

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF MUSIC

A PIONEERING TWENTIETH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN
MUSICIAN: THE CHORAL WORKS OF GEORGE T. WALKER

By

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This dissertation is affectionately dedicated to:

God for His awesome work in my life!

Kimberly Ames, my wife -
Thank you for praying with me, encouraging me,
And being the one God ordained to walk by my side on this journey.
I love you Princess!

and

My mother Mrs. Erma Ames, and the memory of my father Therman E. Ames, Sr.

I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you.
I will give you hope and a good future.
And when you search for me with all your heart,
You will find me.

Jeremiah 29: 11, 13

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ABSTRACT

Finding scholarly research on the choral music by significant American composers is limited. Moreover, a search for scholarly resources on the choral works by significant African-American composers is more limited.

Spiritual arrangements of Negro folk songs by well-known African-American composers such as William Dawson, Jester Hairston, and Hall Johnson are respected and still admired by choral conductors today. These arrangements, which were based upon work, holler, or slave songs, had a tremendous impact upon the cultural development of African-Americans in North America. Hale Smith, a prominent African-American composer states, “Without these people [Dawson, Hairston, Johnson, et.al.] and their contributions, American music would be altogether different.” Thus, the music of African-Americans became a vital component of American history and American music.

Equally, but not always noted, are the contributions by African-American composers of the western European tradition. Many people, including choral directors, are not aware of the vast array of non-spiritual compositions that have been composed by African-Americans. There is a considerable number of African-American composers who continue to make significant contributions in all genres of music, however only a limited amount of resources, primarily compilations, are available that describe their life, compositional style, and works.

The purpose of this study is three-fold: 1) to provide an additional scholarly resource devoted to the musical contributions of Pulitzer Prize winner George Walker; 2) to present his choral works in the form of a descriptive analysis; and 3) to provide a summary of his career as a performer, conductor, teacher, and composer.

Chapter One introduces the composer and briefly discusses the need for continued research in the area of twentieth century African-American composers of the western European tradition.

A review of related literature in Chapter Two provides a Black perspective on twentieth century classical music.

Chapter Three explores Walker's life by examining family and childhood experiences, his education, and career as a concert pianist, teacher, and composer.

Chapters Four and Five are devoted to the musical analysis of his choral octavos and extended works. Each work is presented in a descriptive manner and contains special insight about the work from the composer.

Chapter Six summarizes and reflects upon the life and accomplishments of George Walker and his choral compositions.