



Harry Thacker Burleigh

Harry Thacker Burleigh

The Singer of Spirituals

by Victoria McAfee

A man of grace, gentleness, courtesy, humor, and loyalty.

A musician who, as composer, singer ...and interpreter has given to multitudes a lift along life's steep ascent.

A representative of race which having suffered much at the hands of its brothers, has chosen to express its suffering not in retaliation, but in song.

A man of faith who took his religion seriously and counted it a high privilege to pray much, to serve humbly, and to sing for half a century to the glory of God...

—A tribute to Harry Burleigh written by Rev. Elmore M. McKee, the author of *Hard Trials: The Life and Music of Harry T. Burleigh*

Henry (Harry) Thacker Burleigh is not well known, but he significantly contributed to the development of American art songs. He was the first African American to compose over two hundred of those songs, many of which incorporated plantation melodies including “By an’ By,” “Go Down Moses,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and especially “Deep River.”

Burleigh was born December 2, 1866, in Erie, Pennsylvania and named Henry after his father. His partially blind grandfather, Hamilton Waters, bought his freedom from a plantation in Maryland and moved to Erie where he and his wife Lucinda became the parents of Elizabeth Walters, Burleigh’s mother. Elizabeth graduated from college fluent in French and Greek, but was denied a teaching position in the public schools. Instead, she became a domestic worker and taught in the colored school. She also taught one of the largest white Bible classes in town. Serious about her faith, she passed on her Christian beliefs to her children. Burleigh remembered her singing while doing housework, and he and the other family members joined in.

Burleigh worked several jobs to help his family financially. His grandfather worked as a lamplighter and town crier in Erie. At age 12, Burleigh and his brother worked alongside him. Grandpa Walters sang as he worked and taught his grandsons old plantation songs.

Early in Burleigh’s teens, one of his aunts paid for him to take a few piano lessons, but his major musical breakthrough came through a family his mother worked for—the Russells. They hosted recitals with famous performers in their home, and the young Burleigh made it his business to listen. One time, when he heard Rafael Joseffy, the Hungarian pianist, planned to come, he stood for hours in the snow outside the window to hear him and almost caught pneumonia. After that incident, his mother, his strongest cheerleader, got him a job as the doorman for the Russell family, allowing him to continue to enjoy the musicians.

In 1892, at the age of 26, Burleigh took his whole savings of \$30 and a recommendation letter from Mrs. Russell to New York City to audition for a scholarship at the National Conservatory of Music. Low grades initially eliminated him, but an acquaintance of Mrs. Russell’s helped him, and he finally received the scholarship to attend the school. After he completed his education, he eventually became an instructor there.

As a student, he needed extra money so he cleaned in the school, singing as he went up and down the halls. The director of the conservatory, Antonin Dvorak, heard Burleigh and greatly admired his voice and the richness of the plantation melodies.

They worked on compositions together and the spiritual flavor ended up in some of Dvorak’s major compositions, including his Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”). Dvorak also encouraged other students to use the melodies he heard Burleigh sing because, he said, “the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water.”

Early in life, Burleigh had been a soloist in churches and a synagogue in Erie. His life changed dramatically in 1894 when he became baritone soloist for the choir at St. George’s Episcopal Church in New York City. He was the first black singer at the church, and some in the all-white congregation opposed his presence. However, Burleigh remained there for over 50 years (missing only one performance in that time) and won the people’s hearts and respect. He started the church’s tradition of having an annual Spirituals service every May for over 30 years. Also, the payment from the church made it possible for him to work exclusively on his studies at the conservatory and other creative musical diversions.

In 1895, New York’s governor signed a civil rights bill barring discrimination in restaurants. Burleigh and two others tested the bill in 25 restaurants and were served in all but four.

In 1898, Burleigh married Louise Alston, a poet and actress. Alston, his son and only child (given his wife’s maiden name), was born the following year. The couple experienced a very troubling marriage and separated, but Burleigh was against divorce and continued to support his wife.

Also about this time, three of Burleigh’s songs were published, and in 1900 he became the first African American to solo for Temple Emanu-El, an affluent New York synagogue. He published his popular arrangement of “Deep River” in 1917, which led to a dozen more spirituals being published that year as well. He also set to music American poems such as Walt Whitman’s “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors”; arranged vocal solos in different keys for mixed chorus, men’s chorus, and women’s chorus; composed original song cycles like *Saracen Songs*; and edited or transposed arrangements for such church hymns as “In Christ There Is No East or West” (the tune is “McKee,” the name of the rector at St. George’s).

Burleigh received honorary degrees from Atlanta and Howard Universities for his contributions as a vocalist and composer. The payment of his works covered his travels to Europe and language studies. He had the privilege of performing for the king and queen of England and President Theodore Roosevelt and encouraged the careers of many singers like Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson.

In his later years, Burleigh attended a concert in his honor and listened to others perform several of his musical pieces. At the time he said, “Now it’s time for me to be goin’ home. Next time you walk down to the shore, and look out across the water, you remember you’re not at land’s end; you’re where a bridge begins!... from this world to the next.” The show ended with “I Stand at the River of Jordan,” one of his arrangements.

A skillful preacher can take the Word of God, excellent stories, and illustrations and put together a message to move people and help people see God and the hereafter. Burleigh’s long legacy of Christian music did the same. He made that heavenly shore visible through the power of song.

Burleigh became ill and retired in 1946, and three years later he died of heart failure at the age of 82. Over two thousand mourners attended his services at St. George’s. One writer stated it well about Burleigh’s death, that “the ‘dapper little man with the white mustache’ had indeed laid down his burden.”



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