

WESTMINSTER COLLEGE OF THE ARTS OF RIDER UNIVERSITY

Westminster Choir College

PRESENTS

Down From the Heavens: Celebrating the Music of R. Nathaniel Dett

Westminster Jubilee Singers

Vinroy D. Brown, Jr., *conductor*

Clipper Erickson, *piano*

Rochelle Ellis, *soprano*

George Johnson III, *tenor*

Zackary Ross, *organ*

Marques L. A. Garrett, *guest lecturer*



Friday, October 11, 2019

7:30 p.m.

Bristol Chapel

Westminster Choir College

Princeton, N.J.

I.

Eight Bible Vignettes (1942 – 43) I. Father Abraham	Clipper Erickson, <i>piano</i>	R. Nathaniel Dett (1882 – 1943)
God Understands (1926)		Dett
Somebody's Knockin' at Your Door (1919)	Rochelle Ellis, <i>soprano</i> Clipper Erickson, <i>piano</i>	Dett
Enchantment (1922) I. Incantation II. Song of the Shrine III. Dance of Desire IV. Beyond the Dream	Clipper Erickson, <i>piano</i>	Dett
In that Morning (1943)		Dett
Ride On, Jesus (1940)	Rochelle Ellis, <i>soprano</i> Clipper Erickson, <i>piano</i>	Dett
"Dance-Juba" from <i>In the Bottoms</i> (1913)		Dett
Variation on The Lord's Prayer	Clipper Erickson, <i>piano</i>	Albert Hay Malotte (1895 – 1964) arr. J. Donald Dumpson

II.

Baptism		Dett
Let Us Cheer the Weary Traveler	Valarie Dzielski, Melissa Redway, <i>soprano</i> Destiny Elazier, <i>alto</i> Roy DeMarco, Christopher Fludd, <i>tenor</i> William Butron, <i>bass</i>	Dett
O Holy Savior	Zackary Ross, <i>organ</i>	Dett
Deep River	Rochelle Ellis, <i>soprano</i>	Dett
Listen to the Lambs	Jocelyn Alam, <i>soprano</i>	Dett

Chariot Jubilee

Dett

George Johnson III, *tenor*
Zackary Ross, *organ*

Program Notes

ROBERT NATHANIEL DETT, one of history's greatest musicians of African descent, was multi-talented — not only a composer, but also a choir leader, pianist, teacher, poet and writer. During his lifetime, he was lauded as the first American composer to fuse Negro folk music with the European art music tradition in a sophisticated way. As a seminal figure in the preservation and study of spirituals — as a writer and choral leader, and as a great teacher and inspirer of African-American musicians in later generations — he is acknowledged to be one of the most important musicians in American history.

Dett's writings include *The Emancipation of Negro Music*, which won an important literary prize at Harvard University in 1920, and *The Album of a Heart*, a volume of poems. He was also deeply attracted to philosophical inquiry and was involved in Rosicrucianism as well as Christianity. His cultural interests were wide: ancient Hebrew legends, African chants and Hindu poets all have a place in his music. Particularly toward the end of his life, Dett's music expresses messages of human oneness, which speak to people now with the same meaning and urgency as they did in his time.

Dett was the first person of African descent to graduate from Oberlin College, with a double degree in piano and composition in 1908. Even after being awarded honorary doctorates in music from Howard University in 1924 and Oberlin in 1926, he chose to enroll at the Eastman School of Music in 1931 to obtain a master's degree.

Dett grew up in Niagara Falls, Ontario, and later on the New York side. He was exposed to the piano at a very young age, and his early musical experiences were mostly with the light salon music of the day — now mostly forgotten — mixed with a scattering of classics. His early compositions are in that style, reflecting the ragtime and dance music popular at the time. After hearing the Kneisel Quartet perform a slow movement by Antonín Dvořák at Oberlin, Dett found his true calling, writing that “Suddenly it seemed I heard again the frail voice of my long departed grandmother calling across the years; and in a rush of emotion which stirred my spirit to its very center, the meaning of the songs which had given her soul such peace was revealed to me.” From then on, Dett composed music that used Negro folk idioms in a new way, striving for the highest goals of musical art. He railed against ragtime-influenced minstrel shows, viewing them as a corruption of Negro folk music and a reinforcing of racial stereotypes. Dvořák's challenge to American composers to use their own folk materials for the basis of musical creation found a wonderful answer in Nathaniel Dett's music.

Besides his solo piano music, Dett's works include many choral pieces in motet form such as *Listen to the Lambs*, *Holy Lord*, *Chariot Jubilee*, a magnificent *Ave Maria* and an oratorio, *Ordering of Moses*.

“Father Abraham” – Movement 1 from *Eight Bible Vignettes* (1942 – 43)

Dett's sixth and final suite may be viewed as a culmination of his style, outlook, philosophy, and indeed, his life. Through its depiction of Biblical episodes and its structure, it expresses a compelling and powerful message about reconciliation and the unity of humanity.

Father Abraham begins with a pianistic transcription of Dett's setting of the spiritual, the melody in octaves punctuated with chords representing "Tell it!" in call and response fashion. "Leoni," (which often appears in Protestant hymnals as "The God of Abraham Praise") then is treated contrapuntally as a reflective contrast.

Enchantment (1922)

Dett's third suite was dedicated to the great Australian pianist, Percy Grainger "in appreciation." This suite has strong roots in 19th century piano music, particularly that of Liszt and Grieg. Ethnic influences are still present, though, notably in the swaying motion of "Song of the Shrine" and the rhythms of "Dance of Desire." This movement is a kind of folk version of the Bacchanale genre of the Romantic period, complete with thematic transformation of themes heard earlier.

The title page of *Enchantment* features a framed picture of a possibly Greek temple and the Egyptian symbol known as the Winged Solar Disk (associated with Ra, the sun deity). Given the Rosicrucians' strong involvement with Egyptology, these symbols — as well as Dett's program and membership in the society — strongly suggest a Rosicrucian connection, probably an initiation. Following are Dett's program and notes:

"What seek you? Say! And what do you expect?"

"I know not what: the Unknown I would have!"

What's known to me is endless; I would go

Beyond the end. The last word still is wanting."

I. INCANTATION

A soul obsessed by a desire for the unattainable, journeying on an endless quest, wanders into a pagan temple, and there yields to an overpowering impulse of the moment to utter an Incantation before the shrine of an unknown goddess.

II. SONG OF THE SHRINE

From somewhere far within the shrine a mysterious voice answers - a

"voice of molten melody

Singing love that may not be."

III. DANCE OF DESIRE

A drum beats, and a gong sounds; strange shapes assemble for a carnival of passion, into whose company and revelry the soul finds itself drawn irresistibly. In the urge of the music the Incantation mingles with the now mocking Song of the Shrine.

After a mad swirl, there is a final crash, at the sound of which the apparitions vanish.

IV. BEYOND THE DREAM

And, as in a vision, the soul sees itself transfigured, appearing unto itself as an ever-shifting shoal of pale, opalescent fire, from which there rises in a visible exhalation, like smoke from smoldering incense, the still unsatisfied longing for the unattainable.

— *Clipper Erickson*

"Dance-Juba" – movement 5 from *In the Bottoms* (1913)

This is probably the most characteristic number of the Suite, as it portrays more of the social life of the people. "Juba" is the stamping on the ground with the foot and following it with two staccato pats of the hands in two-four time. At least one-third of the dancers keep time in this way, while the others dance. Sometimes all will combine together in

order to urge on a solo dancer to more frantic (and at the same time more fantastic) endeavors. The orchestra usually consists of a single “fiddler,” perched high on a box or table; who, forgetful of self in the rather hilarious excitement of the hour, does the impossible in the way of double stopping and bowing.

— R. Nathaniel Dett

R. Nathaniel Dett was not raised in the South, so he never had direct contact with the music of slaves. He felt that the spirituals his grandmother sang to him as a child seemed “strange, weird, and unnatural.” It was not until he was a student at Oberlin Conservatory, where he was exposed to folk song-infused music by Antonin Dvořák and several Russian composers, that he realized the potential of Negro music.

Following in the footsteps of black composers Harry Thacker Burleigh and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Dett went on to compose several solo vocal songs, based on Negro melodies, with both sacred and secular texts. Despite some ridicule from African Americans and others who wanted to shed the specter of slavery, Dett wanted to preserve the folk music and blend it with European styles. He wrote: “... if a form of song were evolved which contained all the acceptable characteristics of Negro folk music and yet would compare favorably in poetic sentiment and musical expression with the best class of church music...it would save to the Negro and his music all the peculiar and precious idioms, and as a work of art would summon to its interpretation the best of his intellectual and emotional efforts.”

— Rochelle Ellis

About the Artists

VINROY D. BROWN, JR. is a member of the conducting, organ and sacred music faculty at Westminster Choir College, where he conducts the Westminster Jubilee Singers. A church musician, he is director of music & worship arts at Elmwood United Presbyterian Church. Maintaining an active conducting schedule, he is founder and artistic director of Elmwood Concert Singers and is artistic director and conductor of the Capital Singers of Trenton.

During the 2019-2020 season, he will conduct Margaret Bonds’ *Ballad of the Brown King*, spirituals and hymn arrangements in concerts across the tri-state area with the Elmwood Concert Singers and Vivaldi’s *Gloria* and Robert Ray’s *Gospel Mass* with the Capital Singers of Trenton. He will conduct the Westminster Jubilee Singers in commemorating the ensemble’s 25th anniversary with performances of Adolphus Hailstork’s *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, R. Nathaniel Dett’s *Chariot Jubilee* and a world premiere. As a clinician, he will also headline the Voices United Choir Festival for the New Jersey chapter of the American Choral Directors Association and the Harlem Classical Music Festival in New York.

Professor Brown holds membership in the National Association for Music Education, American Choral Directors Association,

National Collegiate Choral Organization and the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc., for which he is Eastern Region Executive Director. He holds the Master of Arts in Practical Theology degree from Regent University, and Bachelor of Music degrees in Sacred Music and Music Education from Westminster Choir College.

DR. ROCHELLE ELLIS is a performer, teacher and conductor. She holds positions as adjunct associate professor of voice at Westminster Choir College of Rider University and lecturer of voice at Princeton University. She has sung extensively in the U.S. and internationally in both concert and opera. She made her New York City Opera debut in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, and her Carnegie Hall debut in Bach’s *Cantata 140* under the baton of the late Joseph Flummerfelt. In December, she will be appearing with the Cambridge, Mass., Community Chorus in Duke Ellington’s *Sacred Service*.

Active in community outreach through music, Dr. Ellis teaches in the summer Westminster Conservatory High School Vocal Institute and in the Solo Vocal Artist Camp. Dr. Ellis has served as teaching artist for The Princeton Festival Guild and has served as music director and solo/small ensemble director for the Trenton Children’s Chorus.

The St. Louis native received her Doctor of Musical Arts in Voice from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. She received her Master of Music Education from Westminster Choir College of Rider University and a Bachelor of Music Education from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music.

CLIPPER ERICKSON made his debut as a soloist with the Young Musicians Foundation Orchestra at age 19 in Los Angeles. After his studies at The Juilliard School, Yale University and Indiana University with the renowned British pianist John Ogdon, his interpretations began earning prizes at international competitions including the Busoni, William Kapell and the American Pianists Association. He has performed as a soloist with orchestras and in recitals in some of the most famous concert venues in the world, including the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall.

In January 2016, *Gramophone UK* recognized Erickson's disc of the complete piano music of African descent composer R. Nathaniel Dett, released in 2015 on the Navona label, as an editor's choice, writing "this historically and musically important release not only fills a crucial catalogue gap but sets reference standards. No serious aficionado of the history of American piano music can afford to miss it." This CD is the latest in a long series of interpretations of American music from past and present to receive considerable critical acclaim. His powerful renditions of the great classical repertoire have been described as "colorful," "powerful" and "exciting." Typical is the *Washington Post*, "Like a true heroic pianist, Erickson approached Liszt with power, precision and Romantic abandon ... A take-no-prisoners rendition."

Erickson is active in premiering new piano works written for him; his most recent project is the premiering and recording of new works by Laurie Altman, including the immense and colorful *Sonata 7, Tanzania*, soon to be released on the NEOS label of Munich.

Through his work as a roster member of Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour and earlier in the Xerox Pianist Program of Affiliate Artists, he has performed for all types of community groups, always engaging audiences with illuminating commentary on his program repertoire. An important part of his mission is encouraging the love of music through commitment to education, performances in schools, master classes and the inspiration of future generations of musicians. He currently teaches at Westminster Conservatory in Princeton and Temple University in Philadelphia.

A Virginia native, **MARQUES L. A. GARRETT** is an assistant professor of music in choral activities at the University of

Nebraska-Lincoln in the Glenn Korff School of Music. He earned his doctorate in music education (choral conducting) at Florida State University.

An active conductor, Dr. Garrett has served as a guest conductor or clinician with several church, community and collegiate choirs throughout the country, and he served as the festival conductor for the Harry T. Burleigh Spirituals Festival at Tennessee State University.

A versatile voice that performs both as a baritone and countertenor, Dr. Garrett has sung with several community, church and university groups as both a chorister and soloist. He was the baritone soloist for the Germantown Concert Chorus' performance of Haydn's *Missa in Augustiis* and the countertenor soloist in the European premiere of Dan Forrest's *Jubilate Deo* in the Limerick, Ireland.

Dr. Garrett is an avid composer of choral and solo-vocal music whose compositions have been performed to acclaim by high school all-state, collegiate and professional choirs including the Santa Fe Desert Chorale and Seraphic Fire. GIA Publications, Walton Music, Santa Barbara Music Publishing and others have published several of his compositions.

GEORGE JOHNSON, III, is a native of Hampton, Virginia. He performed his debut role as Kenneth Gibson in Trilogly: An Opera Company's production of *The Three Mayors* and has since appeared in several choral and operatic performances throughout the east coast. As a member of Trilogly, Mr. Johnson has performed the roles of Kenyan Man in Trent Johnson's *Kenyatta* and Andy in Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*. He has also been featured as the tenor soloist in Haydn's *The Passion*. Mr. Johnson is a recent graduate of Westminster Choir College and studied voice with Christopher Arneson.

Following Westminster, Mr. Johnson helped premiere the *Mile Long Opera: A Biography of 7 o'clock*. He sang as a soloist for 3 on Three presents: Black Men who Sing. Mr. Johnson had the honor of singing in master classes for Frank Daykin, Fauré Song, and George Shirley, African American Art Song. He also was privileged to sing for New York Fashion Week within Pyer Moss' Choir "America, also. Sister." Collection.

Composed of students selected by audition, the **WESTMINSTER JUBILEE SINGERS** is modeled after the historically acclaimed Fisk Jubilee Singers. Its repertoire, while specialized and select, is very diverse and focuses on solo and ensemble artistic expressions from its singers. Part of Westminster Choir College's Sacred Music Department, the ensemble performs literature that includes African-American spirituals and folk songs; classical music by African-American composers; gospel music and secular songs by musical greats such as William Dawson, Duke Ellington, Walter Hawkins, Andraé Crouch, Richard Smallwood, Kirk Franklin and

Dr. Nathan Carter, as well as Westminster graduates, Rosephanye Powell, Donald Dillard and M. Roger Holland. Also explored and performed are works by non-African-American composers, including George Gershwin, Alice Parker, Robert Shaw, Robert Page, Gail Poch, Steve Pilkington and others who have composed and/or arranged music of the African-American experience.

In addition to its rich repertoire of African-American spirituals, hymn arrangements and gospel songs, the Westminster Jubilee Singers has performed classical works, such as *And They Lynched Him On a Tree* by William Grant Still and *Shout for Joy* and *I Will Lift Up My Eyes* by Adolphus Hailstork. Highlights of recent seasons include the performance Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concerts* and R. Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses*. The ensemble's 2019 – 2020 season began with summer performances by Jubilee Singers' members at the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM) National Conference in Chicago. Additionally, the entire ensemble will present several campus concerts, including a performance honoring R. Nathaniel Dett, participation in the Voices United Choir Festival hosted by the New Jersey Chapter of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA),

a collaboration with the Trenton Children's Chorus and a concert celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Westminster Jubilee Singers.

Previous seasons have included appearances at the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) in Kansas City and Regional Conference in Baltimore; the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) Eastern Regional Convention in Boston; a performance with Denyce Graves at New York's Apollo Theater to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Children's Defense Fund; a joint concert titled Living the Dream with Penn State University's Essence of Joy ensemble as a tribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and its Lincoln Center debut performing in An Evening of Choral Artistry presented by the American Choral Directors Association. The ensemble has performed at Carnegie Hall with the New York Pops Orchestra, under the baton of Skitch Henderson, in a concert version of *Porgy and Bess*. At the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, Westminster Jubilee Singers has presented joint concerts with the Fisk University Jubilee Singers and the legendary Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Westminster Jubilee Singers

Vinroy D. Brown, Jr., conductor

Max Brey, assistant conductor

Zack Ross, accompanist

SOPRANO

Jocelyn Alam, *Mendham, NJ*
Morgan Cerbone, *Sayreville, NJ*
Chloe Crosby, *Bridgewater, NJ*

Valerie Dzielski, *State College, PA*
Julianne Fournier, *North Attleboro, MA*
Colleen Gilgan, *Sayreville, NJ*

Christina Griffin, *Derwood, MD*
Paige Pendleton, *Pennsville, NJ**
Melissa Redway, *Coconut Creek, FL**

ALTO

Azhaneet Blackwell, *Trenton, NJ*
Laura Delgado, *Santo Domingo, DR**
Destiny Elazier, *Carmichael, CA*

Sarah Engel, *Rochester, NY*
Leah Kun, *Easton, PA**
Lydia Reifsnnyder, *Mount Desert, ME*

Victoria Stanley, *Havre de Grace*
Hannah Steele, *Schnecksville*
Caroline Voyack, *Moorestown, NJ*

TENOR

Jordan Allen, *Plainsboro, NJ*
Devon Barnes, *Camden, NJ**
Roy DeMarco, *Woodbridge, NJ**

Christopher Fludd, *Freeport, NY*
Charles Ibsen, *San Jose, CA*
Nathan Lazurus, *Saratoga, NY*

Jorddy Romero, *Newark, NJ*

BASS

Max Brey, *Tallahassee, FL*
William Butron, *New York, NY*

John Lucado, *Frederick, MD**

Jonathon Mount, *Perth Amboy, NJ*

** Indicates section leader
Roster approved 9/18/19*

Rider University's **WESTMINSTER COLLEGE OF THE ARTS** inspires and empowers innovative artists and leaders to transform their communities through the arts. With world-class programs in art, dance, music, music theatre and theatre, and based in Princeton and Lawrenceville, New Jersey, the College consists of three divisions: **Westminster Choir College**, **The School of Fine and Performing Arts**, and **Westminster Conservatory of Music**, a music school

for pre-college students. **RIDER UNIVERSITY** is a private co-educational, student-centered university that emphasizes purposeful connections between academic study and real world learning experience. Rider prepares graduates to thrive professionally, to be lifelong independent learners, and to be responsible citizens who embrace diversity, support the common good and contribute meaningfully to the changing world in which they live and work.

THE WESTMINSTER FUND



THE WESTMINSTER FUND directly supports the College's most critical needs and touches every area of College life. It benefits the Westminster community by providing scholarships, campus enhancements and additional support for new academic programs. The Westminster Fund also underwrites travel expenses for recording sessions, tours and concert run-outs.

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