

Composer's Notes: Why Use Dialect?

Many of the sounds found in English were foreign to the tongues of slaves who were forcefully brought to the New World from many different parts of Western Africa. For example, the 'th' sound did not occur in their languages so it got replaced with 'd.' As a result "this" became "dis," "them" became "dem," and so on. Southern Whites also influenced the speech of slaves as evidenced in their use of the slang word "ain't" and their dropping of the 'ng' sound at the end of many words, such as "mornin'." Of course, the magnitude of this subject is beyond the scope of these notes, but I offer this bit of information as a jumping off place to make the case that the use of dialect in the singing of spirituals is warranted.

Just as we seek to create a "historically informed" performance of a Mozart Mass by singing in Austro-German Latin, we do the same by employing slave dialect when singing African-American slave spirituals. Understanding the use of dialect from this perspective allows us to embrace it as a way to honor the culture and the people from whom these amazing songs were born.

Of course, unlike Austro-German Latin, the "rules" of dialect are not rigid and often vary from conductor to conductor. Therefore, for the most part I have not printed the words in dialect, leaving it to each conductor to introduce it based on his/her own preferences. However, for those who are not completely comfortable with using dialect in the singing of spirituals, I have provided some guidelines below. Using these guidelines will, by no means, create an "authentic" performance (an impossibility), but it *will* bring the music to life in a way that isn't otherwise possible and honor the countless souls who so profoundly expressed their desire for freedom, their misery in bondage, and their hope in God through song.

Guidelines for the Use of Dialect

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Note: I have used IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols which appear in brackets followed by corresponding key words to represent a few vowel sounds, but only as needed for absolute clarity.

[u] in "to" and "you" becomes [ʊ]

The [u] vowel sound in the words "to," and "you" should be replaced with the [ʊ] vowel sound in "foot" or "put." In effect, I am asking that you sing a schwa [ə] since these words are unaccented, but it is best to use the [ʊ] (foot) vowel sound as your guide, since it aids in keeping the sound *forward*. Example: "...car-ry y[ʊ] t[ʊ] free-dom" (pg. 46, meas. 18).

th

Replace 'th' with 'd.'

- this = dis; that = dat; with = wid; the = duh (but use "dee" when "the" precedes a word that starts with a vowel. Example: the old = dee ol')
- Make sure** that the initial 'd' (dis, dat, etc.) is not overly articulated.

t and d

When appearing in the medial or final position, the unvoiced consonant 't' and its voiced equivalent 'd' are often stopped (or simply omitted), and sometimes 't' is sung as a soft 'd.' Specifically:

- In the final position the 't' is stopped. (spiri~~t~~, Egyp~~t~~, trumpe~~t~~, ain'~~t~~, go~~t~~)
- In the medial position, the 't' becomes a 'd.' (water = wah-də; better = beh-də)
- Like the 't,' the 'd' is stopped when in the final position. (gour~~d~~, Lor~~d~~, Gilea~~d~~)
- However, in the final position, the 'd' is sometimes omitted. (world = worl'; old = ol'; land = lan')

Rule of thumb: When 't' or 'd' is found in the medial or final position, simply ensure that the 't' is *never* aspirated and that 'd' is *never* voiced and the rest will likely fall into place.

Final r

When in the final position, replace 'r' with a schwa [ə].

- more = moh-ə; here = hee-ə; poor = poh-ə

er

Similarly, replace the 'er' sound with a schwa [ə].

- ever = eh-və; better = beh-də

Three Diphthongs: ah-ee; oh-u; ey-ee

In the above diphthongs it's best to minimize or omit the second vowel (the "vanish").

- ah-ee: my = mah, not mah-ee
- oh-u: no = noh, not noh-u
- ey-ee: day = dey, not dey-ee

Including a little of the "vanish" is okay, but at the very least, keep it to a minimum.

ee in the unstressed position

When in an unstressed position, the 'ee' vowel should lean towards the more open 'ih' sound.

- carry = keh-rih; ready = reh-dih; morning = mornin'

Note: In the score, all of the 'ing' endings have been changed to 'in.'

v

Often it is suggested that 'v' should be replaced with 'b.' This can be ignored if desired as it has its challenges. However, if this guide is applied only when the 'v' appears in the final position it works well. Of course, the 'b' is stopped and not voiced.

- of = ob; have = hab

Dialect Conclusion

These guidelines are by no means exhaustive, but they cover the most important considerations in the use of dialect. Even at that, however, just reading these guidelines can cause one who is not well-versed in the subject to feel overwhelmed; but, I can assure you that it will come quickly if you use your musical instincts to develop an ear for dialect rather than approaching it as a set of inflexible rules.

It is a useful exercise to sing several different phrases using crisp, clear "proper English diction" and then sing those same phrases using dialect, always taking care not to accent unaccented words or syllables. Through this process it will become obvious that a phrase sung in dialect such as "Soon ah will be done awid duh troubles ob duh worl'" expresses a deep, personal yearning to escape the heavy burden of slavery in a way that "proper diction" could never hope to express.