The Aim Was Song

* Program Notes *

*Signifying Monkey*

“Signifying” is a verbal strategy used against a more powerful foe. The signifier can insult his enemy with impunity by attributing the insults to another party.

*The Strenuous Life*

Joplin’s “Strenuous Life is an homage to President Theodore Roosevelt, though his name does not appear in the score. In 1901 there was no need for it to. “The Strenuous Life” was a famous speech Roosevelt delivered to the Hamilton Club of Chicago on April 10, 1899, the same year that saw the publication of Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag,” the piece that launched his career. Soon after he assumed the Presidency following the assassination of William McKinley, Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House. For this he was much celebrated by African Americans and more progressive Republicans, even as he was vilified by racists in the North as well as the South.

*Heliotrope Bouquet*

For this collaboration, Chauvin composed the first two sections and Joplin the second two. Joplin’s bridge to his own music is sensitive both to Chauvin’s style as well as his own. Louis Chauvin was widely expected to be one of the leading composers of the Ragtime era, but died at the age of 25 from drug addiction. “Heliotrope” is his sole surviving composition.

*Shine. A Toast*

A Toast is a bawdy African-American folk narrative in rhyming couplets focusing on super heroes such as Shine, or trickster figures like the Signifying Monkey

*When Malindy Sings*

This particular combination was much loved by Prof. Jack Harvey, Tatum’s uncle and a long-time professional friend of Bill Cook’s. He can be seen in the video rising to shake hands with both Cook and Tatum at the end of this duet. They would later perform this same duet in honor of Jack Harvey’s memory at his funeral in 1995.

*Sponge*

“To sponge” is New Orleans street slang: to pimp, to pick up tricks.
*The Cascades*

“The Cascades” is Scott Joplin’s Water Music, a virtuoso work composed in the same spirit (but not with as many notes) of Liszt’s “Fountains at the Villa D’Este” and Ravel’s “Jeux d’eaux.” The inspiration was the Cascade Gardens, a watercourse of fountains, lagoons, and other aquatic displays that was one of the central attractions of the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904.

*SOLACE. A Mexican Serenade*

This slow tango is an homage to the Cuban composer Ignacio Cervantes (1847-1905), beautifully capturing his characteristic melancholy and lyricism.

**Still More Commentary If You Feel Like Reading It**

“The Aim Was Song” was a program at Weatherford, Texas, revised for and in honor of the 125th anniversary of the founding of Weatherford College in 1869. This is a version of a collaboration that began in 1974, and as noted earlier, is the only record of many performances.

There is a long tradition of reading poetry to music. It was especially popular in 19th century Europe, with something like an apotheosis of the form reached in Richard Strauss’s 1898 setting of Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden: A Melodrama for Actor and Piano.” (Cook and Tatum would in fact perform Strauss’s work for a Vaughn Recital in the Dartmouth Music Department in 1996.) Beat poets reciting to a jazz background was commonplace in the 1950s, and the “rap” singers of today carry the combination one step further still. Their inspiration comes not from Western Europe, however, but the enduring folkways of West Africa. The Broadway rap musical “Hamilton” is at present (December 2015) an outstanding example of what can be done with this form.

Our aim then was to challenge the prim, silent printed text and the departmental divisions that separate art and humanity from one another: to rejoin music and poetry (here conceived in a sense wide enough to include the ferocious rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt), to show not simply the interplay of word and note, but their interdependence. The meters of the poet and the rhythms of the composer share more than a common beat; they are intertwined at the deepest spiritual level. Just as the words of a poet like Dunbar create a music in our ears, his contemporary Joplin could compose and emotional world that is as immediate and compelling as a poem.

Nor are these lyrics and music merely complementary. For all their existence—certainly for the times during which these poems and music were created—African American artists worked surrounded by a white world with which their relationship was at best ironic. They could be direct about the world that surrounded them, as a number of this program’s works show. But they also excelled in ironies and put-downs so subtle that many white audiences that first heard or read them sometimes didn’t catch on to what was going on. Many guardians of culture sensed something subversive and disposed of whatever the
challenge might be there by refusing to take artists like Joplin or Dunbar seriously.

Scott Joplin’s music was always the center of our collaboration as it evolved over the years. We noted then how historians and critics were forever insisting that every work of art has its historical context and that nothing can be fully understood unless it is set in its proper social and historical context. We didn’t challenge that often tedious refrain in modern academic life. At the same time, poets like Whitman, Dunbar and Brooks and composers like Joplin were as much apart from their times as part of them. Joplin himself well knew the realities of an artist’s life. He had to struggle to make his way in the world from his birth in Linden, Texas in 1868 until his death in New York in 1917. Like Walt Whitman and other geniuses he predicted that it might be as much as a hundred years before people would understand what he was trying to do. Happily he proved to be too pessimistic about the future of his work.

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William W. Cook retired in 2006 as the Israel Evans Professor of Oratory and Belles Letters at Dartmouth College, where he served as the chair of the Departments of English and African and African American Studies. He won Dartmouth’s Distinguished Teaching Award (1988), with many other honors and elected offices in the National Council of Teachers of English and the Modern Language Association. He was also an active administrator and teacher in the National Humanities Faculty and taught high school teachers in the Faculty’s programs in Arkansas and Mississippi. The Valedictorian of his graduating class at Trenton State College (today, the College of New Jersey), Cook attained national recognition and honors for his brilliant teaching at Princeton High School in Princeton, New Jersey. It was that work which brought him to the attention of Dartmouth, where he was recruited first as a visitor, and soon thereafter as a tenure-track professor, where he proved to be if anything even more distinguished. He was awarded tenure in 1977, and many other awards would follow. He was also on the Member Advisory Board of the National Civil Rights Museum in Washington, D. C. A veteran speaker and presider throughout the nation, one of the great teachers in Dartmouth’s history, he also somehow found the time to publish two books of poetry: *Hudson Hornet* (1989) and *Spiritual* (1999).

As the parent and alumni newsletter *Dartmouth Life* wrote of him upon his retirement in 2006, “Bill Cook’s impact on education hasn’t been limited to the Dartmouth campus. The impact of his work has been felt far from Hanover through his long-standing commitments to scholarship and theater. The two things he is most proud of, he says, are his contributions to “The Four C’s” (the College Conference on Communication and Composition) of which he was chair in 1992, and his role in founding the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) in the wake of the National Black Theatre Summit at Golden Pond held at Dartmouth in 1998.”
Bill Cook was also a close friend of the playwright August Wilson (1945-2005) and was instrumental in bringing him to Dartmouth for productions of his plays and to a residency in Hanover as a Montgomery Fellow. Following the 1998 summit at Dartmouth they both played a major role in establishing the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) mentioned in Dartmouth Life’s article.

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James Tatum can be scrutinized by looking around the website in which this recorded performance and program notes appear. Enough already.