

A Perfect Wild Flower and the Straightjacket of Lines and Spaces: Berea's Two Spheres of Music - GSTR 210

Harry Rice

From the 1850s one-room school of rough sawn lumber to the refurbished and enlarged Presser Hall of the present day, music has been much in the air and on the minds of those who have answered John G. Fee's call to teach, learn and serve at Berea.

Rev. J.A.R. Rogers, with support of the American Missionary Association, came to Berea in 1858 to be the then elementary school's first principal. In *Birth of Berea College*, he recalled that

Pleasing music was introduced which seemed to have a magic effect. And those songs! The sweet refrains, the merry jingles and the deeper notes of the gospel hymns all made melody in the hearts. ¹

Among the songbooks used were those of William B. Bradbury a nationally known music educator and composer in the 1800s who was a strong advocate for universal music literacy and community music making.

Rogers's wife Elizabeth was perhaps the first to teach music at Berea. She remembered using Bradbury's *Oriola*, one of the many Sunday-School movement publications of the day. She said the songs she taught from it,

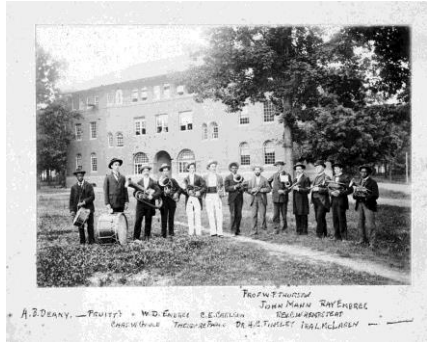


set the countryside afire. The songs were something new; they sang them not only at school but on the hillsides and in the valleys. They entered every home. ²

The songs she remembered included the likes of "We're Journeying on Toward Zion" and "Dare to be Right, Dare to be True, You Have a Work That No Other Can Do." She acknowledged that these songs were not great poetry or music. However, she had no regrets over using them "when I remember the power (of the songs) over these people's lives." ³

Those who have followed in the Rogers' footsteps at Berea have been confident that they too were teaching music that in various ways could empower their students' lives. And like Elizabeth Rogers, they have had to grapple with the challenge of striking a workable balance between the

music that students like and that which they should be taught in the process of becoming well educated.



John Forbes has suggested that music activities for Berea students have had two separate purposes. One is providing exposure to the western European art music that is communicated in written form using standard music notation.

The other is the preservation and encouragement of the student's home-made or vernacular music traditions that are more likely to be passed on orally. The former has tended to be

addressed through the teaching of music that evolved as educational offerings expanded to the college level in the years following Berea's post Civil War reopening in 1866. Responsibility for the latter was assumed by faculty and staff, often from disciplines other than Music. ⁴

The purpose of teaching music at Berea articulated during the administrations of presidents Edward Henry Fairchild, William B. Stewart, and William Goodell Frost (1869-1920) was "to make music an enjoyment and an inspiration in all relations of life--in labor, social life, school, and church." ⁵ The classroom music curriculum that was developed to accomplish this purpose



during those years, included lessons in voice, piano, cabinet organ and at times, guitar and clarinet. Group activities included brass band, Harmonia Society (choral music), men's and women's glee clubs, and a mandolin club. The music of choice tended to be that of famous composers such as Handel, Gounod, Brahms, and Mendelssohn.

Commencement Day in early June came to be a widely anticipated community social event attended by crowds in the thousands. Attendees listened to the band and Harmonia Society display their accomplishments and also heard oral presentations by students, alumni, and famous orators. Other notable public musical opportunities were the Harmonia Society's performances of Handel's *Messiah* and *Esther the Beautiful Queen*, William Bradbury's less musically demanding but very popular cantata.



Other types of music heard from less formal groups such as the men and women's glee clubs included "college and classical songs," "mountain ballads" and "plantation" or "Negro" melodies and hymns. Newspaper accounts of the Men's Glee Club and other Berea students, performing on a fund raising tour of Ohio in 1896, notes the presence of both African-Americans and whites and describes them as singing "quaint ballads, negro melodies, and hymns common in the mountain region." ⁶ An 1899 press account of a group of probably all white Berea students performing at Chautauqua, New York, speaks of songs "sung in a nasal tone and a weird minor key accompanied by a home-made banjo, fashioned from a cat-skin." ⁷

The musical models for the "Negro melodies" included in these 1890s performances are not clear. The former slaves and free born African-Americans among Berea's post Civil War students could well have provided first hand musical input. One of the latter was Julia Britton who, like other musically talented students at the time, was enlisted as a teacher.

Another source of such material could have been the songs sung by slaves that were preserved in the repertoire of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers who had been organized in 1871. The group had Berea connections as early as 1873 when President Fairchild's son Charles, shepherded them on a triumphant six month British Isles fund raising tour for the benefit of their then struggling Nashville based school. ⁸ Also figuring into this mix may have been the Camp Nelson Jubilee Singers who were active during the 1890s.

A later possibility could have been the work of 1885 Berea graduate, William E. Barton who had collected numerous songs from freed slaves and other African-Americans, especially in the southern Kentucky - northern Tennessee border area during the later 1800s. Barton was inspired, at least in part, by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Whether or not he had also been drawn to this music by his African-American classmates at Berea has gone unrecorded. ⁹

President William Goodell Frost began to focus Berea's educational and service efforts more sharply on the southern mountains beginning in 1892. This fact and the long absence of African-American students from Berea resulting from the 1904 passage of the Day Law, set the stage for

many years of much extracurricular attention to the home made music of the Appalachian region. Frost encouraged faculty to visit students' home communities to experience their music, religion and other life-ways first hand.

Western art music was seen by some on Berea's music faculty to be a well deserved replacement for the rural based music traditions of their students' homes and churches which they saw as having "little literary or musical value." ¹⁰ Others, along with President Frost, were convinced that the two genres should coexist and that students' home music traditions were to be encouraged and preserved.



Among the faculty that followed Frost's urgings were John F. Smith, James Watt Raine, and Gladys Jameson. Smith taught English. Raine taught Theatre and may have been the founder of Berea's Theatre Department. Both collected ballads and songs from their students. Smith's perspective is especially notable in that, unlike many other folk music scholars of his time, he expanded his search beyond British Isles ballad survivals. The results are a large, body of material from his students that include ballads and songs of American origin, fiddle and banjo tunes, lists of home musical instruments, and descriptions of musical events they had taken part in, such as house dances and singing schools. ¹¹

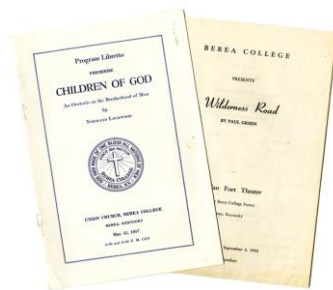
Beginning in 1914, Jameson taught conventional Music Department courses in music history and music appreciation. She was also much taken with the singing styles of mountain students. Upon hearing such singing for the first time in 1916 by a student from Breathitt County, Kentucky, she says that she was,

... struck..amidships. I was enchanted. After the tremendous clamor of Wagner and Brahms played by great orchestras, here was a tune as perfect as a wildflower. A few weeks later I tried to notate his singing, and found that his tones slid all over the spectrum of sound, and that our straightjacket of lines and spaces, of key centers and strict time, were barbarous limits in music that had lived for centuries only in the voices and memories of people. ¹²

Opportunities for her to hear instrumental music from students' home communities included fiddle contests held in the College Tabernacle in late summer (beginning in 1915 and extending into the late 1920s). These events drew musicians from as far away as Harlan and Leslie Counties. They were organized by College faculty including John F. Smith and Elijah F. Dizney, and Berea graduate, Alson Baker. One year the contest was sponsored by the College Normal School to raise funds to purchase a movie projector for use in several nearby elementary schools. [13](#)



In response, Jameson set about writing musical arrangements of traditional melodies to make them more accessible for use by student choral groups. With mathematics teacher, Virgil Smith she composed the ballad opera, *Evenin' Time* which was first performed at Berea's 1934 Commencement. In the 1950s she wrote the choral arrangements of the traditional songs used in the outdoor musical drama, *Wilderness Road* which was produced as part of Berea's Centennial celebration. [14](#)



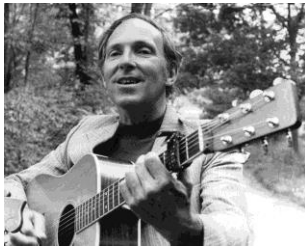
Another centennial-related musical undertaking was *Children of God*, an oratorio on the brotherhood of man. It was conceived by Psychology professor, Clara Chassell Cooper with inspiration from both traditional and contemporary sources. Reflecting on Berea's long attachment to Handel's *Messiah* with its English text from the King James Bible, it occurred to her that that an oratorio based on the recently published Revised Standard Version could give a modern voice to the tradition of putting biblical texts to music. [15](#)

Both *Wilderness Road* and *Children of God* drew heavily on the talents of the College's Chapel Choir and Music Department Chairman, Rolf Hovey. Students had to audition to be accepted into Chapel Choir, a group Hovey had formed in 1950 to provide music for Sunday evening Chapel services. The group soon became goodwill ambassadors for



the College, traveling extensively in the U.S. and numerous foreign countries. Commercial LP recordings of the Chapel Choir, student ensembles and soloists performing mountain songs, African-American spirituals, music from Wilderness Road, and Children of God were released by the College in the 1950s and 1960s. Later recordings under the leadership of professor, Stephen Bolster include a 1984 LP and a CD in 1996 by which time the group's name had been changed to the Concert Choir. Additional commercial recordings were issued in the 1980s and 1990s during which time Professor Stephen Bolster became director and the group's name was changed to the Concert Choir. [16](#)

Three later faculty members who brought a broader focus to bear on vernacular music expression included Raymond K. McClain, Loyal Jones, and William Tallmadge.



McClain was the first faculty to have a formal academic background in Appalachian music. Beginning in 1971, he began teaching courses on the history of popular music, traditional music performance, and Bluegrass music. With his three teen aged children, he formed the bluegrass oriented McLain Family Band which toured widely in the United States and many foreign countries during the 1970s and 1980s. [17](#)

Jones, director of the College's Appalachian Center beginning in 1970, initiated the annual Celebration of Traditional Music which continues to bring to campus numerous traditional musicians who represent much of Appalachian music's ethnic, vocal, and instrumental diversity.

Beginning in 1976, Music Department faculty member Tallmadge taught Jazz history, did much research in the areas of rural white and African-American church music, and eventually followed McLain in teaching the Appalachian music courses.

Their joint efforts also resulted in major academic conferences on campus including the 1970 Country Music Symposium and the 1979 Symposium on Rural Hymnody. [18](#) The academic legacy of these efforts in the present day includes Hutchins Library's [Appalachian Sound Archives](#) and [Music Fellowship](#)



[Program](#), an Appalachian Music course, Bluegrass Music Ensemble, and private lessons for such traditional instruments as guitar, fiddle, and banjo.

At least as early as the spring of 1969, African-American students took the initiative in establishing what would become Berea's Black Ensemble. Their action was in response to the view that the limited opportunities for Black musical expression through such groups as the Chapel Choir left a cultural void for many Black students. In fall 1969, the group came together through the efforts of student leaders Charles Crowe, Edsel Massey, Gay Nell Bell, and academic counselor, Melvin Marshall. [19](#)

The group's constitution states its purpose in terms of "serving as an outlet through which students may express their beliefs in humanity and the Christian Faith." The group concentrated on singing the spirituals and gospel songs learned growing up in their homes and churches. It was strictly a student-directed, non academic credit activity that was open to all regardless of race or nationality. Their debut performance that Fall was in the College's Fire House Coffee Lounge, singing We've Come this Far by Faith, the chorus of which is,



We've come this far by faith
Leaning on the Lord
Trusting in His Holy word
He never failed me yet
Oh' Can't Turn Around
We've come this far by faith

In the present day the group is called the Black Music Ensemble (BME) and has become a for-credit offering of the Music Department. The BME's repertoire includes spirituals, gospel music, West African songs, anthems and other sacred music, all by African-American composers or in the African-American tradition. [20](#)

The group performs on campus in annual Fall and Spring concerts of its own, as well as for other occasions such as the Celebration of Traditional Music; off campus performances include venues nearby and such cities as Atlanta, Chicago, and Cleveland. Commercial LP recordings were released in 1970 and 1976. Other opportunities that have developed for the study and

performance of African-American music since the group's founding include such courses as African-American Music, African-Latin Percussion, and World Music.

John Forbes' analyses of how and why music is made at Berea continue to have some validity for the present day. The Music Department is still heavily committed to exposing students to the art music tradition that is most at home in concert halls, opera houses and cathedrals. The Appalachian Center through its Celebration of Traditional Music strives to foster an appreciation of the "homemade music passed on from person to person in the Appalachian region." ²¹

However, in contrast to earlier times, this division of labor is much less clear cut. Music Department courses and performance opportunities in Appalachian, African-American, and World music traditions allow a good deal more leeway for loosening the "straightjacket of lines and spaces" on "music that had lived for centuries only in the voices and memories...." ²²

Symbolic of this broadened view at the performance level is the Music Department's replacement of Handel's Messiah with a Christmas concert that involves about 300 student musicians. In this very popular event, western European / American art music shares the stage with black gospel, bluegrass, and other roots genres. Recent vernacular music research interests in the Music Department include those of Ann Rhodes, Kathy Bullock, and student Catherine Morgan, who have documented the contributions of Appalachian Women in traditional music and various aspects of the interplay of African and American music. ²³

The Appalachian Center is in the process of broadening the view regarding music that can be included at the Celebration of Traditional Music. For instance, the present definition of "old time string band music, blues, traditional gospel singing and ballads" may be too narrow in light of the changing ethnic makeup of Appalachian residents. One reflection of this consideration was the inclusion of a Kentucky based mariachi band in a recent CTM.

Beyond ethnicity issues, Deborah Thompson from the Appalachian Center and independent scholar Ajay Kalra, working separately, have done extensive research relating to where the Celebration of Traditional Music has been historically and where it might need to go in the future.

Kalra has provided extensive analyses and commentary relating to the repertoires and playing styles of the several African-American performers at the Celebration of Traditional Music since its beginning in 1974.^{[24](#)}

Thompson has focused particularly on the ways race and gender are represented in Appalachian music, what counts as “traditional” music, the definition of the region whose traditions the festival is representing, and how to adequately represent the diversity of traditions found in the region.^{[25](#)}

There is much room for further study and conversation regarding these issues among students, the Music Department, the Black Cultural Center and the Appalachian Center, especially as they apply to Berea.

Perhaps in Music and Appalachian Studies courses it would be possible to look more closely at how students move back and forth between the music of their home communities and their Berea musical experience. For instance, what might a student-designed Celebration of Traditional Music look and sound like? Might it be useful to think in terms of “Appalachian Musics?” Might for instance, room need to be made for “Appalachian Hip Hop” or “Appalachian Reggae” in Berea’s Appalachian music mix?

These and many other topics will lend new insight into the important role of music at Berea College.

Notes

¹ Rogers, John Almanza Rowley. *Birth of Berea College; a Story of Providence*, page 53.

[378.7691 R727bi](#)

²Rogers, Elizabeth. Personal History of Berea College, Unpublished Type Script, pp15-16. RG 1.03, Box 16, folder 8, Berea College Archives ([p.13 of digital version](#)).

³Rogers, Elizabeth. Full Forty Years of Shadow and Sunshine, Unpublished Type Script, p 17. RG 1.03, Box 16, folder 5, Berea College Archives.

⁴Forbes, John M. *The Music Program of Berea College and the Folk-Music Heritage of Appalachia*. [Berea 780.72 F693m](#)

⁵*Berea College Catalog 1905-1906*, p 58.

⁶*Berea Quarterly*, [February 1896, pp 15-19](#). (also [Berea 051 B487](#))

⁷*Berea Quarterly*, [November 1899, pp15-16](#). (also [Berea 051 B487](#))

⁸Lauder, Bertha Fairchild. *My Berea: A Child Remembers Berea in the 1870's*, p 7. Berea [378.7691 L367c](#)

⁹Barton, William Eleazar. *Old Plantation Hymns*, p 3. (also [784.756 B293o](#))

¹⁰Forman, Irma. Annual Report Excerpt, 1922. Folder 9, Box 1, Appalachian Ballad and Folk Music Collection [SAA 18](#), Berea College Southern Appalachian Archives.

¹¹ The songs and other material that Smith and Raine collected from Berea students and others are preserved in their respective manuscript collections, [SAA 5](#) and [SAA 6](#), in Hutchins Library's Department of Special Collections and Archives. Follow these links to the online finding aids that fully describe the contents. In [The Berea Tune Lists](#), former Appalachian Center Archivist, Steve Green delves deeply into musical genres and geographical distribution of the material John F. Smith collected.

¹²Jameson, Gladys. Audio Recorded interview 1972 by John M. Forbes. Transcript in biographical file, RG 9, Box. 26. Audio excerpt of [this quote](#) and Jameson's commentary regarding [use of the reed organ for teaching music at Berea](#).

¹³ [Berea fiddle contest participants compiled by Steve Green from newspaper accounts](#).

¹⁴ Jameson's published arrangements of Appalachian traditional songs and tunes include her [Sweet Rivers of Song](#) and [Wake and Sing](#) – both found in Hutchins Library's Special Collections Department. Extensive documentation of the origins, musical compositions and performance history of "Wilderness Road" are found in the Wilderness Road

Collection, RG 11 in Hutchins Library's Berea College Archives. [Audio of songs from *Wilderness Road* performed by the Berea College Chapel Choir.](#)

¹⁵Extensive documentation of the origins, musical compositions and performance history of "Children of God" are found in the Children of God Collection, RG 11.01 in Hutchins Library's Berea College Archives. [Audio of songs from "Children of God" by the Berea College Chapel Choir.](#)

¹⁶Audio [Chapel Choir performances](#) 1950s-1970s, on campus and during a trip to Wales in 1967.

¹⁷ Extensive documentation of the origins and performance history of the McLain Family Band are found Collection [SAA 86](#) in Hutchins Library's Department of Special Collections and Archives. Audio of McLain Family on-campus performances.

¹⁸ Extensive audio recordings of oral presentations and musical performances that were part of the Country Music and Rural Hymnody Symposia are found in Hutchins Library's Department of Special Collections and Archives.

¹⁹Black Music Ensemble File, RG 7, Box 5.

²⁰ Audio of [Black Music Ensemble on-campus performances](#) from various years.

²¹[Celebration of Traditional Music web page](#)

²²Jameson, Gladys. Audio Recorded interview 1972 by John M. Forbes. Transcript in biographical file, RG 9, Box. 26. ([excerpt of this quote](#))

²³ See Solberg and Morgan's [Appalachian Women and Traditional Music: A List of Sources.](#)

²⁴ Ajay Kalra's [Appalachian Music Fellowship web page.](#)

²⁵ Deborah Thompson's [Appalachian Music Fellowship web page.](#)

[Harry Rice](#), Sound Archivist, Special Collections & Archives, Hutchins Library