Harry Thacker Burleigh, born in Erie, Pennsylvania on December 2, 1866, was surrounded with music from the moment of his birth. As his father, Henry, had died when Harry was a small child, Harry’s maternal grandfather, Hamilton Waters, was a powerful influence on Harry. Waters, a former slave who had purchased his freedom for $55, worked as the local town crier and lamp lighter. As he made his nightly rounds with his grandson by his side, he sang the songs he had learned as a slave.

Burleigh credits his mother, Elizabeth, as his first music teacher. Elizabeth was a college-educated woman, fluent in French and Greek, and she exposed young Harry to European classical songs. But as is too often the case, despite her advanced education, Elizabeth, a Black woman, was only able to find work as a domestic in the home of Elizabeth Russell, a wealthy arts’ patron in Erie. Young Burleigh’s love of music was apparent. He took piano and voice lessons and sang in the choirs of two churches in Erie, as well as in the local reformed Jewish Temple. His mother’s employer, Elizabeth Russell, hosted many musicians in her home, including Hungarian pianist Rafael Joseffy. Standing outside in the snow to hear Joseffy’s recital, Harry became ill. After learning the cause of his illness, Harry’s mother asked her employer to hire the teenage Burleigh as a doorman, so that he could hear the music from inside the house. Unable to attend the segregated events as a guest, young Harry was thus able to hear many classical performers of the day, including Venezuelan pianist Teresa Carreño and Italian tenor Italo Campanini.

In 1892, Harry received a scholarship to attend the newly created National Conservatory of Music in New York, founded in 1885 by Jeannette Thurber, after Ms. Thurber made the controversial decision to admit Black students. In the same year that Harry arrived as a student, the celebrated Czech composer, Antonin Dvořák, became the new director of the Conservatory. It was destined that the two would meet. While Harry’s scholarship covered tuition, he took a job in the Conservatory...
doing maintenance and cleaning to help cover living expenses. Dvořák encouraged Burleigh to preserve the melodies of his heritage in his own compositions, and Dvořák wrote themes inspired by the music he heard from Burleigh. Dvořák hired Burleigh as a copyist, which prepared him for his future role as a music editor. Burleigh’s influence can be clearly heard in the second Largo movement of Dvořák’s Symphony. The music is so compelling that many believed the Largo melody was not Dvořák’s own. It was entirely composed by Dvořák, and adaptations of the melody came after the symphony was composed. One of Dvořák’s students, William Arms Fisher, adapted the melody into a hymn, which he called “Goin’ Home.”

In 1894, while still a student, Burleigh auditioned for the post of soloist at St. George’s Episcopal Church in New York. Although he faced opposition because he was African-American, Burleigh won the position and held the post for over fifty years, missing only one performance during his entire tenure. From then on, Burleigh’s productivity only increased. In 1898, he married poet Louise Alston, and their son, Alston, was born the following year. In that same year, the music publishing company G. Schirmer published his first three songs. In 1900, he became the first African-American to perform as a soloist at Temple Emanu-El, the largest Reform Jewish congregation in New York City, and he held that position for 25 years. In 1911, upon Dvořák’s recommendation, he secured a position as a music editor for Dvořák’s Milan-based publisher, G. Ricordi. Burleigh’s career as a composer and performer grew steadily and he championed the works of other Black composers. As a singer, he was interested in the works of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and assisted with arrangements in bringing the celebrated composer to the United States. In November of 1904, a performance of Coleridge-Taylor’s Hiawatha, at the Convention Hall of Washington D.C., featured Burleigh as soloist. In 1900, Burleigh performed for New York’s Governor Theodore Roosevelt and stayed overnight in the governor’s Albany mansion, following the recital. Burleigh received considerable support from J. Pierpont Morgan, the financier, who was a senior warden at St. George’s Church. It was Morgan who lobbied the congregation to employ Burleigh, and Morgan personally arranged for Burleigh to perform in the homes of socially prominent patrons, including in his own annual Christmas Eve celebration at the Morgan mansion. With earnings from performances and publication royalties, the Burleighs traveled to Europe multiple times and visited with his publisher G. Ricordi at his home in Milan. Burleigh was one of the founding members of ASCAP (The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), and in 1941, he became the first Black member of the ASCAP Board of Directors. Burleigh was a mentor to countless other Black musicians and composers, including Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, Margaret Bonds and William Grant Still. His colleagues and friends included Will Marion Cook, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and James Weldon Johnson (the composer of Lift Every Voice and Sing). His lifelong championship of Black composers and musicians was recognized with the NAACP’s Spingarn Medal, an honor conferred in 1917.
It is estimated that Burleigh composed between 200 and 300 songs during his lifetime, the bulk of which were not his enduring arrangements of spirituals, but a genre known as art songs, written in a new American tradition that utilized the works of American poets including Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes. Illness in 1946 compelled Burleigh’s retirement, and on September 12, 1949, while in a nursing home in Stamford, Connecticut, Burleigh died of heart failure at the age of 82. His funeral, at St. George’s Episcopal Church (where he had worked for 50 years), was attended by more than 2,000 people. His pallbearers included jazz legends Eubie Blake and W.C. Handy. According to the Harry T. Burleigh Society, Mr. Burleigh lay many years in an unmarked grave. On May 28, 1994, he was returned to his hometown of Erie, Pennsylvania, 102 years after he left home for New York City.

Burleigh was once asked by a music critic whether he preferred to be known as a singer or as a composer. He responded that he preferred to be known as an arranger of spirituals: “In them my race has pure gold, and they should be taken as the Negro’s contribution to artistic possessions. In them we show a spiritual security as old as the ages.”

Please join the HSO

as we celebrate the music of Florence Price, Antonin Dvořák, and Harry T. Burleigh in our performance, From the New World, January 14 – 16, 2022.
INTERESTED IN HEARING MUSIC BY HARRY T. BURLEIGH?

Listen to 5 selections from Spirituals by H.T. Burleigh, with baritone Dashon Burton and pianist Benjamin Hochman, performed and recorded at the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival in Connecticut:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXVcQQdb0Pw&t=42s

Hear Marian Anderson perform Deep River, arranged by H.T. Burleigh:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwhlaXiXEwQ&t=16s

Enjoy this choral version of Deep River, arranged by H.T. Burleigh and performed by the Ghent University Choir in Ghent, Belgium:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meXQlemLTp0&t=25s

Burleigh’s composition, Lovely, Dark and Lonely One, set to music a poem by Langston Hughes. Enjoy a performance by Dr. Marti Newland:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hv7zLcOJwE&t=3s

A video about H.T. Burleigh, featured as an episode of We, Too, Sing America, focuses on Burleigh’s position as a foremost composer of American art songs:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjZWUIRrs2o

Enjoy this video about H.T. Burleigh’s legacy, from the Black Excellence Series:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ_3ky8XyMM&t=32s

If you are curious to hear the sound of Harry Burleigh’s voice, here’s a 1919 recording of Burleigh singing Go Down Moses:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7kpcps7Jx0

WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Here’s HSO’S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you’ll hear on our concert stage!

Listen to Price’s electrifying Piano Concert in D minor, performed by Sophia Rahman:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_YDuiDjV4I

Enjoy Dvořák’s Slavonic Dance No. 1, performed by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Seiji Ozawa:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2amTjF_mkM

Thrill to Dvořák’s uplifting Slavonic Dance No. 8, performed by the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Daniel Barenboim:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tijh34AzCow

Watch a stunning performance of the entirety of Dvořák’s Symphony #9:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_tPb4JFgmw
Want the best recordings of the pieces you’ll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Florence Price is hardly a household name, but you will question why you are not more familiar with her name and her music after hearing her *Concerto in One Movement for Piano and Orchestra* with pianist Leslie Dunner and the New Black Repertory Orchestra under the baton of Karen Walwyn (ALBANY).

Dvorak’s *Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”)* is performed magnificently by the great Czech maestro, Rafael Kubelik, and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (DG).

*Letter from Burleigh to Florence Price*
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