

Portraits of Spirituals

1.) An Overview:

Portraits of Spirituals is a 80-minute lecture/performance based workshop that explores authentic spirituals. This class investigates the culture of enslaved communities and the expressive characteristics of spirituals in their original form. This investigation culminates in an improvisation exercise inspired by old Negro melodies and their original expressive characteristics. The workshop is composed of 3 main sections:

- Historical and cultural considerations
- Guided listening
- Group performance/improvisation
- Group reflection/discussion

The focus pieces for the workshop are “Deep River,” “Motherless Child,” and “Many Thousand Gone.” The workshop is geared towards college or advanced high school students. It is designed to be offered in-person and can be adapted for a 60 minute virtual seminar.

2.) Outline:

The 80 minute workshop includes the following sections:

- 5 minutes: Live performance of “Deep River”
- 15 minutes: Lecture about Antebellum history, culture, and performance practice of spirituals
- 20 minutes: Guided listening/discussion
- 40 minutes: Group performance/improvisation in the style of authentic spirituals followed by group reflection

3.) Materials Provided:

- 5.0 octave marimba
- PowerPoint presentation
- Transcriptions of “Deep River,” “Motherless Child,” and “Many Thousand Gone”

4.) Materials Needed:

- Speakers/sound system

5.) Cost:

- 80 minutes: \$350

6.) Excerpt of Script:

“Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston described spirituals as being ‘unceasing variations on a theme.’ The same melody could be sung for hours on end. One person would start humming a short melody that would be heard and imitated by others. Eventually, the melody one person started would grow into a cloud of sound, created by a large group of people singing different variations of the melody asynchronously. Other times, smaller groups of people might sing songs together, in sync. The same melody could be sung mournfully and slowly in times of grieving, or upbeat and with rhythmic clapping and foot stomping to accompany work or dance. The expressive flexibility of spirituals knows no limit.”