Reverent References: African American Cultural Topics in William Grant Still's Symphonic "Prayer"

William Grant Still's (1895-1978) orchestral output boasts considerable volume and variation.¹ One finds symphonic poems, orchestral requiems, and suites among other works. Works such as *Darker America* (1924-25), *Dismal Swamp* (1936), and *In Memoriam: The Colored Soldiers Who Died for Democracy* (1943) show the broad span of subjects. His later symphonies did not reach the level of popularity of his first, the "Afro-American Symphony." However, they also invoke American folk programs and showcase the composer's skilled orchestration. All of Still's symphonies were performed while he was living, with the exception of the "Sunday Symphony." It appears that the "Sunday Symphony" is not among the better known Still pieces, and there is a pronounced lack of published information about it. It is the only one of Still's symphonies without a bibliographical entry in *William Grant Still: A Bio-Bibliography*.

The "Sunday Symphony" was written in 1958 to fill a void created when Still revised his third symphony and renamed it Symphony #5. The "Sunday Symphony' is dedicated to Christian Dupriez. A champion of Still's music in Belgium, Dupriez helped establish the composer's international reputation by programming much of his music on radio broadcasts.2 The work's four movements portray a day of worship from the composer's perspective: (1) Awakening, (2) Prayer, (3) Relaxation, (4) Day's End and a New Beginning. The following analysis will focus on the second movement, entitled "Prayer," which features a remarkable blend of African American cultural symbols and brilliant craftsmanship. The aim of this study is to investigate the correlation between the structural and the referential in this movement. Conventional analytic methods prompt discussions of form, melody, and harmony, while topical analyses enhance our interpretation of expressive musical signs.³ Among the African American cultural topics I identify and will highlight in this analysis are call-and-response, blues, jazz, and elements of the spiritual/supernatural.4 Moving beyond

the identification of African American musical tropes and attributes, the search for topical signs affords dialogue that engages and examines both the structural and expressive domains, enabling vernacular subjects to interact with the more objective directives of scholarly analysis. In other words, how do these African American musical symbols commingle with the elements of the composition?

Still, at times, preferred to write music that suggested a program.⁵ Drawn from Black musical resources and traditions, the program of this symphony is direct and convincing. Still recalls from childhood:

During my early years, my maternal grandmother also lived with us, and it was she who sang Spirituals and Christian hymns all day long as she worked. "Little David, Play on Yo' Harp" was her favorite. Because she was a visiting teacher, my mother was expected to attend their social functions, one of which was a basket meeting on Sunday, in this case, an affair both religious and social. As a prelude to the variety of foods prepared by the housewives, they all gathered in the church, sang Spirituals and shouted.⁶

Still realized the richness of Black musical traditions as elements of spirituals, jazz, blues, and other Black musical traditions surface in a number of his works. The second movement of the *Sunday Symphony* points to a specific facet of the worship experience: prayer. Before we examine this movement, let us explore some aspects and dynamics of certain African American worship traditions.

The dynamics of worship services vary among denominations and regions, and this is very much the case with Black worship services. However, some common traits and traditions stand out. Vocal exclamations related to responsive readings in some groups are often shared by many Black congregations, though the timing and character of these exclamations differs from one service to another. There is no designated time for the exclamatory shouts since they are specific to each individual and serve as a testimony of personal experience and/or a sign of agreement with the leader of the service. Another dynamic, similar to the testimonial exclamation in origin, is the moan. Some members of the congregation shout, and other individuals may express themselves by moaning. Due to the longing nature of this utterance, these moans are semi-pitched, arhythmic, and almost always reflect the minor mode. Hence the terms "testifyin'" and "moanin" will be used in identifying and characterizing some of the thematic material in Still's "Prayer." Other responsory utterances such as "Yes, Lord," "Amen," and "Halleluia" are common to Black worship and, when repeatedly solicited by a preacher, may create an elaborate and prolonged display of call-and-response exchanges.

Various members of the congregation are active and vocal participants in the service. The call-and-response trope, then, permeates the devotional and sermonic aspects of Black worship: during the devotional period, there

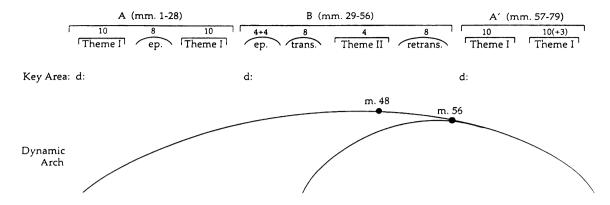
is singing and prayer. The prayer leader is most often a deacon, minister, or layperson. Many denominations observe a particular doctrine of prayer. But regardless of the specific exhortations, a number of Black congregational prayers tend to assume similar shapes. A typical prayer might begin with the leader offering sentiments of thanks to God. The sentiments are expressed in regular speech patterns, as if the leader were conversing. Members of the congregation agree with a variety of barely audible hums and "Yes, Lords," scattered around the congregation, yet never disturbing or interrupting the leader. As the leader begins a series of pleas to God, the congregation is stirred and becomes more vocally involved. The high point of the prayer is marked by the most vigorous interaction between the congregation and the leader. As the calls of the leader rise, so do the responses of the congregation. An intense energy results from this climax of interactions and interjections between leader and congregation. Natalie Curtis Burlin offers an account in her article "Negro Music At Birth":

[The] preacher began in a quavering voice a long supplication and now and again an ejaculation, warm with entreaty, "O Lord!" or a muttered "Amen, Amen"—all against the background of the praying, endless praying. Minutes passed, long minutes of strange intensity. The mutterings, the ejaculations, grew louder, more dramatic, till suddenly I felt the creative thrill dart through the people like an electric vibration, that same half-audible hum arose—and then up from the depths of some sinners' remorse and imploring came a pitiful little plea, a real Negro "moan" sobbed in musical cadence. From somewhere in that bowed gathering another voice improvised a response: The plea sounded again louder this time and more impassioned; then other voices joined in the answer, shaping it into a musical phrase; and so, before our ears, as one might say, composed then and there by no one in particular and everyone in general.8

Once this activity dies down, the leader closes the prayer with aspirations of reaching heaven. The congregation returns to soft utterances of agreement and praise. The prayer closes.

These events, if likened to a musical form, yield an arch-shaped structure. The interactive aspect of Black worship services in effect produces a terraced texture involving the leader, individual utterances, and group exhortations. While the hierarchy of worship leadership is, to a degree, structured, everyone has the opportunity to participate on Sunday morning. The active, yet orderly, communion of the participants creates the unique expressive dynamic of Black worship. With this image in mind, we now focus on Still's musical depiction of a Black worship experience.

Feelings of longing and supplication are conveyed in Still's depiction of prayer. Still expresses the moans and pleas of prayer, and also represents the exhortations and exclamations of praise. One experiences the



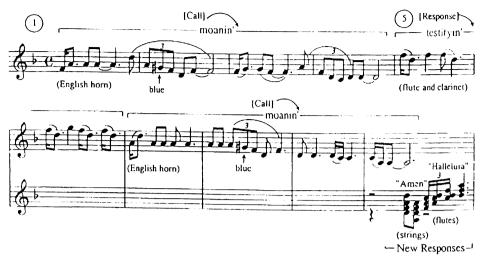
Example 1: Form diagram

emotional swellings and resolutions common to Black worship traditions. The arch shape resulting from the global swell and release is shown in Example 1. The theme of prayerfulness is most readily recognizable by the slow tempo and the mood of longing. Still instructs the ensemble to play "very slowly" with a tempo marking of $_{\bullet}$ =50. The blue color and somber nature of this movement are reflected in the opening English horn solo, which is in a minor mode and is marked "mournfully." Still creates reverent call-and-response exchanges between characters whom I refer to as the "moanin' deacon" and "testifyin' sisters." The initial piano dynamic depicts the solitude and serenity of prayer and meditation, as murmuring strings accompany the opening thematic statements.

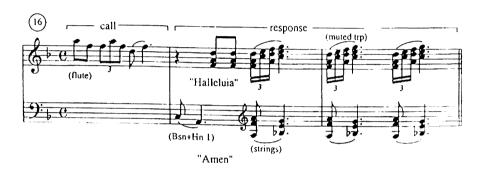
The arch shape of the movement is related to the arch-shaped dynamic of Black worship and prayer. Ternary structures commonly involve some type of harmonic contrast in the B section. Still, however, is not adventurous in this regard. Each section has D minor as its tonal center. Key stasis maintains the plaintive mood of the prayer. Yet, through manipulations of orchestration, dynamics, and texture, Still achieves contrast. The outer A sections constitute varied realizations of primary thematic material. The contrasting B section denotes the climax of the prayer as the entire congregation (tutti orchestra) becomes involved in worship.

Call-and-response

Call-and-response pervades and propels this prayer. Its relevance to the entire movement is evident in its involvement in thematic construction, cadential activity, and transition passages. As shown in Example 2, Still's orchestration in the opening measures (mm. 1-10) enhances the textural contrast that helps define the call and response topic. The moanin' English horn (Deacon) begins the prayer at measures 1-4 and the flutes and clarinets (sisters) testify in agreement at measures 5-6. The timbral contrast between these characters is explicit, yet subtle. Murmuring strings accompany the moanin' theme's antecedent phrase (mm. 1-6). Once the flute and clarinet complete their testifyin' at m. 6, a humming woodwind accompaniment in the bassoon and second clarinet assist the Deacon in concluding the first verse of prayer (mm.7-10). Two additional gestures



Example 2: Call-and-response (mm. 1-10)



Example 3: Call-and-response (mm. 16-18)

answer the English horn's call and help bring the opening verse of prayer to repose. The descending string figure whispers "Amen" while the ascending flutes utter a triplet-laden "Halleluia" in m. 10. A more elaborate realization of the topic closes the episode at mm. 11-18 as shown in Example 3. The flute calls with a descending cadential figure at m. 16. The first bassoon and third horn respond with a similar figure. These figures recall the "Amen" figure at m. 10. The descending figure is then repeated in the upper strings along with muted trumpets uttering the ascending "Halleluia" figure (mm. 17-18). Here, call-and-response signals the closing of the episode.

Variation in the delivery of calls and responses highlight the recapitulation (mm. 57-79). Example 4 illustrates this event. The third statement of moanin' and testifyin' (mm. 57-66) marks a vivid contrast from the opening statements. Here, the piccolo joins the English horn in the moanin'



Example 4: Call-and-response (mm. 57-62)



Example 5: Call-and-response (mm. 63-66)

statement and is accompanied by a clarinet choir and harp. A striking variation to the testifyin' theme, now in the first clarinet and first horn, is the addition of a two-beat lead-in (mm. 60-62). The lead-in suggests an interjected, intensified response of testimony that overlaps the call—perhaps, a member of the congregation could not wait to testify. The testifyin is accompanied by the remaining horns, and the murmuring strings return to accompany the moanin' consequent (mm. 63-66). As shown in Example 5, another variation is the omission of the cadential "Amen" response at m. 66. One expects the descending "Amen" to follow the call of the moanin' consequent as in the opening statement, but it does not occur. Instead, Still presents the descending "Amen" figure as another anticipatory interjection in the chromatically inflected gesture in the viola at m. 65. The ascending "Halleluia" response follows in m. 66, now scored for muted trumpets.

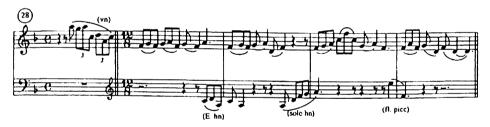
Still concludes the prayer with a series of repeated figures as illustrated in Example 6, which can be interpreted as a series of calls and responses (mm. 76-79). When the moanin' and testifyin' ends, a set of cadential responses replies to the first violin's call at m. 76. The "Amen" figure returns in the humming clarinets and is coupled with the ascending "Halleluia," now in the solo bassoon (mm. 76-77). Above these, a new responsive gesture enters in the flute. The first violins call again in m. 78 and the clarinets and bassoons state a truncated response. The flute, however, extends its exhortation. A final call by the oboes in m. 79 recalls the moanin' Deacon (English horn) because of timbral similarities. Still closes the movement with a somber Amen-like response in the second bassoon and clarinet choir.

The contrasting middle section (mm. 29-56) features call-and-response in melodic dialogues that drive the movement to its climax. The beginning of the section features a series of exchanges between various members of Still's orchestral congregation as shown in Example 7. These utterances were initiated by the first violin lead-in at m. 28 and carried out by the remaining winds during the following four measures (mm. 29-32). The triplets of the violin lead-in provide a smooth transition to the flowing 12/8 meter that prevails throughout the section.

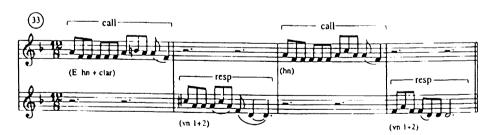
A more intricate working of call-and-response, dialogues between different instrument families (timbres) in the orchestra, occurs at mm. 33-36. Example 8 shows the first dialogue between the English horn and clarinets calling (m. 33) and the violins responding (m. 34). The second ex-



Example 6: Call-and-response (mm. 76-79)



Example 7: Call-and-response (mm. 28-32)



Example 8: Call-and-response (mm. 33-36)

change involves the horns (m. 35) and violins (m. 36). Not only are these dialogues rhythmically symmetrical (2 bars + 2 bars), the contrasting timbres between the calls and responses again reflect the communicative and interactive property of the topic.

Measures 37-44 constitute a transition to the climactic theme of the middle section. Still uses call-and-response in this passage to create and perpetuate an energy build-up. At m. 37, the celli state melodic figures that are answered by brass fanfares and a fleeting figure in the first violin as shown in Example 9. The celli/brass exchange is repeated at m. 39, transposed up a third. The fleeting violin figure, now doubled in the clarinet, acts as a lead-in to the first violin melody at m. 41. Measures 41-44 mark the preparation for the climactic congregational theme. This passage highlights two layers of call-and-response activity occurring above the driving pulse of the low strings and low woodwinds. The layers are illustrated in Examples 10a and b. The first layer involves the melodic first violin being answered by the fleeting upper woodwinds. The second layer involves intricate exchanges within the brass choir. Still's manipulations of call-and-response are so compressed and terraced throughout the orchestra that it generates an increase of rhythmic and textural energy, thrusting the ensemble into the congregational theme. This energy increase is analogous with the emotional arousal of a congregation as more participants become actively involved.

The congregation theme arrives at mm. 45-48. Call-and-response activity here is at a minimum, as the entire congregation (orchestra) participates in the tutti statement. The interactive dynamic, however, is still



Example 9: Call-and-response (mm. 37-38)



Example 10: Call-and-response (mm. 41-42)



Example 11: Congregation Theme, rhythmic reduction (mm. 45-48)



Example 12: Call-and-response (mm. 49-52)

present. Instead of isolated participants responding to one another, exclamations and exhortations sound simultaneously in the various melodic figures. The bold statement of the congregation theme occurs in the flutes, oboes, and violins at m. 45. However, counterstatements are difficult to trace in any individual voice or part because melodic fragments are distributed throughout the remaining instruments. Still holds the multi-layered episode together with the persistent accompanimental rhythm shown in Example 11.

The congregation theme subsides rapidly and call-and-response exchanges resume once again (mm. 49-56). A dramatic change in texture occurs at m. 49 as Still shifts from tutti orchestra to strings alone. This expressive textural contrast affords ample space for intimate dialogue. Example 12 illustrates the woodwind's two-measure answer to the string section's call (mm. 49-52). Measures 53-56 mark the transition that prepares the recapitulation. Here, as shown in Example 13, truncated statements of the call-and-response exchanges that prepared the congregation theme (m. 45) appear. A one-measure trumpet call receives a one-measure response from the horns and upper woodwinds (mm. 53-54). The trumpets and woodwinds call for a second time in m. 55 and the remainder of the orchestra responds with a grand unison figure in m. 56. The grouping for this series of call and response realization is [1+1+1+1]. The accelerated entries of the calls and responses correspond to the increase in harmonic rhythm at points leading to a cadence in common practice compositions.





Example 14: Gospel clichés



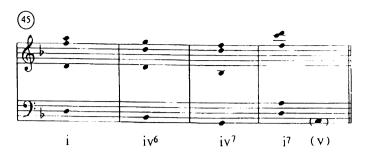
Example 15: Treatment of the subdominant (Testifyin')

Harmony

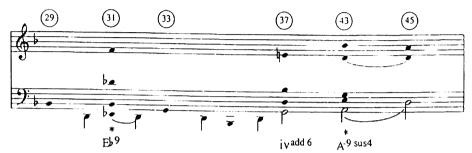
As previously mentioned, the composer asserts D minor throughout the movement. Scarcity of harmonic adventure allows texture, especially textures defined by the call-and-response topic, to dominate the structural fabric of the prayer and to define formal units, both local and global. Other harmonic events and elements clarify formal design and depict topical signification.

Still's treatment and emphasis of the subdominant throughout, reminiscent of the plagal or "Amen" cadence, suggests the presence of a gospel emblem. Example 14 illustrates a few clichés common to gospel performance practice. Just as the plagal cadence prevails in Western musical traditions, the context and treatment of the IV chord characterizes the gospel models as shown in Example 14. Each statement of the testifyin' theme features a particular setting of a gospel-flavored chord progression. Example 15 illustrates Still's treatment of the subdominant in the testifyin' theme. A mild tension occurs between the melodic F and the harmonic Gflat in m. 5, which functions as an altered root of the iv chord. Play with subdominant continues as Still borrows from the major mode in m. 6. On beat two of m. 6, he states a IV chord over the D pedal and slides through the altered iv on beat three. Here, chromatic inflection and modal borrowing amplify the sense of longing. Still's harmonizations could be considered from a voice-leading perspective, but his coloration of plagal relationships during the testifyin' exhortations accents the topical signification of the referential gesture.

Still prepares the arrival of the congregation theme with a series of calls and responses over a G pedal in the low woodwinds and brass (mm. 37-42). The fundamental harmony for these measures is G minor (iv). Chord extensions in the horns enrich the harmony, but do not disturb the subdominant emphasis. Subdominant harmony is also prevalent in the congregation theme. The harmonic progression, i-iv6-iv7-i, is implied by the



Example 16: Congregation theme (harmonic reduction)



Example 17: Harmonic reduction (mm. 29-45)

outer voices in mm. 45-48 as shown in Example 16. Still's emphasis on the subdominant not only engages spiritual/gospel emblems, but also focuses attention on his treatment of dominant harmony.

Still's insistence on the minor mode preserves the blue color of the movement; he never states the dominant with the raised third (C-sharp). This treatment is intriguing in that one might expect stronger tonicdominant relationships (V-i) to articulate large-scale structures. Even though the minor dominant projects a blues topic, Still's treatment of the dominant at pivotal cadential points conveys jazz and spiritual topics as well. Example 17 is a reduction of the harmonies that lead to the congregational theme at m. 45. The jazz topic surfaces as the E-flat9 chord can be interpreted as a tritone substitution for the dominant. This event is striking because Still indirectly states the leading tone (C-sharp) enharmonically as the seventh of the E-flat9 chord (D-flat). The jazz topic is also suggested in the harmonic preparation of the congregation theme. The dominant harmony in mm. 43-44 features chord extensions and alterations that recall jazz harmonic practices. In jazz nomenclature, the chord of mm. 43-44 would read A-9 (sus4). The D-natural (sus 4) substitutes for the third of the chord producing a suspended sonority. The ninth of the chord, Bnatural, is emphasized in the brass fanfares and in the inner voices of the strings (viola).

Example 18, a reduction of measures 53-56, shows an embellishment of the dominant that prepares the recapitulation. The pentatonic collection [G-A-B-D-E] is highlighted in this episode and recalls the spiritual topic. The modal shift, involving the change of B-flat to B-natural, mildly brightens the harmonic color and generates a sense of expectation. The tutti figure at m. 56 continues the dominant emphasis that began at m. 53. Al-



Example 18: Dominant preparation of the recapitulation



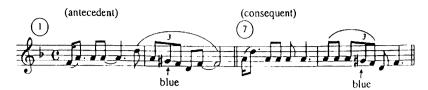
Example 19: Syncopation in primary theme

though the figure cadences on E-natural, Still assures dominant function by stressing A-natural on the downbeat of m. 56. This episode also evokes the spirit of jazz because the third of the dominant is again omitted producing a suspended sonority (A-9 sus4).

Details of Topic, Emblems, and Nuance

Just as a colorful garnish complements fine cuisine, Still's sensitivity to evocative emblems and nuances helps bring into focus the topical signification and referentiality in this prayer. For example, the snapped syncopations that characterize the movement's prominent themes signal the spiritual topic as shown in Example 19. Syncopations such as those highlighted in this example occur throughout the movement in various melodic and accompanimental shapes. The distribution of syncopated gestures throughout the ensemble reinforces the sense of community as the entire congregation participates in the worship experience. Another topical detail that strongly recalls the African American vernacular is the weighty blue fifth found in the moanin' antecedent and consequent. Example 20 isolates this topical reference. The blue fifth (A-flat), enharmonically spelled as G-sharp, deepens the solemn color and mood of Still's theme. This blue note also strengthens the expressive vernacular profile established by the persistent minor mode that boasts two blue inflections (F-natural and C-natural).

The attributes and customs of African American worship are at full display in the second movement of Still's "Sunday Symphony." Still's



Example 20: Blue inflections in moanin' theme

"Prayer" portrays vernacular traditions through numerous manipulations of call and response, blue gestures, jazz harmonies, and spiritual emblems. The call-and-response topic dominates the structural framework of this movement as it characterizes primary themes and marks pivotal cadences. Jazz and blues topics surface in Still's harmonic treatments. Substitute chords, suspended harmonies, and minor dominants are employed throughout and occasionally take precedence over more conventional harmonic treatments. The spiritual/supernatural emblems suggested in Still's thematic constructs enhance the intriguing references to prayer and worship. Still, in essence, "has church" as he captures the profound expressivity of African American worship and musical traditions within the symphony orchestra, a Euro-centric performance medium.

Notes

This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the 2nd International Symposium and Festival on Composition in Africa and the Diaspora in Cambridge, England, August 2003.

- 1. Judith Anne Still, ed., William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music (Flagstaff, Ariz.: The Master-Player Library, 1995). This book features a thematic catalog of the composers' work. Other historical sources include Catherine Parsons Smith, William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Jon Michael Spencer, ed., The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); Judith Anne Still, Michael J. Dabrishus, and Carolyn L. Quin, eds., William Grant Still: A Bio-Bibliography (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996).
 - 2. Judith Anne Still, telephone interview by author, 14 September 1999.
- 3. Leonard G. Ratner, Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980). V. Kofi Agawu, Playing With Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). Raymond Monelle. The Sense of Music (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). The notion of topics (or musical signs) was codified in Ratner's Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style and extended in Agawu s Playing With Signs. Agawu focused on how topics in music of the Western tradition convey expression and formulated a theory that promotes "the interaction between topical and structural signs." Modifying Agawu's theory to the music of African Americans allows us to address the issues of structure and expression in African-American Music. Horace Maxile, "Say What: Topics, Signs, and Signification in African-American Music" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2001).
- 4. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 3rd edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). Olly Wilson, "The Heterogenous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," in *New Perspectives On Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, eds. Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 327-338; Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Halloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). A number of scholars have

contributed notably to the body of Black music scholarship, particularly to the distinctions of certain attributes and performance practices such as pitch inflection (blue notes) and call-and-response. I note here contributions that directly influenced this study.

- 5. William Grant Still, "An Afro-American Composer's Viewpoint," in *The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music*, 232.
- 6. William Grant Still, "My Arkansas Boyhood," William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music, 11.
- 7. The worship and prayer dynamics discussed in this essay stem from observations by the author of a number of Black Baptist churches in the south.
- 8. Natalie Curlis Burlin, "Negro Music at Birth," *Musical Quarterly* 5, no.1:86-89 quoted in Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 62.