

CONTEXTUAL NOTES: “Elijah Rock,” arr. Roger Emerson

“Elijah Rock” is perhaps the most well-known and performed African-American spiritual in our choral libraries today. The most famous that has served as the model for most that follow was written by Jester Hairston (1901-2000) in the 1950’s.

The text is based on the Old Testament story of Elijah’s dramatic ascension to heaven in which he was transported by a chariot of fire. According to authority on spirituals, Dr. Rollo Dilworth, “It was quite common for enslaved people to compose spirituals based upon scriptural narratives. Given their desires for freedom, justice and equality, they often celebrated the triumphs of biblical figures in their songs. Owners often took delight in hearing the enslaved people perform these pieces as they worked because such behavior demonstrated a spirit of productivity, submission and cooperation.”

This contemporary arrangement differs in many ways from earlier ones created by Jester Hairston, Moses Hogan and others. The accompaniment and harmonies are quite modern and the rhythm of the phrase, “comin’ up Lord” is anticipated on the “upbeat” of 4 instead of the “downbeat.” This can be problematic for those familiar with earlier versions, so be cautious.

An important part of the evolution of these later arrangements is that the dialect varied a great deal in that “Lord” would most likely have been “Lawd” and “conjure” would have been “conjuh” etc. For more information on the dialect on this song and many others, please see: *A New Perspective for the Use of Dialect in African American Spirituals* by Felicia Raphael Marie Barber, Lexington Books.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In Their Own Words - Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals by Eileen Guenther, MorningStar Music Publishers

“somebody’s CALLING my name” - black sacred music and SOCIAL CHANGE by Wyatt Tee Walker, Judson Press

“Way Over in Beulah Lan’ - Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual by André J. Thomas, Heritage Music Press

“The Books of American Negro Spirituals” by James Weldon & J. Rosamond Johnson, Da Capo Press