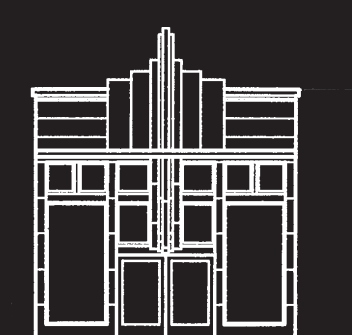
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Sing, You Sinners

American spirituals for a modern symphony audience

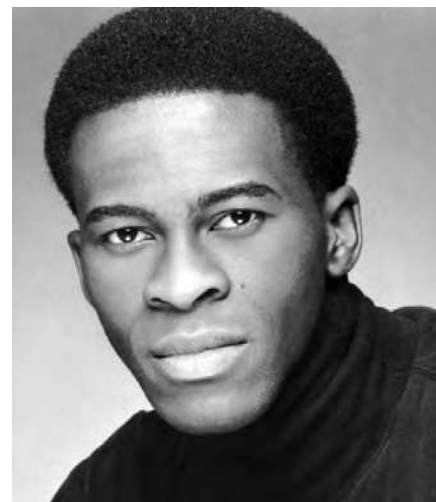
The world of symphonic music often looks more white than black, no matter how much of the latter the musicians wear onstage. But the Eugene Symphony opens the door a tiny bit with its upcoming "American Spirituals" concert.

Antonin Dvorak, in his most famous work, *The New World Symphony* (Symphony No. 9) from 1893, wrote a "Negro spiritual" so convincing that many people have thought it was an appropriated work. As a matter of fact, the second movement of the symphony became the basis for the oft-sung at funerals spiritual called "Goin' Home." But what about beautiful authentic spirituals like "Wade in the Water" or "Ain't Gonna Study War" transformed into symphonic moments?

That's precisely what Albany (N.Y.) Symphony music conductor and artistic director David Alan Miller wondered. A few years ago, he asked baritone Nathan Myers to sing some of his favorite spirituals at a Pittsburgh performance of the *New World Symphony*, but they could find no orchestral arrangements of the classics. So Miller commissioned brilliant modern composers from a variety of backgrounds to take some of the country's most beloved and meaningful spirituals and create works scored for strings, brass, woodwinds and timpani.

The results have played across the country with Myers singing the results of the combination of new and old. In Eugene, where Miller guest conducts and Myers sings as the soloist, the list of spirituals includes "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," adapted by composer Bun Ching Lam. "I came across this piece through Joan Baez's rendition when I was a teenager," the composer explains. "I thought it was the saddest song in the world."

"Wade in the Water," one of the most glorious and chilling songs I ever heard as a young Girl Scout learning about civil rights, was adapted by Stephen Danker into a piece that uses percussion and strings to create a sense of dread and alarm. Myers uses his voice to convey the throbbing grief of slavery before the orchestral accompaniment changes to a



American Spirituals
The Eugene Symphony with guest conductor David Alan Miller and guest soloist baritone Nathan De'Shon Myers (pictured)
8 pm Thursday, Dec. 6
Hult Center • \$15-\$51

discordant, brassy and cautiously triumphant conclusion.

And "Ain't Gonna Study War," a spiritual that has deep resonance with any audience in the U.S. right now, got its treatment from John Harbison, composer of the opera version of *The Great Gatsby*. Sure, anyone who has studied (er, or participated in) the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s probably has "Ain't Gonna Study War" on several CDs, but this new version gives a new majesty to the idea of beating swords into plowshares. Other songs on the program include "Stan' Still Jordan," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" and several more.

The Eugene Symphony says in its press release materials that this concert, which includes Smetana's "The Moldau" and Dvorak's Bohemian folk-melodic 8th Symphony, will be "a poignant evening of folk traditions." I prefer to think of it as another in the long list of adaptations of these ever-evolving spirituals, adaptations that express human longing for freedom, for redemption, for release from suffering — and for peace. Those are New World traditions we should all be able to agree on, especially for the holidays. **EW**

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