PANEL THREE
The Life of Christ

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The Life of Christ

The salvation of man is always the great theme of masterworks in literature and art. Biblical material follows like a red thread in mankind's art works through the ages. No story appeals to man's finer creative vision as does the life of Christ. The early Christian chants, the masses of Palestrina, the passions, oratorios, masses of Bach, Handel, Beethoven — among many others — are the musical panorama of the mute majesty of the life of God on earth. With never diminishing radiance, to every succeeding generation of humanity this panorama gives life, spiritual consciousness to each in his own measure. It is small wonder that in his turn the Aframerican should find in his musical portraying of the life of Christ his most effective utterance. A social condition of the most abject humility could not help but find complete identity in a life of love, compassion and patience.

The choice of faith, the acceptance of a spiritual reality, were but the wise choice of a people who, without benefit of a philosophic tradition, recognized the all-encompassing human and divine wholeness of Truth. Jesus was their master! In that acknowledgment, that inner assurance, lay the reason for the survival of human dignity in a race that until quite recently was, as is the beast, the property of earthly masters. As it was with my own mother, so it was with the best of my race. "The master, yes, one had to acknowledge him, I belonged to him, it was the law of the land," she often told me, "but
what I am, here inside me, he couldn’t touch.” A great, simple rule of conduct that in its earnest sincerity strikes me as nothing short of epic. It is this earnestness that lends to these songs their own nobility, their inescapable appeal. I range some of them unhesitatingly among the masterpieces of religious folk songs of all people. Humble they are, humble in origin, humble in form, humble in means. Yet, isn’t the magnificent flowering fame of, for example, “Were You There?” and “He Never Said a Numb’lin’ Word” rather symbolic?

That specific stamp of unforgettable dignity that gives life and reason to an individual or to a piece of music is often difficult to analyze. A sophisticated man of my acquaintance told me a luminous story of a humble charwoman in his community. Old and alone, she lives on the outskirts of town. But such is her quality that, forsaking his books, friends and rich home, he often feels impelled to visit her. He tells me, “One feels better, kinder, cleaner for having been in her presence, for having had a glimpse of her bending over her plants in her pitiful, small garden.” And I am reminded of old Lewis, a janitor of my race, in a studio apartment. Nobody knew how old he was; he wouldn’t or couldn’t tell beyond admitting he was born in slavery. Yet I doubt if any of the many tenants will ever forget the essence of his strangely illuminating person. From the wooden partition separating the coal pile in the basement from his domicile, his spirit seemed to radiate into every room of the house, seeming to touch, as if by a miracle, human hearts. That unforgettable gift which most of us have encountered in living I believe partakes something of what we mean by salvation of man, of which my Angel Mo’ speaks. To me as a human being and artist this essential and therefore timeless spirit accompanies the Aframerican Passion of Saint Matthew and Saint Mark.

As has been stated earlier in this discussion, the texts of these folk songs are a blend of versified religious paraphrases and amplifying remarks of the poets—a means of religious articulation evident in the expression of all people from time immemorial. I have had occasion already to refer to this as a quality of poetic incantation on the song sermons of my people. No less an authority than Saint Augustine is cited by Charles Burney (English critic of the eighteenth century) on that specific quality:

When we are unable to find words worthy of the Divinity, we do well to address Him with confused sounds of joy and thanksgiving.
For to whom are such ecstatic sounds due, unless the Supreme Being? And how can we celebrate His ineffable goodness, when we are equally unable to adore Him in silence and to find any other expression of our transports, than in articulate sound?

And how true appears to me the following quotation from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in summing up the kind of ecstasy, the spring of inner singing that radiates forth from hosts of souls of my people:

\[ . . . \text{All} \]
\[ \text{The multitude of Angels, with a shout} \]
\[ \text{Loud as from numbers without number, sweet} \]
\[ \text{As from bless’d voices, uttering joy, heav’n rung} \]
\[ \text{With jubilee, and loud Hosannas fill’d} \]
\[ \text{Th’ eternal regions.} \]

It is curious how in our times such religious poetic creations as the Hebrew chant, Palestrina, Lassus, Gregorian chant, the great masses of Bach, Beethoven, the monumental Biblical oratorios, the religious folk songs of my people, have become concert fare, and sometimes museum pieces, that we study with the rational abstract aloofness of the scholar and student. Yet it would seem to me that only in finding our way back to the simple truth to which these human documents testify can we find the key to the spirit inherent in them. By lending our ear to the continuity, perseverance and simple feeling in them, we may find, as the artist in his quest for perfection, the heartstring of their meaning, with which lives the meaning of the words of Christ.
I. Prepare Me One Body

A sort of prologue to "The Life of Christ" series is the beautiful Aframerican folk song, "Prepare Me One Body." The original of the text of this song is not to be found in any of the Gospels and Prophecies. But I believe it to be a dramatization by our early Aframerican preachers of such Biblical elements as are found in Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians (II.5–8):

...Christ Jesus: who...took upon him the form of a servant...
was made in the likeness of men...humbled himself...became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Prepare Me One Body

Arranged by Roland Hayes

Voice

Piano

Tranquillo—with smooth rhythmic flow

I’ll go down, I’ll go down, Prepare me one bod-y like man;
I'll go down and die.
The man of sorrows,
sinner, see: I'll go down, I'll go down, He died for you and He died for me, I'll go down and die. Prepare me, Lord, one body! Prepare me one body, like man! I'll go down and die!
Christ’s Birth, Boyhood and Ministry

II. Sister Mary Had-a But One Child

From the earliest memories of my boyhood, this song has remained with me as one of few Aframerican folk songs dealing with the Nativity. I believe it is of very early Aframerican origin in the United States, and bears the stamp rhythmically and melodically of African musical idiom. On listening to its berceuse-like rhythm, one should not find it hard to imagine an old crude manger in a Bethlehem stable. But to me, the rocking was not that of Mother Mary’s hand, but of some mysteriously roving, supernatural wind which swayed the ancient walls to which the Holy Child’s crib was pegged.

Sister Mary Had-a But One Child

(Nativity)  
Arranged by Roland Hayes

Voice

Piano

Very slow

Born in Beth-le-hem...  And a ev-er-y-time-a the-a

ba-by cried, She’d-a rocked Him in the wea-ry land,  She’d-a
rocked Him in the weary land.

Three wise men a to Jerusalem came. They'd travelled very far.

They said, "Where is He born King of the Jews? For we have a seen His star?" King Herod's heart was
troubled,— He mar-velled but his face was grim. He said,

"Tell me where the Child may be found, I'll go and worship

Him,— I'll go and worship Him."

Sis-ter

angel appeared to Joseph,— And gave him a this-a com-mand.

piu f
"A - rise ye, take a your_ wife and_ child,_ Go 

flee in - to E - gypt land._ For yon - der_ comes old He - rod,_ A 

wick - ed_ man and bold. He's slay - in' all_ the chil - lun._ From 

six to_ eight - a days old, From six to_ eight - a days old!"
Sis-t'er Ma-ry had a but one child,

Born in Beth-le-hem. And a ev-er-y time a the-a

ba-by cried, She'd-a rocked Him in the wea-ry land,

' Rocked Him in the wea-ry land...
III. Lit’l Boy

Of early origin and decidedly African is “Lit’l Boy, How Ole Are You?” a solo-type folk song. This particular song was sung to me by my old friend, William L. Shelton. He had once heard it sung by a traveling Aframerican evangelist. Because of the native African quality, rhythmically and idiomatically, I have written its accompaniment in a pure African design suggested by an idiomatic rhythmic pattern given me by Nigeria West Africans in London. I have arranged it to retain as nearly as possible its original flavor, through our conventional harmonic form, and conventional instrument, the piano.

Lit’l Boy

(Christ in the Temple)
Exclamatory—Voice ad lib.

Arranged by Roland Hayes

Voice

Piano

“Lit’l Boy, how ole are you? Lit’l Boy, how ole are you?
Lit-’l Boy, how ole are you?” “Sir, I’m only twelve years old!”

This Lit’l Boy had them to re-mem-ber that He was born the twen-ty-fifth of De-cem-ber...
Lawyers and doctors were amazed, and had to give the Lit'-l Boy the praise.

"Lit'-l Boy, how ole are you?  Lit'-l Boy, how ole are you?

Lit'-l Boy, how ole are you?"  "Sir, I'm only twelve years old!"

Lawyers and doctors stood and wondered, as though they had been struck by thunder. Then
they decided while they wondered, That all mankind must come under.

"Lit'-l Boy, how ole are you? Lit'-l Boy, how ole are you?

Lit'-l Boy, how ole are you?" "Sir, I'm only twelve years old!" The last time the Lit'-l Boy was seen, He was stand-in' on Mount O-li-vet green.
IV. Live a-Humble

Jesus, the true example of humility, inspires men to develop strength for forbearance. The Aframerican slave learned and practiced it continually. It is one of the saving graces of his nature, that enabled him to emerge from his trials with resilience and flexibility. The song "Live a-Humble" tells of watching daily the temptations of this life; of continuing faithfully active in the sense of our duties to God and one another; of working, that we may be ready to receive Him when He comes. Also, it treats of Jesus's healing of the sick; restoring sight to the blind; enabling the crippled to walk.
Live a-Humble
(He Healed the Sick)
Arranged by Roland Hayes

Voice

A-live a-hum-ble,

humble,

Hum-ble-your-self, de bell's-a done-a rung. A-live a-hum-ble,

humble,

Hum-ble-your-self, de bell's done rung. Glo-ry an' hon-or! (Praise King Je-sus!)

Glo-

- ry an' hon-or,- Praise de Lamb. Oh,- my Lord's done jes' what He said,- my Lord, He

meno mosso e sempre col canto
Healed de sick an'. He raised de dead. A-live a-humble, a-humble,

Humble-yourself, de bell's done rung. Did you ever see such a

man as God, Who gave up His Son for to come an' die! He gave up His Son for to

crescendo f espressivo grande a tempo

come an' die, Jes' to save my soul from a burning fire. A-live a-humble,
V. Hear de Lambs a-Cryin’?

Jesus sensed, always knew, the frailty of humankind and sought with utmost compassion to help man in his weaknesses. Thus He questions Peter, His disciple, with respect to his faithfulness and exhorts him to do his full duty as befitting a true disciple. So gently, so beseechingly He inquires: "Peter, if you love me, feed-a my sheep!"

The melody has a Hebraic flavor that moves in a tender minor mode.

Hear de Lambs a-Cryin’?

Arranged by Roland Hayes
"Peter, if you love me, feed my sheep!"

"Lord, I love Thee,

Thou dost know:

Oh, give me grace to love Thee more!"

You hear de lambs a-cry-in'? Hear de lambs a-cry-in'?  

Hear de lambs a-cry-in'? "Oh, shepherd, feed a my sheep!"
The Passion of Our Lord

"The first appearance of dramatic dialogue in the services of the Church," according to Paul Henry Láng, "may be traced back to the ninth century. . . . The dramatic atmosphere was not restricted to the dialogue. . . . The incidents which mark the birth of Christ, the adoration of the shepherds, and of the Magi, the wrath of Herod, and the massacre of the Innocents, provided the material for the Christmas cycle; the Resurrection that for the other important cycle of Easter. From the simple dialogue sung at Eastertime developed the colossal literature of the Passion." ¹

The traditional form presented by the Church is the mass — Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei, all of which were retained by Luther. The act of sacrifice (the Offertorium), being typically Catholic, had been supplanted by the sermon. Were the song sermons of my people perhaps an adapted continuation of the German sermon of Reformation days, or rather a kind of Pachelion, a form of sermon in music?

Making the supreme sacrifice of human life to a noble purpose, in some of the African kingdoms, I am told, is a common occurrence. It is said that Africans in these kingdoms of Central Africa vie with each other for the honor; that individuals chosen to make the sacrifice experience exaltation increas-

ingly during the interim of awaiting the sacrificial hour. Thus it becomes quite understandable that religious leaders amongst Africans found little or no difficulty in winning them to immediate, favorable reaction when they related the story of the supreme sacrifice which Jesus Christ made for the salvation of all humanity. The news of Jesus’s loving and serving those who hated and abused Him was no unusual news to the Aframerican slave. The story of Jesus in Gethsemane and His experience on the Cross did grip the imagination of my people and stirred them to emotional heights such as are shown in their songs of exaltation under the tragic experiences of excruciating pain and intense suffering at the hands of some of their cruel masters.

The high principle revealed through the example which Jesus made of Himself by washing His disciples’ feet at a moment when He was fully aware that one of the twelve disciples would presently betray Him moved by people mightily. “You call me master and Lord. . . . If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (Saint John XIII.13–15).

That my people grasped the meaning of Christ’s teachings is not only mirrored through their lives and example as human loving beings; it is particularly reflected in their songs. You may search the entire collection of Aframerican religious folk songs extant — which number in the hundreds — and you will not find one word of hate or malice anywhere expressed in them. The Aframerican has pictured with understanding the spiritual essence, the tender, but poignant, “Passion of Our Lord” in poetry and music.

The five songs in the “Passion” group of songs are not used consecutively in the Aframericans’ church service as they appear here, but it may be of interest to realize how effective these songs can be on an Easter observance occasion.
VI. The Last Supper

The opening words of the first part of this song— which lead into the refrain, "My time is come" — bring us to the point of "The Last Supper" where Jesus indicates His betrayal by one of the twelve disciples. Then, immediately following the refrain, "My time is come," we perceive the Aframerican's extraordinary grasp of human values, as well as spiritual essences, as is highlighted by his depiction (in words and music) of the mood where Jesus is at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The utter dejection of mortal man in the moment of such distress was never more movingly pictured in words and musical cadence than in what the originator of this song has given. There is the silent throb of a troubled heart felt as inner pulse, actually an undertone (in measured tempo) of the tragic mood sounding through the words of Jesus — "Simon! Sleepest thou?" — when He returned from prayer and found His disciples all asleep.

Imagine an entire congregation sitting in rapt attention under the hypnotic spell of an eloquent Aframerican preacher (feet a-patting out a supersoft rhythm) in company with spiritually electrified bodies that sway (clockwise) forward and backwards, keeping the mood created by the preacher alive, and heightening, as he with masterful imagery vividly picturizes the story of the whole of the tragic garden scene.

In the music setting under the melody and words in the Garden of Gethsemane, I have fixed, sustained minor chords tied together that hold throughout several measures. The rhythmic pulse embracing four counts to the measure is represented in quarter notes in the bass clef and below it.
The Last Supper

Arranged by Roland Hayes

Jesus was a-sit-tin' at the last Pass-o-ver. John, he rest-ed up-

Jesus said one word that seemed to

blight. He said, "One of you goin' to betray me to-night."
Mark cried out, "Lord, is it I?"

James cried out, "Lord is it I?"

Lento

Then Jesus said, "Ah look an' see him dat dip in de dish-a wid me."

Andante

My time is come, my time is come, Oh, my time is come!

Then Jesus with his disciples Simon-Peter, and others went into the garden. Jesus said to them, "Tarry ye here, while I go and pray." Then when Jesus on returning found his disciples asleep He said:
quasi recitativo — ad lib.

Simon! Simon! Simon!

Sleepest thou? Simon! Couldst

Thou not watch one hour? Simon! The

spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.
VII. They Led My Lord Away

When Jesus had come the third time to His disciples, He said, "It is enough, the hour is come; behold, the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

"While he yet spake" (Saint Mark XIV.41) Judas and his gang appeared.

It was the kiss of Judas on approaching Jesus that was the cue for the high priest and his men to seize Him.
They Led My Lord Away

Andante con moto

Voice

Piano

Arranged by Roland Hayes

They led my Lord a-way, a-way, a-

way, They led my Lord a-way. Oh tell me where to
col canto

find Him.

They led Him up to

very grave

Pi-late said, "I

p quasi recitative
Pilate's bar: Tell me where to find Him. But "I wash my hands,"

they could not condemn Him there. Tell me where to find no fault in this just man?"
VIII. He Never Said a Mumberlin' Word

But Christ's mission had to be fulfilled. They crucified Him.

1 In respect both to its music and to its marvelous words, this song is a master work among all Aframerican religious folk songs. It definitely was the creation of an African who came to these shores already an accomplished bard. This particular version is a song sermon, emphatically a solo. He whom this poet-musician so poignantly reveres in this song is the only being he would call master.

He Never Said a Mumberlin' Word

Andante molto

Arranged by Roland Hayes

Voice

Piano

Was-n't it a pi-ty an' a shame! An' He nev-er said a mumber-lin' word. Was-n't it a pi-ty an' a shame.

An' He nev-er said a mumber-lin' word, Oh not a word,

not a word, not a word! Dey nailed Him to de tree! An' He nev-er said a mumber-lin' word! Dey nailed Him to de 'tree! An' He nev-er said a
num-ber-lin' word—Oh, not a word, not a word,
not a word! Dey pierced Him in de side, in de side,
in-a de side! Dey pierced Him in de side,
in de side, in-a de side! De blood came a-twink-a-lin' down!

An' He nev-er said a num-ber-lin' word, De blood came a-
twink-a-lin' down! An' He nev-er said a num-ber-lin' word,

Oh, not a word, not a word, not a word!

He bowed His head an' died! An' He nev-er said a num-ber-lin' word. He bowed His head an' died!

An' He nev-er said a num-ber-lin' word; Oh,
not a word, not a word, not a word!
IX. Did You Hear When Jesus Rose?

"In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. . . . And the angel answered and said unto the women . . . He is not here; for he is risen, as he said . . . go quickly, and tell his disciples. . . . And she [Mary Magdalene] went and told them . . . afterwards he [Christ] appeared unto the eleven . . . So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God."

The minor mode in which this song is cast does not set free, entirely, the ecstatic joy expressed at the resurrection of our Lord. I can well imagine that the originator of the song had in mind that to do so would have had an overshadowing effect of the more poignant meaning — the triumph of Jesus over death — which this semi-minor musical mode preserves.

Did You Hear When Jesus Rose?

Arranged by Roland Hayes
Mary set her table, In spite of all her foes. King Jesus sat at the center place. An'
cups did overflow. Chil-Ian, did you hear when
Jesus rose, did you hear when Jesus
Did you hear when Jesus rose?
rose an' ascended on high.
Father looked at His Son an' smiled,
Son did look at a Him.

Father saved my
soul from Hell, An' de Son freed me from sin.

Chil-lun, did you hear when Je-sus rose, did you hear when Je-sus rose?

Did you hear when Je-sus rose? He

rose an' as-cend-ed on high.
X. Were You There?

The Aframerican poets and musicians set Christ's death on the Cross apart from that of all others in that only through His death did all mankind fall heir to salvation and life eternal.

But, often, man in the midst of his tranquillity and enjoyment of promised redemption through Christ forgets that he, an heir to life eternal, has definite duties to perform thereto before he can claim the promised reward.

Are we then, as human beings, keeping ourselves in a constant state of awareness in the sense of, for instance, a daily exercise and practice of "being our brothers' keeper"? Here, as the next song of this collection envisions, we of all races and of every creed are brought together in one embrace of the all-important question; not so much, however, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" but — in the sense of the responsibilities which this death places upon us to love and serve God and one another — Are you there?

"SOMETIMES IT CAUSES ME TO TREMBLE!"

Were You There?

Arranged by Roland Hayes

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
sometimes it causes me to tremble,
tremble, tremble! Were you there when they

crucified my Lord? Were you