



NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONCERTS

HOW AMERICA FOUND ITS
SOUND
SPIRITUALS

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SPIRITUALS

Grades 5 - 8

STANDARDS

5.GM.P1.C, 5.GM.R1.A, 5.GM.R1.B, 6.GM.R1.A, 6.GM.R2.A, 6.GM.Cn2.A, 7.GM.P1.D, 7.GM.R1.C, 7.GM.R2.A, 8.GM.P1.D, 8.GM.R1.C, 8.GM.R2.A

OBJECTIVES

Students will identify the historical purpose of African American spirituals and explain how they communicated messages of hope and hidden meaning.

Students will perform a call-and-response song, demonstrating an understanding of this important musical tradition.

TIME NEEDED

45 – 60 minutes

MATERIALS

- Video: [The Ellison Singers "Travelin' Shoes" \(1964\)](#)
- Video: [Swing Low Sweet Chariot - Fisk Jubilee Singers \(1909\)](#)
- Non-pitched Percussion Instruments (optional)

GENRE OVERVIEW

Spirituals are songs created by enslaved African Americans during the time of slavery in the United States. These songs combined African musical traditions with Christian beliefs to express hope, faith, courage, and the dream of freedom. Many spirituals were passed from person to person by singing instead of being written down. They often included **call-and-response**, **clapping**, and powerful **storytelling**. Some songs even contained **hidden messages** to help people seeking freedom. Spirituals became the foundation of gospel music, inspiring its joyful singing, emotional expression, and messages of faith, perseverance, and community that continue to influence music today.

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PROCEDURES:

Students will participate in a call and response activity with the teacher.

Call and Response Activity

1. Say: Repeat after me.

- (Students repeat teacher's rhythmic patterns, vocal or instrumental)

2. Say: This time in your response you must do something different

- (Students respond to the teacher with something different within the established beat pattern (ex: 4 beat pattern))

3. Say: We just experienced Call and Response, both as an echo (when you repeated me exactly) and also conversationally (when you responded with something different).

- (Extended Game Activity: [Poison Rhythm](#))

4. Say: Now we are going to watch an example of call and response, see if you can figure out who is calling and who is responding.

- Video: [The Ellison Singers "Travelin' Shoes" \(1964\)](#)

5. Discuss: Students identify who performs the Call and who performs the Respond.

6. Say: Another interesting piece of spirituals is that they can carry hidden messages. Can you identify the hidden message in this Spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot?"

- (The message: "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is an African American spiritual that features a dual meaning. While outwardly a religious song about death and salvation, it served as a covert "signal song" for the Underground Railroad, using coded metaphors to signal upcoming escapes to freedom.)
- Video: [Swing Low Sweet Chariot - Fisk Jubilee Singers \(1909\)](#)
- (Fisk University is a private historically black liberal arts college in Nashville, Tennessee. It is the oldest institution for higher education in Nashville. The Fisk Jubilee Singers toured along the Underground Railroad path in the United States, as well as performing in England and Europe.)

7. Discuss: Students respond to the performance by sharing their perspective on the message.

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