

“Listen to the Lambs”--The Hampton Quartette (1917)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Michelle Wick Patterson (guest post)*



Natalie Curtis Burlin

“No one can hear these songs unmoved,” claimed Natalie Curtis Burlin in her introduction to “Negro Folk Songs” (1918) which contained her transcription of “Listen to the Lambs.” This four-part collection of spirituals and work songs resulted from Burlin’s research into African American music under the auspices of Hampton University, a Virginia school founded for freed people in 1868. The singers, often known as the “Big Quartet,” performed across the country as part of the school’s fundraising efforts and to promote the “Hampton Model” of black education and uplift. Burlin advocated for African and Native American folk song as the basis for a distinctive American national music and used recordings and her published transcriptions of spirituals and other folk music to showcase what she believed were the unique contributions African Americans could make to American music.

Natalie Curtis Burlin began her study of this song and others in 1912 with the encouragement of her philanthropic patron, George Foster Peabody, and the principal of Hampton, Hollis Frissell. They asked her to do for the folk music of southern blacks what she had previously done for the songs of Native Americans, most notably in her 1907 publication, “The Indians’ Book.” In this work, Curtis (she married artist Paul Burlin in 1917) presented songs, stories, and artwork of Native groups across the country to a non-Indian audience, arguing for the preservation of Indian cultures and for their inclusion in a distinctively American national music. Curtis traveled to Hampton from her home in New York City in the early twentieth century to study the music of Native American students who were part of an experiment in bi-racial education there. Her exposure to the many groups of musicians across campus, coupled with the patronage of Peabody and Frissell, led her to the study of black folk song.

Hampton’s promotion of spirituals and folk music served at least two purposes. Following in the footsteps of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, many black schools in the South used performances of spirituals as fundraising tools among sympathetic white audiences in the North.

These institutions popularized Negro spirituals and often crafted the students' performances to appeal to Euro-American aesthetics and tastes. Secondly, Hampton promoted spirituals as part of an educational philosophy that emphasized the economic and cultural contributions of African Americans rather than political or civil rights. Spirituals served as a dignified alternative to the songs of the minstrel shows and showed the promise of black education, school leaders argued. Furthermore, the songs' origins in bondage and their spiritual appeal reinforced the school's promotion of African American uplift without challenging the political or economic status quo.

The songs' origins in slavery presented problems for their black singers at Hampton, however. Many students hoped to escape reminders of slavery and expressed frustration at performing spirituals for white visitors to campus. Some desired to showcase their new musical knowledge and to show the developments made since the end of slavery; others resented the emphasis on the "primitive" nature of their music by white school officials. Many disliked the notion, trumpeted by musicians like Curtis, that black singers possessed innate racial talents for musical composition and performance. R. Nathaniel Dett, who served as Hampton's musical director at this time, forged a middle ground by composing arrangements of spirituals in European formats without sacrificing the integrity of the songs or the singers. He published his own version of "Listen to the Lambs" as a choral work in 1914, arguing that African Americans could draw on their "wonderful store of folk music" as a means of developing a national school of music.

Dett was not alone in using songs such as "Listen to the Lambs" to forge an American musical sound. From the 1890s, American composers and musicians sought to use the folk songs of minority groups as a basis for a new musical aesthetic. Antonín Dvořák, a Czech composer, encouraged American musicians to use the songs of Native and African Americans in their compositions. As director of the National Conservatory, he worked with black musicians, such as Harry Burleigh, to fulfill this mission. Dvořák's "From the New World" (1893) inspired a generation of American musicians, including Natalie Curtis Burlin, to record, study, and use folk music to create a distinct American sound.

At Hampton and in other parts of the South, Burlin recorded and studied spirituals and work songs. Although she used her Edison recorder in this process, Burlin believed that a student of these songs needed to "live for the time being in the midst of the folk-singers, where [s]he can drink in the atmosphere and spirit of the instinctive song of un-self-conscious people." This immersion, she argued, helped her comprehend the emotional and spiritual qualities of the music and of the people who made it. Although Burlin could be patronizing in her promotion of the racial characteristics of this music, she sincerely wanted to share it with the world. She believed that folk songs and compositions based on them could create a cultural movement to thwart the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, mass production, and modernism in American society.

Burlin, therefore, described "Listen to the Lambs" as a "spiritual filled with rare imaginative quality in word and music" in the second volume of her "Negro Folk Songs." As with other songs in this collection, she dedicated her rendition to her patron and Hampton trustee, George Foster Peabody. She recorded this version from the Big Quartet, which consisted of Ira Godwin as lead singer, Joseph Barnes as tenor, William Cooper as baritone, and Timothy Carper as bass. All of these men graduated from Hampton and were trained in teaching or the vocational arts. Burlin hoped that her efforts would help singers like these to cherish their cultural

productions and to share them with a world in need of spiritual and emotional uplift. She selected “Listen to the Lambs” for its imagery, its ability to capture the feelings of enslaved people, weak and poor, but hopeful. The song paints an image of huddled lambs crying to the “Good Shepherd” for release, then builds to a “jubilant summons full of hope,” followed by the “touching confidence” of the refrain, “*I want t’ got’ Hebb’n when I die.*” Curtis envied the simple faith of the singers who performed this song. She celebrated the communal creative process that created and re-created this spiritual, as new singers adapted it to new circumstances. In the midst of a world war, she found hope in this song. The emotional and spiritual elements of “Listen to the Lambs” moved Burlin and she hoped that both her arrangement, this recording, and the future music it would inspire, would resonate with all Americans.

Michelle Wick Patterson, PhD, teaches Native American and women’s history at Mount St. Mary’s University. She is the author of “Natalie Curtis Burlin: A Life in Native and African American Music” (University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.