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Barriers and Benefits: The Impact of Learning Art Songs and Spirituals by African-American Composers on Voice Students from all Racial Backgrounds

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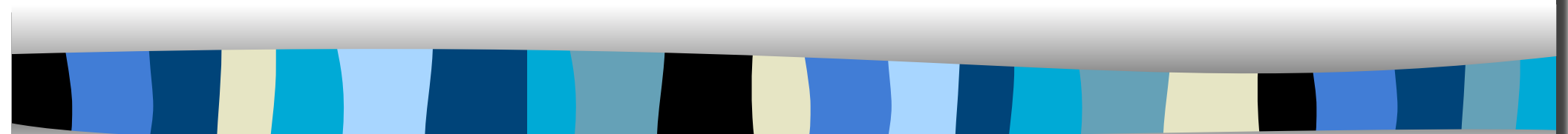
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Barriers and Benefits:



The Impact of Learning Art Songs and
Spirituals by African-American Composers
on Voice Students from all Racial
Backgrounds



The Four Questions

- What are the barriers that singers from all racial backgrounds face when performing art songs and spirituals by African-American composers?
- How do students and teachers confront their preconceptions when learning any piece of music (e.g., a female student singing a song from a man's perspective)? Specifically, how can that process be applied to learning spirituals and art songs by African Americans?
- How is a singer's outlook on racial dynamics affected by studying and performing these pieces?
- What do we need to do as educators in order to enable singers from all racial backgrounds to become more comfortable performing this repertoire?



Definitions:

- **Art Song:** a composition for voice and piano in which the composer has chosen a pre-existing text and created a musical union between the piano and vocal lines that are meant to support and complement one another in a way that elucidates the composer's conception of the poem.
- **Folk Song Arrangement:** a folk melody that has been set by a classically-trained composer with the expectation that it will be performed by classical musicians.



A Complicated History: Slavery and Minstrelsy

- “Negro spirituals” (plantation slave songs) or African-American spirituals were inspired by African and European religious and musical traditions, often sung in slave dialect
- Rise and Popularity of 19th-century minstrelsy in the United States



African-American Composers

- Edward Boatner (1898-1981)
- Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)
- William Dawson (1895-1978)
- R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943)
- Hall Johnson (1887-1970)
- Florence Price (1887-1953)
- William Grant Still (1882-1943)



Question #1

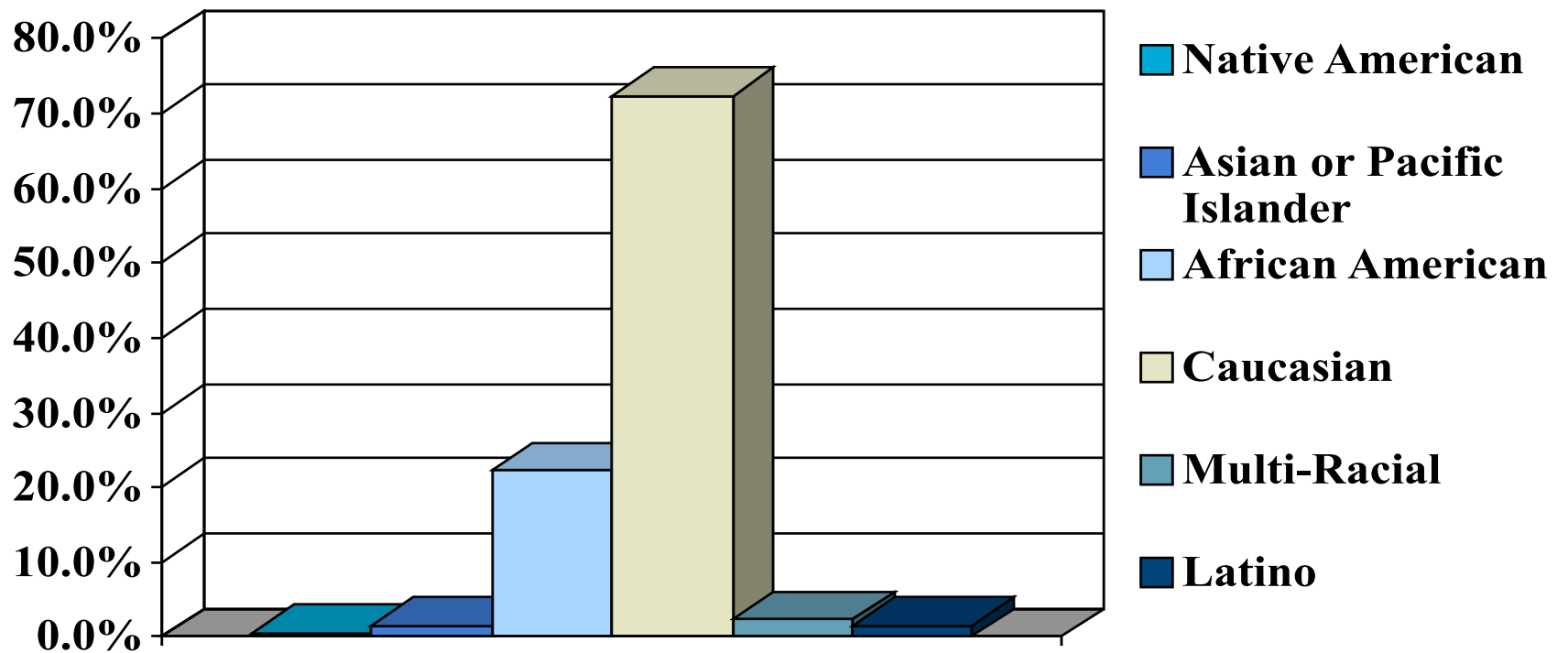
- What are the barriers that singers from all racial backgrounds face when performing art songs and spirituals by African-American composers?



Survey Design

- **Part I:** General demographic questions (gender, age, race/ethnic background, and religious affiliations)
- **Part II:** Specific questions about musical training and exposure to art songs and spirituals by African Americans
- **Part III:** Preferences of vocal performance style
- **Part IV:** Open-ended questions regarding attitudes towards performance of this repertoire by singers of all racial backgrounds and questions regarding perceptions of authenticity

Breakdown of Respondents by Racial Background





Survey Question from Part III

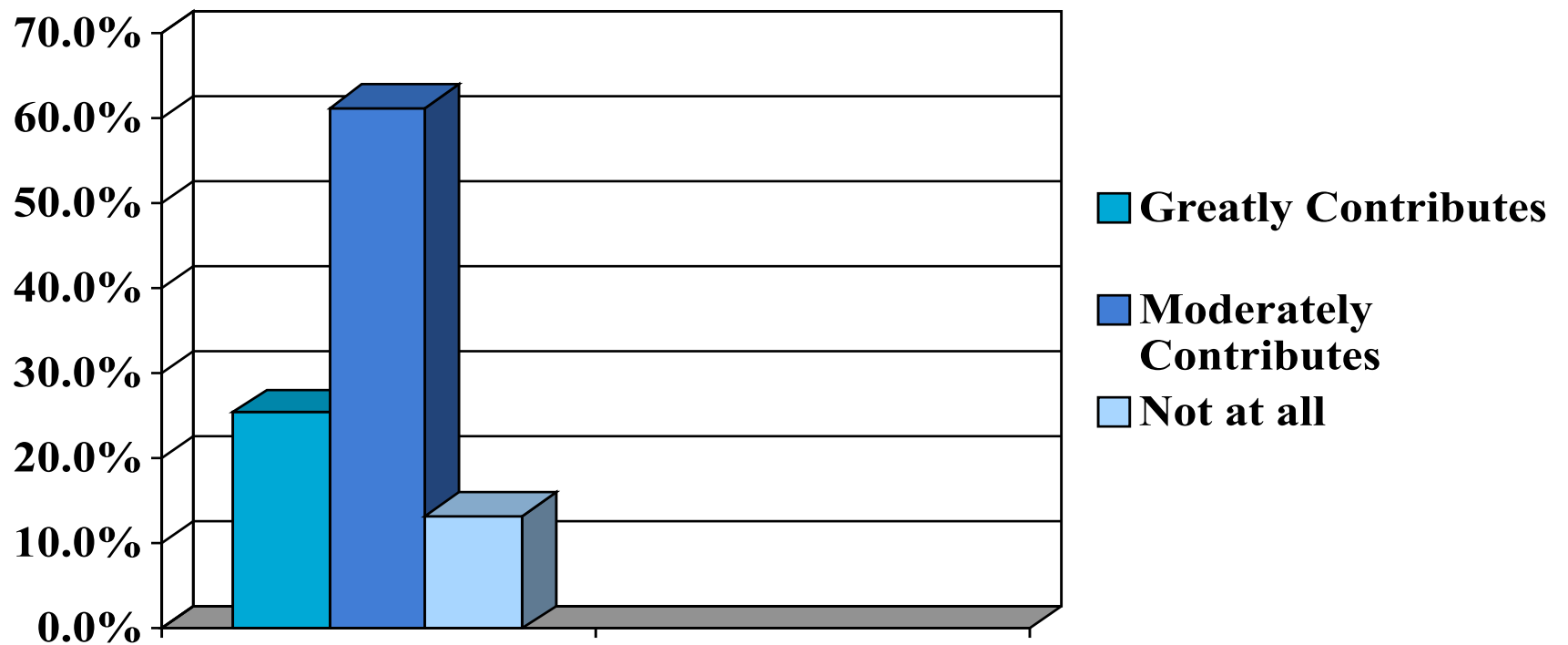
- What was your greatest challenge in approaching this repertoire?
 - Fear of inauthenticity
 - Lack of availability
 - Lack of stylistic knowledge or guidance to interpret the repertoire correctly and respectfully
 - Fear of audience reception



Survey: Part IV

- To what extent do you think race contributes to the authenticity of singing African-American art songs?
- What is your level of comfort if all races were involved in performing African-American art songs regularly?

Contribution of Race to the Authenticity of Performance





Barriers: Authenticity

- “I think African Americans can sing these types of songs more authentically, and I feel like I don’t have as much of a right to perform this type of music because I am not black. But I think if more singers of all races were to sing this type of material, it would become more widely accepted.”
- “I think that at this point race plays a major part in the authenticity of singing African-American art songs, simply because many teachers of other races have not taken the time to know this material well enough to teach students how to approach them with understanding and appreciation for the history and culture behind them.”
- “It is obviously more authentic if an African American sings it.”
- “I have declined to sing spirituals in recital because I, as a dominant culture singer, felt unworthy and unable to express the deeper meanings of these works.



Breaking Barriers: Universality

- “Without knowledge and sensitive performance, race alone will not render these songs authentically. These songs can be sensitively understood by skillful and knowledgeable performers of any race.”
- “Feelings are common to us all, even if experiences are not.”
- “If race is a factor in how well African-American art songs are performed, then the argument that Blacks can perform ‘Western’ vocal music just as well as non-Blacks is a faulty and moot one. We all know that this is not the case.”
- “As a fellow African American, it is my duty, and the duty of other African Americans, to continue performing the songs of our past to others. I believe that is very important to do; however when people of other races sing these wonderful songs the message of continuing the story is extended to a greater family of people, beyond race.”



Summary (Survey Respondent)

- “ I do not believe that music has a soul, but it does leave the imprints of peoples’ spirits and communicates on a deeper level than our verbal language can ever begin to communicate.”



Question #2

- How do students and teachers confront their preconceptions when learning any piece of music?



I. Focus Group Responses: Breaking Barriers in Performance

- “I found it easy to connect to this repertoire because the emotions were so real, from people I could understand.”
- “I was glad to have the opportunity to perform this repertoire *with permission*, because I’ve only ever seen black singers perform it and I’ve always wanted to be able to.”
- “Some of my pieces you couldn’t tell what the perspective was, but some you could. I learned to dive in with confidence and push hesitation out of the way because we talk on different characters all the time.”
- “...as a soloist, you search for the music that you are; the experience is more lasting, a self-fulfillment. You have to engage in more self-exploration because you’re the sole communicator.”



Breaking Barriers..... (cont.)

- “The main idea is to get ideas or emotion across no matter what your race.”
- “All composers compose in a deliberate way; they make choices because they fit the text, and those choices are powerful.”
- “It’s much easier for a student to connect with a spiritual or art song by African-American composers than an Italian song.”



Focus Group Summary (Quote)

- “...as a soloist, you search for the music that *you* are; the experience is more lasting, a self-fulfillment. You have to engage in more self-exploration because you’re the sole communicator.”



Question #3

- How is a singer's outlook on racial dynamics affected by studying and performing these pieces?




II. Focus Group Responses: Gaining Insights

- “‘Singing outside the box’ breaks cultural barriers and makes it much easier to connect to others. Performing makes you learn way more than just reading about it; it makes the experience much stronger.”
- Everybody learns about the Harlem Renaissance, but doing it [i.e., performing songs by poets and composers from that era] was way more powerful.”



Gaining Insights (cont.)

- “You need to understand the struggle and some of African-American history and know how each song relates to the struggle. Each story is told from a different perspective.”
- “I gained the most insight when I did my first mock performance--after the music was learned and memorized--and I was making choices about how I was going to make people believe me. I thought that, since I’m African American, my connection would be automatic, but my insight came through real performance.”



Question #4: What do we need to do as educators in order to enable singers from all racial backgrounds to become more comfortable performing this repertoire?

- Grant permission
- Guide preparation and performance
- Provide role models
- Facilitate students' self reflection



Quotes

- *“Whether singing or acting, race and color prejudices are forgotten. Art is one form against which such barriers do not stand.”*
-Paul Robeson, African-American bass-baritone