

R. NATHANIEL DETT
Piano Works
DENVER OLDHAM

New World Records 80367

As a black musician of his time, Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) had options for the evolution of his talent. Most readily, he could write songs for minstrel shows (as did James Bland and Ernest Hogan), ballads for the parlor (Gussie Davis), or instrumental Gebrauchsmusik (Frank Johnson). Had he participated in the idioms which evolved during his youth, he might have turned to musical theater, or created blues or ragtime pieces. With the exception, however, of *After the Cakewalk*, a ragtime piece, his lifework centered upon spirituals, as did that of his older contemporary Harry Burleigh (1866-1949), and the use of folkloric ideas.

Two individuals provided substantial impetus for Dett's exploration of Afro-American compositional sources during his youth: Antonin Dvořák, who had counseled Americans to look to their own roots for the basis of a native school, and the Afro-Britisher Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912), whose respect for the music of both native and black Americans was manifest even before his visits to the United States.

Dett (who chose to be known as R. Nathaniel) was born in a suburb of Ontario's Niagara Falls, a terminus on the underground railroad for escaped slaves. His mother's family had been Canadian residents for at least two generations, and his father was a first-generation expatriate.

"I played the piano ever since I can remember; no one taught me, I just picked it up: I used to follow my two older brothers to the house while their lessons were in progress," he recalled. But when the teacher was out of the room, she knew the playing was not that of her students, and offered free lessons to the 5-year-old pianist.

Dett continued his piano studies when his family crossed the border, moving in 1893 to Niagara Falls, New York. Three years later, his playing was heard by Frederic H. Goff, the president of the Cleveland Trust Company, who provided financial assistance when the youth entered the Oberlin Conservatory; and by a friend of Dvořák, who urged Dett to study music theory and encouraged him to follow Dvořák's thoughts on a national school. The latter stimulus resulted in his first published work, the Joplin-influenced *After the Cakewalk* (1900).

At Oberlin he studied piano with Howard Handel Carter (a former student of Theodore Presser) and George Carl Hastings (among whose students was Jessie Covington Dent, another black prodigy). His theory teacher was Arthur E. Heacox, and for composition he studied with George Whitfield Andrews, later the teacher of William Grant Still. The most influential factor, however, was a concert given at Oberlin by the Kneisel Quartet, which included a work by Dvořák (Possibly the String Quartet No. 12, Opus 96--the "American"), reminding him of the spirituals his grandmother had sung for him in Ontario. "Here indeed was the concept--the use of traditional folk melodies in art music--which was to direct and control his creative efforts throughout his life," Vivian McBrier has written.

Dett graduated from Oberlin (one of the first blacks to do so) with a major in both composition and piano. He then joined the faculty at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee, and later, at Missouri's Lincoln Institute. Despite access to Lincoln's instrumental ensemble of 14 players, Dett never made chamber

and ensemble music a substantial part of his oeuvre. This was the period in which he composed his first piano suite (*Magnolia Suite*) and his first choral work; he also wrote a collection of poems, *The Album of the Heart*, a result of his mother's encouragement in literary interests. Dett would use the poems as texts for several song compositions in the future.

Following a summer of additional study at Oberlin with Karl Gehrkens, Dett accepted a position in 1913 at the Hampton Institute (now University) in Virginia, for which he had been recommended by E. Azalia Hackley. Here he established the School of Music, the Musical Arts Society (a concert series), the Hampton Institute Choir, and the community-based Hampton Choral Union. On his arrival, he was fresh from the success of *In the Bottoms*, a piano suite which had been premiered in Chicago's Music Hall by Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler.

The influence of the spiritual began to appear in his choral works, and also in a string-quartet set (apparently lost). After completing several wartime patriotic works for Canada and the United States, Dett turned his attention to the use of the spiritual within an extended form, resulting in *The Chariot Jubilee* for tenor, chorus, and orchestra. This innovative concept had been anticipated by the art-song settings of spirituals by Burleigh and the use of these melodies in piano versions by Coleridge-Taylor. It marked an intensified concern on Dett's part for the preservation and "elevation" of the spiritual for use in the church and by his choruses at Hampton.

His desire for additional education was stimulated by a leave, 1920-21, for study at Harvard with Arthur Foote. There Dett won prizes for his essay on "Negro Music" and his setting of *Don't Be Weary, Traveler*, and he received additional attention as a result of Percy Grainger's recording of "Juba" from *In the Bottoms*, which quickly became Dett's most popular work.

He began a two-year tenure in 1924 as president of the National Association of Negro Musicians, an organization he had helped found five years earlier, and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree that year by Howard University, with Oberlin granting the same degree two years later.

A large collection of spirituals in choral settings, "Religious Folksongs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute," appeared in 1927; some of these settings were probably included in the choir's major concerts in 1928 at Carnegie Hall, and the next year at Boston's Symphony Hall.

Dett studied further at the University of Pennsylvania, Chicago's American Conservatory of Music and, in 1929, at Columbia University, where he worked with Rosseter Gleason Cole (Gershwin's teacher seven years earlier). Most auspicious, however, was his trip with the Hampton singers to Europe in 1930, encouraged by George Foster Peabody, which included performances in England (where 45 minutes of encores were required at the Royal Albert Hall), Belgium, the Netherlands, France (providing Dett with the opportunity to meet with Nadia Boulanger), Austria, Switzerland, and Germany.

He entered the Eastman School of Music in 1931 to study with Howard Hanson. The Master of Music degree was awarded Dett in 1932, with a composition for chorus and orchestra, dedicated to Peabody, as his thesis. When premiered in 1939 at the Cincinnati Festival with Eugene Goossens conducting, it was presented as a full-scale oratorio entitled *The Ordering of Moses*, and it was a logical successor to *The Chariot Jubilee*.

The stay in Rochester appeared to be more promising than continued tenure at Hampton, where he was replaced by Clarence Cameron White. Dett established a private studio in Rochester and continued his activity as a choral conductor, working in 1933 for radio broadcasts sponsored by Stromberg-Carlson. His final piano suite, *Eight Bible Vignettes*, exhibits his chromatic and contrapuntal interests, with references to both spirituals and Hebrew material.

Except for brief teaching appointments in Texas and North Carolina, Dett remained in Rochester until the final year of his life, when, touring with the U.S.O. women's chorus, he suffered a fatal heart attack in Battle Creek, Michigan. He was buried in Niagara Falls, New York, and was survived by his wife, Helen Elise Smith, and their two daughters.

—Dominique-Rene de Lerma

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Balm in Gilead.* Inez Matthews, mezzo-soprano Jonathan Brice, piano. Period SPL-580 ca. 1950.
- The Chariot Jubilee.* Morgan State University Choir, Nathan Carter conducting. Audio House AHS-30F75, 1975.
- Done Paid my Vow.* Virginia Union University Choir, Odell Hobbs conducting. Richmond Sound Stages SWO-626, ca. 1970.
- Go Tell it on the Mountain; I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray; Rise Up, Shepherd, an' Foller; Steal Away to Jesus; Were You There?* Dorothy Maynor, soprano, with male chorus. RCA Camden CAL-344, ca. 1950.
- I'm a-Trav'lin' to the Grave.* Ellabelle Davis, soprano; Hubert Greenslade, piano. London LPS-182, ca. 1950.
- In the Bottoms.* Natalie Hinderas, piano. Desto DC-7102/3, 1970. Clive Lithgoe, piano. Philips 9500 096, 1976.
- In the Bottoms:* Prelude (Night) and Juba Dance. Percy Grainger, piano. Columbia A-6145 (78 rpm), ca. 1920; Juba Dance was recorded again by Grainger on Decca A-586 (78 rpm), ca. 1946. Both performances of Juba Dance were reissued on Gustafson Piano Library Tape GPL 102.
- Listen to the Lambs.* Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Richard P. Condie conducting. Columbia ML/MS-6235, 1966.
- The Ordering of Moses.* Jeanette Walters, soprano; Carol Brice, contralto; John Miles, tenor; John Work IV, baritone; Talladega College Choir; Mobile Symphony Orchestra, William L. Dawson conducting. Silver Crest TAL-42868-S, 1968.
- Poor Me.* Marian Anderson, contralto; Franz Rupp, piano. Victor 10-1278 (78 rpm).
- Ride On, King Jesus.* Veronica Tyler, soprano; Charles Lloyd, piano. BRC Productions, 1986.

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DENVER OLDHAM has performed extensively in Europe, South America and the United States. He has given several recitals in New York, including three in Carnegie Hall. He is devoted to expanding public appreciation of music by neglected American composers. Oldham attended the Juilliard School, where he studied with Joseph Bloch and Leland Thompson. He also studied with Dame Myra Hess and Olona Kabos in London and with Alexander Uninsky at the Aspen Music Festival, where he received the Uninsky Scholarship. Oldham also appears on New World 80310/311, *Charles Tomlinson Griffes: Collected Works for Piano*, and 80328/329, *John Alden Carpenter: Collected Piano Works*.

R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943)

Magnolia Suite

Part I

1- No. 1 Magnolias (3:38)

2- No. 2 Deserted Cabin (2:17)

3- No. 3 My Lady Love (2:56)

Part II

4- No. 4 Mammy (3:19)

5- No. 5 The Place Where the Rainbow Ends (5:19)

In the Bottoms

6- Prelude

Night (3:48)

7- His Song (2:16)

8- Honey

Humoreque (1:00)

9- Barcarolle

Morning (4:55)

10- Dance

Juba (2:10)

Eight Bible Vignettes

11- Father Abraham (4:32)

12- Desert Interlude (3:23)

13- As His Own Soul (3:25)

14- Barcarolle of Tears (3:46)

15- I Am The True Vine (3:33)

16- Martha Complained (5:30)

17- Other Sheep (9:29)

18- Madrigal Divine (3:52)

Denver Oldham, piano

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