

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: KAYLINA MADISON

A Comprehensive Investigation of Black Sacred Music, the Spiritual, and John Wesley Work III (research director: Ron Pen)

Abstract

Although historians and music scholars have made progress in areas of African-American studies, academia has not yet documented the full range of black composers and musicians. Intellectuals have dutifully addressed some of the highest profile black artists of the Western Classical tradition, such as William Grant Still (1895—1978), Harry Burleigh (1866—1949), and R. Nathaniel Dett (1882—1943), but there is a dearth of research pertaining to more local, less globally recognized composers. “Negro spirituals” and their concert-style arrangements are a challenging area of scholarship because they transcend and trespass cultural racial boundaries in couching vernacular slave expression with classical art aesthetic. John Work III was heavily invested in the concert spiritual tradition; the third generation to do so at Fisk University where this tradition originated.

While John Work III was a local musician and researcher, his influences on the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other musicians, both inside and outside of Tennessee, require examination. His contributions to the field of musicology may have affected the way current scholars view black music, and his arrangements of Negro spirituals have impacted the changing course of future arrangements of the spirituals. John Work exerted an influence among notable musicians, such as Duke Ellington and Jimmie Lunceford, who occasionally dropped by the Work home while they were in town. Work III’s brilliance was admired by renowned musicians, and his research and contributions to the music world have deeply affected the way people perform and view black gospel music. This research requires accessing the primary sources of John Work III and his family members through the Special Collections Library at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, the Library of Congress, the Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, Illinois, and the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Interviews from the living Work family members and former students and colleagues will also play an integral role in discovering the personality and minutiae of the composer.

John Wesley Work III is not a household name in academia. He is not referenced in music history texts or invoked in most publications on music of the United States. Music research paid little scholarly attention to black folk traditions during the early 1900s: a time when John Wesley Work III chose to focus his work on black folk music in the South as well as Negro spirituals and music in the black church. A dissertation devoted to a study of Work’s life and work will explore aspects of his spiritual arrangements, investigate his scholarly contributions, and provide a foundation for further analytical study of African-American sacred music.