

An oratorio based on the writings of William Still, conductor for the Underground Railroad.

Commissioned and premiered by the Oratorio Society of New York Orchestra and Chorus through the generous support of Joanne Abell Spellun.

[1] WRITE

William Still, Soloists, Chorus

SOPRANO

Sarah Grace...
A slave all her days...
Separated from her family...
Ellen Craft...
Sold three times.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

[Overlapping with above.]
Clarissa Davis...
Born in Martinsburg...
A slave all of her life...
A slave all of her days.

TENOR

[Overlapping with above.]
Wesley Harris...
Talbot Johnson...
Fled from Richmond...
On horseback all night.

BARITONE

[Overlapping with above.]
Barnaby Grigby...
Isaac Jackson...
Fled from Charleston...
Samuel Green.

WILLIAM STILL

[Spoken.]
"The Underground Railroad.
A record of facts,
Authentic narrative, letters, et cetera,
Narrating the hardships,
Hairbreadth escapes,
And death-struggles,
Of the slaves in their efforts of freedom,
As related by themselves and others,
Or witnessed by the author;
Together with sketches of
Some of the largest stock-holders
And most liberal aiders and
Advisors of the road,
By William Still."

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Escaped on the roof of a train...
Cordelia Loney...
Emiline Chapman...
Charlotte Giles.

TENOR

[Overlapping with above.]
Wesley Harris...
On horseback all night...
On foot...
On a steamer...
Talbot Johnson...
A slave all of his life...
John Henry Pettifoot.

SOPRANO

[Overlapping with above.]
Separated from her family...
Henry Brown...
Owner had five-hundred slaves...
Edmundson Turner.

BARITONE

[Overlapping with above.]
Isaac Jackson...
Fled from Charleston...
Fled from Atlanta...
Hid in a cave for one year.

WILLIAM STILL

Write it down.
Write it.
Write.
Record.
Recount.
Chronicle.
Write.
Write it down,
Every word.
Every word they say,
Every detail.
Every sentence,
Every phrase,
Every syllable.
Write it down.
Write it.
Write.

WILLIAM STILL

Set it to paper.
Preserve every story, every fact,
Every event.
Preserve, collect,
Compile every testimony.

SOPRANO

Clarissa Davis...
Harriet Eglan...
Ellen Craft...
Mary Epps...
Our struggles,

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Cordelia Loney...
Sarah Grace...
Our struggles...

TENOR

Isaac Jackson...
Sam Green...
Robert Carr...
Our stories,

BARITONE

Emiline Chapman...
Charlotte Giles...
Our testimony...
Our testimony...

SOLOISTS

Our sacrifices.

WILLIAM STILL

From cities and plantations,
Rice swamps and cotton fields,
Kitchens and mechanic shops,
From cruel masters, and kind masters,
They arrived.
By steamer, by skiff,
By train, on foot,
Shipped in a crate...
They arrived.

CHORUS + SOLOISTS

Our testimony.
Our stories cannot be forgotten.
Our testimony,
Our stories will be repeated,
Over and over.
Our testimony will never be forgotten.
Our struggles,
Our triumphs,
Our sacrifices,
Will be remembered,
Remembered.

BARITONE SOLO + BARITONE CHORUS

Our testimony,
Our stories cannot be forgotten.
Our testimony,
Our stories will be repeated,
Over and over.
Our testimony will never be forgotten.
Write it down.
Every word they say,
Every word,
Every detail will be remembered.
Remembered.

WILLIAM STILL

Their testimony will never be forgotten.
Write it,
Write,
Write,
Write it down.
Every word they say,
Every word, every detail.
Dip the quill in the well.
Draw, draw from it deeply,
Deeply, and write.
Write it down.
Write it,
Write.
Record.
Recount.
Chronicle.
Write,
Write it,
Write,
Write.

[2] QUIETLY

Soloists

BARITONE

Spoken in a whisper,
Spoken in a whisper,

Quietly, quietly,
Just a rumor,
Too good to be true,
Free.

TENOR

Spoken, spoken in a whisper
Spoken in a whisper,
Never too loud,
Just a rumor,
Too good to be true,
Too good to be true,
Free.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Spoken, spoken,
Spoken in a whisper,
Too good to be true,
Free.

BARITONE + TENOR

Hard to believe,
Not a hope in Heaven,
But there it is,
Even just a chance,
They must never know.

MEZZO-SOPRANO + SOPRANO

Quietly, quietly.
They must never hear.

SOLOISTS

One little word,
One sweet little word,
Free.

MEZZO-SOPRANO + SOPRANO

Free,
To be your own person,
To have your own life,

TENOR + BARITONE

To raise your own family,
Free to have your own life,

SOLOISTS

Your own soul.
May not be tomorrow,
May take us a while.
Imagine it,
Pray for it,
Find a way,
Make it come to be,
Quietly,
Quietly,
Free.

[3] REWARD!

Chorus, Soloists

CHORUS

Reward will be paid!
Runaway slave!
Age...
Appearance...
Countenance...
Demeanor...
Last seen...

Reward will be paid!
Runaway, runaway slave!

BARITONE + TENOR CHORUS

Reward.

CHORUS

\$100...
\$2000...
\$400...
\$1600...

SOPRANO + ALTO CHORUS

Will be paid.

BASS + TENOR CHORUS

For the apprehension...

BARITONE CHORUS

For the safe return...

CHORUS

For the arrest and confinement...
Of a runaway slave.

BARITONE

Talbot Johnson...
Edward Morgan...
Mary Epps...

BARITONE

Josiah Jackson...
Robert Carr...
Wesley Harris...
Sam Green...

TENOR

Emiline Chapman...
Sarah Grace...
Clarissa Davis...

TENOR

John Henry Proudfoot...
Saj Tracey...

ALTO

Sarah Grace...
Clarissa Davis...

ALTO

Cordelia Loney...
Barnaby Grigby...

CHORUS

AGE:

CHORUS

Twenty-nine...
Forty years of age...
Thirty-four years old...
Thirty-six...
Fifty-nine years old...
Between nineteen and twenty-two...
Older than he looks...
Sixty-four...
They both are twenty-five...
Forty-seven years old...
Younger than her years...

On the verge of womanhood...
Lies about his age.

CHORUS

APPEARANCE:

CHORUS

Five feet seven inches...
A little over five feet...
High cheekbones...
A little bowlegged...
Broad across the shoulders...
Round featured...
Stoops while walking...
Face rough...
A scar above his eye...
Small mustache and beard...
Thickset and stout made.

CHORUS

DEMEANOR:

BARITONE + TENOR CHORUS

Arrogant eyes...

SOPRANO + ALTO CHORUS

A happy countenance...

CHORUS

Can read and write well...
Plays on the violin...
A confident manner...
Quick-spoken...
Laughs a good deal...
Of awkward manners...
Stammers some.
Reward will be paid!
LAST SEEN:
On their way up north...

SOLOISTS

New York...
Boston...
A free state...
Philadelphia...

CHORUS

Philadelphia.

[4] THE SAME TRAIN (ELLEN CRAFT)

Mezzo-soprano solo

MEZZO-SOPRANO

He doesn't know.
He doesn't know.
He shuffles into the train,
Huffs a "hello,"
And sits across from me,
Right across from me.
My master's brother.
I'm done for.
I'm finished.
He sees through my disguise!
Knows I'm a slave.
Throws me in jail,
Has me whipped,
Shot,
Worse.

But... but he doesn't know.
 He does not know.
 Last night I served him leg of mutton,
 Sweet potatoes,
 Blueberry pie.
 Poured his wine,
 Cleared his plates,
 Twice folded his napkin.
 Everything but chew his food for him.
 Last night I was a slave:
 Young, female, black.
 Today I'm a gentleman:
 Old, feeble, and white,
 At death's door,
[Coughs theatrically.]
 On my way to see my "doctor" in Philadelphia,
 Dressed up in a fine suit,
 Tinted glasses,
 A little powder to lighten my skin,
 My head bandaged up.
 I pretend not to hear
 If someone speaks to me.
 But no one does.

No one knows.
 Not a soul.
 They see me as a sick, white gentleman,
 A sick white gentleman,
 Who has his own valet –
 A black man who sits with the other slaves,
 In the other car.
 But he's not my valet.
 That man is not my valet.
 He's the man I will marry,
 The man I will marry in Philadelphia.
 He's in a different car.
 But we're on the same train,
 Humming along like a hymn,
 All the way to Philadelphia,
 To Philadelphia.

[5] INTERVIEW I*William Still, Baritone solo***WILLIAM STILL**

How old are you?

BARITONE

Thirty-two years old, first day of June.

WILLIAM STILL

Were you born a slave?

BARITONE

Yes.

WILLIAM STILL

How have you been treated?

BARITONE

Badly all the time.

[6] RUN I (WESLEY HARRIS)*Tenor solo***TENOR**

Run, run,
 Run through the woods,
 Along the creek,

Past the marsh,
 Up the ridge,
 Down the hill.
 Avoid the trail,
 Avoid the road,
 Avoid the port,
 Anywhere they wait,
 Anywhere they wait,
 To stop you.
 Run, run, run...

[7] THIS SIDE UP (HENRY "BOX" BROWN)*Baritone solo***BARITONE**

They can't seem to read.
 They don't seem to know.
 The crate I'm in,
 It says:
 "THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE"
 This side up with care.
 In big, big letters.
 To clarify:
 "This Side Up" is above me,
 Not below.
 Been on a cart,
 On a train,
 On a steamer,
 And on a train again.
 It'll be twenty-six hours since I had myself
 Nailed in a shipping crate.
 It'll be twenty-six hours of being thrown
 This way and that,
 Of not seeing the light of day,
 Of not moving a muscle,
 Of not saying a word,
 Twenty-six hours of breathing through a
 Hole in this box
 No bigger than a button.
 My brain may burst from being
 Upside down.
 And my eyeballs may explode.
 But it's worth every second,
 Every second of those twenty-six hours,
 Even if I'm caught,
 Even if I'm beaten,
 Even if they hang me from a tree,
 For just a chance,
 For the slightest chance,
 The dimmest hope,
 For just a chance,
 The slightest chance,
 The dimmest hope that this crate,
 This crate I mailed myself in arrives,
 Safe and sound in Philadelphia.
 Philadelphia.
 Now if only these fools could READ.

[8] I WAITED*Chorus***CHORUS**

I waited,
 I waited patiently for the Lord,
 And He inclined unto me,
 And heard my calling.

[9] RUN II (WESLEY HARRIS)*Tenor solo***TENOR**

Run,
Go,
Run,
Quicker than the wind,
Quicker than their horses,
Quicker than their whips,
Quicker than their bullets.
Run,
Go,
Run,
Hide under a house,
Hide in a cave,
In a hollow,
Up a tree,
In a barn,
Hide,
Then run,
Run again...

[10] INTERVIEW II*William Still, Soprano solo***WILLIAM STILL**

What do you mean by
Being treated badly?

SOPRANO

Have been whipped and sold three times.

WILLIAM STILL

What was the name of your master?

SOPRANO

Fleming Bibbs.

WILLIAM STILL

Where did he live?

SOPRANO

Caroline County.

[11] AUNT ABIGAIL (HARRIET EGLAN, CHARLOTTE GILES)*Mezzo-soprano solo + Soprano solo***SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO**

Oh, oh, oh,
Poor, poor Aunt Abigail.
Summoned to Heaven
Too, too, too early

SOPRANO/MEZZO-SOPRANO

By gout / By scarlet fever.

SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO

So sudden,
So, so, so sudden,
Too soon, too soon,

SOPRANO

Plucked from our arms.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

By the clutches of death.

SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO

Oh, oh, oh,
Poor Aunt Abigail.
Will our suffering ever,
Ever cease?
So far, so good,
On this train.

SOPRANO

No one wants to question,

SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO

No one wants to trouble,
The black women in black,
Their faces covered in veils.
But we're not in mourning,
We're not in mourning,
And poor Aunt Abigail,
She doesn't exist.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

And if someone looks askance,

SOPRANO

If someone suspects,

SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO

(Like that man,
Walking right toward us...)
Then it's...
"Oh, oh,
Poor, poor Aunt Abigail.
Will our suffering ever cease?
Oh, oh, oh..."

SOPRANO

How many tears?

MEZZO-SOPRANO

How many sobs,

SOPRANO

How many whimpers,

SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO

How many whimpers?
How many "ohs?"
And how many nose-blows,
To Philadelphia?
To Philadelphia...

[12] RUN III (WESLEY HARRIS)*Tenor solo, Chorus***TENOR**

Run, run,
Run through the woods,
Along the creek,
Past the marsh,
Up the ridge,
Down the hill.
Avoid the trail,
Avoid the road,
Avoid the port,
Anywhere they wait,
Anywhere they wait,
To stop you.
Run,

Go,
Run,
Quicker than the wind,
Quicker than their horses,
Quicker than their whips,
Quicker than their bullets.
Run all day, all night.

CHORUS

All day, all night.

TENOR

Was that a voice?

CHORUS

You don't hear it.

TENOR

Was that a face?

CHORUS

You don't see it.

TENOR

Was that a shadow?

TENOR + BARITONE CHORUS

Don't look back.
Don't look around.

CHORUS

Not there.

TENOR

Was that a shot?

CHORUS

You don't hear it?

TENOR

Was that another shot?

CHORUS

You don't hear it.
You don't feel it.

TENOR

There was no shot.
And it's so close,
So close...
So close...
You can wrap your arms around it...

CHORUS

You can taste it.
You're nearly there.

TENOR

So close... nearly there...

[13] INTERVIEW III

William Still, Soloists

WILLIAM STILL

We're giving you some new clothing.
A good meal.
Money, and a ticket away from here.
To New York and then Boston

And then further north.
Talk to no-one.
Don't look around.
Do not look back.
Keep on moving.
Keep on going until you're
Over the border.

SOLOISTS

New clothing.
A good meal.
And a ticket away from here.
Talk to no-one.
Don't look around.
Do not look back.
Keep on moving.
Keep on going.

[14] RAIN (CLARISSA DAVIS)

Soprano solo, Soloists

SOPRANO

Come down, rain.
Come down hard.
Come down fast.
Come down Noah's Ark heavy.
Empty the streets,
Empty the squares of those
Who might want to catch me.
Empty the streets of those
Who might want to stop me,
Who might want to hurt me,
Who might want to kill me.

SOPRANO

Double the darkness of this night,
That I might slip away,
Like a shadow,
And get to the boat
That will take me up North
To liberty,
To my own life.
Come down, rain.
Come down hard.
Come down fast.
Come down Noah's Ark heavy.
And when I'm free,
When I'm free,
I'll dance in that rain that hid me,
That saved me,
That delivered me to freedom.

SOLOISTS

Come down, rain.
Come down hard.
Come down fast.
Come down Noah's Ark heavy.
And when I'm free,
When I'm free
I'll dance in that rain.
I'll dance in that rain,
I'll dance.

SOPRANO

I'll dance.

[15] INTERLUDE: 1861–1865*Chorus***[16] FINALE***William Still, Soloists, Chorus***WILLIAM STILL**

Five years since I hid these records.
 Five years,
 Five terrible years since the start of the war.
 And fearing the outcome,
 Concealed them in a shelf in
 Lebanon Cemetery.
 The war is done.
 The records must be recovered.
 Gently, gently,
 So that they don't fall apart.
 Gently... and pray that no moisture or mice
 Got in to trouble the page,
 To trouble the fate of their testimony.

Survived.

Every page,
 Every record,
 Every handbill,
 Every account,
 Every letter,
 And here,
 The best letters,
 The ones from Canada,
 Sent when they got there.
 Sent when they first knew freedom.
 Sent when they first saw their new flag
 And shook hands with the lion's paw.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Dear Mister Still...
 I take this method of informing you...
 In health and mind...

TENOR

My dear friend Mister Still...
 Excuse me for not writing sooner...
 As I don't write myself...

BARITONE

Dear brother in Christ...
 As I don't write myself...

SOPRANO

Dear Sir...
 That I am well...

SOPRANO + MEZZO-SOPRANO

I arrived safe into Canada...
 I arrived on Friday last...
 And I am happy to tell you I am well...

WILLIAM STILL

Write it.
 Recount every word.
 Record every syllable.

TENOR

Shaking hands with the lion's paw.
 Hear that big cat roar.
 I'm unbound,

Unchained,
 Unshackled.
 A slave no more.

WILLIAM STILL

Every word they say.
 Every detail.
 Every phrase.
 Every syllable.
 Write every story,
 Every detail...

SOLOISTS

[Overlapping.]
 Much pleased with Toronto...
 Made a good start...
 Endeavored to make every day
 Tell for itself...
 I will open a shop for myself...
 I go to work this morning...
 Went right to work at the Willard House...

MEZZO-SOPRANO + SOPRANO

\$16 a month...

SOLOISTS

\$5 a week...
 I shall, with the help of the Lord,
 Go to school...
 I have no master in Canada,
 But I am my own man...
 Learning to read and write...

MEZZO-SOPRANO + SOPRANO

The wedding takes place on Saturday...

SOLOISTS + WILLIAM STILL

Shaking hands with the lion's paw.
 In the nick of time.
 Fin'ly found a place
 Where freedom is not a crime.

SOLOISTS

I wish all in bondage were as
 Well off as I am...
 I must request from you to write
 A few lines to my wife...
 If my brother is well send him on
 For I have a place for him...
 Send me word if any of our friends
 Have been passing through...
 I am grateful for my liberty...
 Obligated to you for all you have done and
 For your kindness...
 When I was in distress and
 Out of doors you took me in...
 I was hungry and you fed me.

SOPRANO + TENOR

For these things God will reward you.

MEZZO-SOPRANO + BARITONE

I hope to meet you all again.

SOPRANO + TENOR

If not on Earth may we so live...

SOLOISTS

That we shall meet in that happy land
Where tears and parting are never known.

CHORUS

Shaking hands,
Shaking hands with the lion's paw.

SOLOISTS + CHORUS

Here I know I'll stay.
The sky,
The land,
The whole world is mine today.

SOLOISTS + WILLIAM STILL

Shout from every roof top,

ALL SOLO + CHORUS

Loud as can be,
Joyfully,
Finally come true...

SOLOISTS + WILLIAM STILL

Free.
Free.
One sweet little word.
Everyone must hear,
Everyone must know.

CHORUS

Thou shalt not deliver
Unto his master the servant
Who has escaped his master
Unto thee.

SOLOISTS, WILLIAM STILL + CHORUS

Shout from every rooftop,
Loud as can be:
Free.

[THE END.]

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