

DEEP RIVER

Traditional Spiritual
arranged by Douglas Mears

Instrumentation

Flute
Oboe
Clarinet in B^b
Bassoon
3 Horns in F
Timpani
Suspended Cymbal
Harp
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Contrabass
Organ (optional)

Notes

Deep River is a classic example of an African American “spiritual” – a significant genre of music born from the “plantation” and “sorrow” songs of the African American slaves in the Deep South in the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s. Like all spirituals, *Deep River* is a song of hope and longing, expressing a desire for peace and freedom both in the present and afterlife. Through these melodies, slaves held on to the hope of survival. The songs were created vocally by groups of slaves working in the fields and gathering at camp meetings, the more popular melodies then being passed from one plantation to the next. Over time, slaves also developed songs that carried coded messages containing escape plans—especially when the Underground Railroad seemed like the only hope for freedom.

Most of the lyrics in the now-documented over 6,000 traditional spirituals echo the Old Testament language. The creators of spirituals quoted the Bible often in the lyrics, perhaps identifying with the Israelites, enslaved and persecuted throughout the Old Testament. The lyrics of this song, “*Deep river....my home is over Jordan Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground,*” imply that the Jordan River in the Bible symbolizes the Ohio River, a dividing line between the slave states and the free states. “Campground” suggests a place for camp meetings, a type of gathering that, even though illegal in some areas, served as a vehicle for slaves to gather and share their sorrows and hopes. These camp meetings were rare occasions during which slaves could feel free for at least a little while singing, playing instruments, and sharing stories. “Campground” also has a second meaning, suggesting that the meeting they sought was in Heaven, the place where they would indeed be set free.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot is also considered a *coded song* and is one of a handful of spirituals that refer directly to the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was neither a railroad nor underground but was instead a loose and mysterious web of people and places serving the common goal of helping those bound by slavery to escape. Those fleeing slavery often moved northward from hiding place to hiding place under cover of darkness and disguise.

Most of the code words in spirituals refer to escape from slavery; slaves used these cryptic words to hide the lyrics’ underlying, secret meaning. Coded songs were a way for slaves to openly share the dream of freedom with one another, drawing inspiration and hope from the texts. Without understanding the code, the lyrics appeared to have very different, non-threatening meanings to the slaveholders. “Swing low,” for example, could be interpreted as “come down from heaven,” or as “come into the slaveholding states.” The “sweet chariot” could be understood to mean a heavenly vehicle or the “Underground Railroad.” And “comin’ for to carry me home” could be construed as “coming to take me to heaven,” or decoded to mean “coming to take me to freedom in the North.”

Both *Deep River* and *Swing Low* were born of suffering, yet these powerful spirituals focus on hope—hope for a better world, where oppression and suffering give way to justice and freedom. In these spirituals, born of the African American experience, this hope is for a heaven beyond this world, where all will be made right. That vision of hope has never failed, though, to stir longings for something better “here and now” as well. This tradition’s music has made and continues to make an indelible impression on the landscape of American (and world) culture—expressing a proud heritage of faithful endurance, offering a testimony of hope to all who suffer, and enlarging many human hearts through its unique poetic power.