

## **On the Value of Quietness: Dr. Paul Kwami Conducting the Fisk Jubilee Singers®**

During rehearsal with the Fisk Jubilee Singers on April 17, 2012, director Dr. Paul Kwami shares correspondence between himself and a woman who attended their recent concert in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He tells the ensemble:

“She said [there was] one thing she couldn’t figure out--because she has a Master’s degree in music, has directed many choirs, has sang in many, many choirs--but wanted to know. [She wanted to know] how we came together, how we started our songs—which is a question we always get, right? She said she knew it was not the pitch pipe, the “pitch pipe guy” [a Fisk Jubilee Singer, in strategic position, who sounds the tonic pitch of the music just before its performance]. It could have been [the pitch pipe guy]. But then she said, ‘Did you have someone sitting in the front row conducting?’ [The Fisk Jubilee Singers chuckle]. So I wrote back to her and told her that that night I was very ill and sat backstage instead of being onstage with you. And if anyone would have sat in front conducting, that would have been me, but I wasn’t there. I wrote back to her saying that we work very hard in rehearsals preparing for concerts so that you are able to sing without me conducting.” (Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 4/17/2012).

This audience member observed a key characteristic about Kwami’s presence during performances by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers since 1994, Kwami is rarely seen conducting the ensemble.<sup>1</sup> I offer here a critical examination of how Kwami’s choral conducting shapes the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performance practice. This investigation exemplifies a mode through which the Fisk Jubilee Singers currently challenge audience expectations for how an ensemble comprised of black college students singing spirituals proceed through an entire concert. Learning how to refute negative stereotypes about people identifying as black is part of a Fisk education and the work of the Jubilee Singers. This

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<sup>1</sup> It is common for other collegiate concert spiritual ensembles to have a conductor in performances, unlike vocal ensembles specializing in Baroque era music, for example. In the *Sacred Journey* documentary, Kwami is seen conducting the Fisk Jubilee Singers during the recording at Elmina Castle. This is an atypical occurrence. Note in the documentary that when the Singers sang at the National Theater in Accra, Ghana, Kwami states: “I stood backstage and just listened to them, enjoyed their music.” (2007 *Sacred Journey* DVD).

process entails making use of a serious, non-violent demeanor often accomplished through a quiet presence that acts as a confirmation that Fisk students know how to conduct themselves.

This analysis is informed by my experience singing with the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 2001 as an exchange student attending Fisk from Oberlin and dissertation fieldwork at Fisk between 2010-2012. While certainly the perspectives of the Jubilee Singers themselves factor into shaping the ensemble's performance practice, along with the perspectives of other members of the Fisk community (students, faculty, administrators, and alumni) as well as the sonic ideal of the ensemble's vocal production, I explore these elements further in my dissertation and focus here only on the component of Kwami's conducting of the 2011-2012 Fisk Jubilee Singers.<sup>2</sup> Before detailing his conducting, I briefly review the background of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their current encounters with ideologies of racial inequality. I then describe how Kwami prioritizes a quiet presence in rehearsal and performance bringing into conversation Kevin Quashie's framework of "the sovereignty of quiet."

### The Fisk Jubilee Singers and Musical Director Dr. Paul T. Kwami

The Fisk Jubilee Singers are the premier choral ensemble at Fisk University, a historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee founded in 1866 by the Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary Association. This select group comprised of sixteen Fisk students sings entire programs of acapella concert spirituals from memory.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My dissertation "Sounding 'Black': An Ethnography of Racialized Voical Practices at Fisk University" is a phenomenological study of racialized vocalicity in the United States, with a focus on blackness. I examine the procedures at play in sounding "black"—the performances of race ideologies through vocal acts, as well as the ethics of listening for race in voices. Focusing on differences between the curricular and non-curricular vocal acts of Fisk students, I examine how education at this university contributes to and complicates the naturalization of race in the US and investigate how race-based vocal genre construction develops an epistemology of sounding "black."

<sup>3</sup> Unlike student governed collegiate acapella vocal ensembles popular on American college campuses, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are an ensemble within the curriculum of Fisk's Music Department.

Renowned for their historic leadership of contertizing Negro spirituals<sup>4</sup> and performing them publically, the original ensemble toured the US and Europe, singing the repertoire with a bel canto vocal aesthetic for Queen Victoria during their first international tour in 1871. Their early tours are significant on two fronts: the student singers' concert profits kept Fisk from closing due to its parlous financial condition, and they pioneered the presentation of non-blackface minstrel black performers on stage. The early Singers' tour successes that "taught the nation and the world an enduring lesson about the dignity and educability of black Americans," shaped the ensemble's goals in subsequent performances which have occurred every academic year since their first tour and inspired other colleges and universities to establish concert spiritual ensembles (Ward 2000: 3).

During Dr. Kwami's leadership, the ensemble has been awarded bountifully, including a 2008 National Medal of the Arts and 2009 and 2003 Grammy nominations for "Best Gospel Performance." They have performed in prestigious venues including The Kennedy Center and Elmina Castle. Kwami was a Jubilee Singer while a student at Fisk, and is a keyboardist and composer of choral and solo voice concert spiritual arrangements. After graduation from the National Academy of Music in Winneba, Ghana, Kwami matriculated to Fisk University, graduating in 1985, and subsequently earning a M.M. and D.M.A. in conducting from Western Michigan University and the American Conservatory of Music respectively. Kwami's conventional training in and mastery of Western choral conducting methods are exercised

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<sup>4</sup> Concert spirituals are an art song genre distinct from the large body of songs emerging from the experiences of enslaved Africans in the U.S. Sometimes referred to as "slave songs," "sorrow songs," "plantation songs," "jubilees," or "gospels," concert spirituals are sung in an operatic style and the texts center on Protestant beliefs and extend to coded communications describing strategies to gain freedom. For more about concert spiritual development, see Sandra Graham, 2001. *The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginning of an American Tradition*. Ph.D. Dissertation. New York University.

extensively during rehearsals with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. His choice not to practice them in performance is at the curx of his value for a quiet presence.

### The Current Fisk Jubilee Singers' Performance Context of Racial Inequality and Racial Representation

As students attending a historically black university singing repertoire of the Christian faith tradition, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are subjected to politics of US racial inequality that renders inferior people identifying as “black” and cultural products identified as “black.” Post-Civil Rights era public imaginations of racial inequality perpetuate in contemporary debates about the relationship between nature and culture, and the arenas of music and the singing voice are no exception (Bohlman and Radano 2001; Bauman and Briggs 2003). Literary scholar Lindon Barrett explains that singers identifying as black who are members of an institution of higher education are especially susceptible to such subjection, as “the academy and the African American singing voice are understood as radically opposed counterparts, one representing the height of reason, and the other its seeming nadir, which is to say, in the tensivity of ludic dissipation”(Barrett 1998: 6). The Fisk Jubilee Singers are historically situated as foundational to the global circulation of African American music as well as the development of African American art music. This historical significance informs how Fisk students construct a habitus of obligatory racial representation of African American bourgeoisie, along with their participation in current US popular culture, especially hip-hop music and fashion.

Regarded as exemplary Fisk students, administration, faculty and upperclassmen encourage the student body to emulate the Fisk Jubilee Singers and demonstrate the merit iconized by the Singers. This standard responds to stereotypes of African American young

adults as “irresponsible” in popular media. Thoughtful of this, Kwami, suspecting that he and the Singers could be perceived as musicians inferior to dominant ideologies of choral excellence, prepares the ensemble to manage audience expectations and educate Fisk students about how to manage negative stereotypical reception in their own lives as individuals. This work places an enormous value on racial representation and, I argue, fortifies the way that quietness operates between Kwami and the Fisk Jubilee Singers as well as between the Jubilee Singers and their public. Kwami explains, “...if we can do musical things, it always makes us different from--, well, it blows people’s socks off when they hear us. It’s simply that. Because, you know, people always think ‘Oh, they’re black and so: [Kwami starts clapping loudly, snapping his fingers and stomping his feet].’ (Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 3/3/2012). Performing musical excellence and vocal virtuosity within the aesthetic realm of western choral singing guides the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ vocal style. Kwami makes this quality of singing a criterion among the Singers in no uncertain terms, the role of quietness at the center of this principle.

### Kwami’s Quietness in Rehearsal and Performance with the Fisk Jubilee Singers

At the beginning of each academic year, Kwami selects Fisk students through an audition process to comprise the year’s ensemble. From year to year, no student is guaranteed an opportunity to be a Fisk Jubilee Singer. Once the Singers are selected, the ensemble rehearses twice a week for an hour and forty minutes. At one of the first rehearsals held for the 2011-2012 ensemble, Kwami enters the room exactly at the traditional 6:00pm rehearsal time. Singers are seated in four rows; the first two rows are filled with female Singers and the back two rows are filled with male Singers. Kwami walks to the piano in the front of the room and proceeds to arrange a collection of sheet music he carries with him. The students wait in silence for an

indication from Kwami about what to do. A full *two minutes and thirty seconds* pass before Kwami looks at or speaks a word to the students. One of the male Singers, a junior Music major at Fisk and seasoned Jubilee Singer, nervously attempts to release the increasing tension in the room, asking: “Is everyone alright?” No one responds. More time passes and he whispers to me (and the recording video camera): “This is the intimidating part”(Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 9/22/2011).

The Singer’s disclaimer marks Kwami’s quietness in this rehearsal as routine and intimidating. Kwami’s tendency to have the Singers endure his protracted non-vocal presence at the beginning of rehearsal diminishes as the academic year progresses. However, with a new ensemble, this practice establishes an important facet of Kwami’s direction by utilizing a quiet presence. This Singer’s reaction to Kwami in rehearsal that day emphasizes a crucial aspect of what the Singers learn from Kwami’s repetition of a quiet presence during rehearsal. Over the course of an academic year, Kwami spends hours with the Singers in rehearsal without speaking or singing, where the only audible sounds are ambient. Arguably the most privileged act in Fisk Jubilee Singer rehearsals is not vocalizing, but the embrace of quietness.

Kwami’s extended moments of quiet presence develops the Singers’ intradirection, a way of conducting that provides the Singers with principal elements of Western choral conducting (maintaining a desired tempo, balance among vocal parts, and a cohesive beginning and ending). In addition to memorizing music from scores, stating the musical standards, and shaping vocal quality, the way in which Kwami leads the time spent together building trust in rehearsal also equips the ensemble to conduct themselves in performance without his being in front of them. A bit further into this same rehearsal, Kwami invites the Singer, who shared his feelings about Kwami’s quietness as intimidating, to lead the ensemble in vocal exercises to warm-up their

instruments. Kwami says, "...keep everything gentle... a lot of times you go to choral rehearsals and the warm ups are very hard on the voice...its always best to start very very softly, so that you can really, really warm up the voice instead of just pushing the voice from the beginning. Ok?"(Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 9/22/2011). Quietness not only commands Kwami's presence with the singers, but his musical direction to them as well.

Kwami's discretion during performances can be seen in a video recording of the Singer's 2009 performance of John W. Work III's (1901-1967) "Rise Shine, For Thy Light is a' Comin'" for Carnegie Hall's Neighborhood Concert Series.<sup>5</sup> In the video, Kwami stands behind the the male singers in the back row of the ensemble. However, he does not indicate to the Singers when to begin the song, as he has trained the ensemble to start singing without any direction from a conductor. The process of assembling on stage and beginning a concert involves the work of a tenor who sounds the tonic pitch of a piece, and the ensemble begins to sing. Though this process appears effortless, to the point of puzzling the audience member quoted at the opening of this piece, it is the result of the education provided to the Fisk Jubilee Singers about how to execute performances without evidence of Kwami's supervision. Twenty seconds into the video, the camera pans the ensemble from right to left and Kwami's presence behind the ensemble becomes clearer. He makes no arm movements or vocal sounds. Only his eyes adjust to focus on various sections of the ensemble throughout the piece. He remains in place throughout the entirety of the performance. The only change made is that he bows his head at the 1:11 mark it remains in that position until the song's conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> This video can be viewed at: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIf8EV\\_04Yg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIf8EV_04Yg)>

Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet* and Kwami's Value for Quietness

Kevin Quashie's recent framework discussed in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* is helpful for understanding how Kwami's mode of quiet presence among the Fisk Jubilee Singers establishes a technique of performing prestige while delivering a spiritual message. Quashie articulates what I have observed to be Kwami's value for quietness in directing the Fisk Jubilee Singers to performance success. He argues that attending to expressions of quietness can lead to "...a shift in how we commonly understand [performances of] blackness, which is often described as expressive, dramatic, or loud... These assumptions are noticeable in the ways that blackness serves as an emblem of social ailment and progress"(2012: 3). Kwami believes that the Fisk Jubilee Singers' endeavor to counter stereotypes of choirs comprised of black people singing Christian music—through quiet performances of seriousness, learnedness and skill—allows them to accomplish their mission of proclaiming a message of Christian faith in a way that is different from urban contemporary gospel singers that often perform in a mode of loudness. His investment in leading this ensemble transpires, above all, from the opportunity to minister to people. In a 2006 interview, he shares:

"I never thought much about the Negro spiritual when I was in Ghana. I just knew that they were related to the time of slavery. It was when I got to Fisk and became a Jubilee Singer that I started to understand more about the impact of Negro spirituals on the world. In terms of it being, first of all, music that the Jubilee Singers sang in order to raise money for Fisk University. But in singing this music, they also helped the world know about this form of music.

Now, I am looking at the Negro spiritual from another angle. It is a very historic, very traditional, a very strong part of the American culture. But I also see it now as a music that can be used to minister to people. The Jubilee Singers and I have had many experiences where, after concerts, people would come and tell us about how they were blessed by the songs."(Newland interview with Kwami. 2006. New York City).

He also conveys this spiritual purpose with the students, saying:

“Personally, I have a very strong belief that this ensemble, Jubilee Singers, is one of the very important aspects of Fisk University’s life, spiritually....and therefore whatever we do, must be done dilligently and for His [God’s] glory...for us to bring out His beauty through singing, it becomes very important for us to give all that we have.”(Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 9/22/2012).

During a rehearsal, Kwami delights in nothing more than relating how listeners are impressed with the Singers’ sound and impacted by the meaning of the text of the spirituals. For example, in a rehearsal he says to the Singers, “People always ask me how I get that tone out of you. It is because we understand what we are singing. We don’t care about the tone. We care about the message, and then it takes care of tone”(Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 3/3/2012). With a quiet presence, Kwami intends to establish a performance style through which the Fisk Jubilee Singers affect listeners with their vocal sound and the communication of a Christian faith message.

My use of “quiet presence” to describe Kwami refers both to his persona—a soft spoken man of few words—and the ways through which he compells the Fisk Jubilee Singers to emulate his stillness, conviction and hushed vocal temperament by following his example in rehearsals. He fosters the Singers’ commitment in communicating a spiritual message and builds an awareness of how the image and sound of blackness competes with their commitment, making the import of dignified self presentation and representation emerge as foremost in their performances. Kwami has found the disposition of a quiet presence to be effective in challenging audience expectations and in making audible their Christian declamation. Quashie’s work further explains:

The quiet subject is a subject who surrenders, a subject whose consciousness is not only shaped by struggle but also by revelry, possibility and the wildness of the inner life. Quiet is not a performance or a withholding; instead, it is an expressiveness that is not necessarily legible, at least not in a world that priviliges public excessiveness. Neither is quiet about resistance. It is surrender, a giving

into, a falling into self. The outer world cannot be avoided or ignored, but one does not only have to yield to its vagaries. One can be quiet. (Quashie 2013: 45).

Kwami's use of quietness in directing the Fisk Jubilee Singers exemplifies how one's consideration of selfhood and of the "outside world," makes room for resistance and makes room for the Singers to be recognized as musicians embodying excellence vocally and spiritually.

Recalling how the ensemble is perceived while traveling on tour, Kwami reminds the Singers about the importance of how they represent themselves. He says:

"Imagine the driver [of a bus the Singers rented for travel to a concert]: I intentionally told her to try and get into the hall and listen to you [the Singers], because I know the effect it has, our performances, have had on many drivers. They pick us up from here [Fisk's campus] just thinking 'well, another group of college students, and they're from a black school, so, 'it's [the experience of driving them and their performance] going to be this-and-that.' But then they get to hear us, and something in them changes, their attitudes toward us change. And the same thing happened with this lady. She was just, blown away." (Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 4/17/2012).

Through Kwami's employment of what Joi Lei (2003) describes as "repeated stylization" in rehearsals, students in the ensemble associate Kwami's quiet presence with their participation in the ensemble. His model of physical gesturing in front of them during rehearsals, a model that includes minimal speech at a low volume, extended moments of quietness, unrushed movement, and insistence upon patience, implicitly instructs the students about how to behave as Fisk Jubilee Singers. Kwami's attention to representation, musical virtuosity and Christian witness imbues the performance of a quiet presence with value. Enacting a quiet presence characterizes Fisk Jubilee Singer performances and differentiates them from normative contemporary gospel performances in which physical movement, non-bel canto vocal singing, and vocally loud delivery is prized.<sup>6</sup> Yet even among audience members who are familiar with concert spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> Even with this effort to distinguish themselves from other choirs of the African American sacred music tradition,

singing—like the audience member quoted at the opening of this paper—the Fisk Jubilee Singers perform in an exceptional style: with the quiet presence of a conductor.

I now return to the correspondence between the audience member and Dr. Kwami quoted at the opening of this piece. The audience member's expression of expertise in music, especially choral conducting and performance, suggests that her question emerges from a perspective of someone who is versed in the traditions of Western choral practices, a set of practices from which she feels the Fisk Jubilee Singers deviate by not having Kwami conduct during the concert. Her desire to know "how [the Fisk Jubilee Singers] came together" indicates that the Singers effectively assembled and performed within the choral conventions with which she was familiar, save the role of a choral conductor in performance. This audience member is not alone in inclining to credit the conductor's physical gestures for a choir's performance. Choral studies scholar Liz Garnett recalls the axiom among Western choral pedagogues, writing that "the [choral] director should look like he or she wants the choir to sound"(Garnett 2009: 1). Common among both instrumental and choral conductors is the expectation for musicians to mirror their emotive expressions while they manage sonic onsets and decays, control tempo, shape dynamics and phrasing (Durrant 2003). Kwami may not be seen conducting the ensemble during performances, but he is involved in every detail of the Singers' presentation: from choosing repertoire, attire, program order, ensemble members, stage blocking, travel arrangements, and certainly, musical execution. He guides the singers in performing his intended choral product that is at once sensitive to politics of racial representation, steadfast in vocal virtuosity and expressive of Christian spirituality.

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Country and Christian Contemporary vocalists recording in Nashville often seek the Fisk Jubilee Singers to provide background vocal tracts, an inclination inspired by gospel choir interludes during the bridge and climax of pop songs.

Still, Kwami asserts his commitment to *not* conducting concerts, an achievement acquired through concentrated work with the Singers in rehearsal.<sup>7</sup> That the Singers found her observation humorous indicates their awareness of such a reception and their satisfaction in having delivered a concert, without a conductor in front of them, that made an audience member wonder how it was possible. I contend that Kwami does conduct the Fisk Jubilee Singers through their performances even though he is not gesturing in front of them. His off-stage presence, speaking no words, making no visible arm movements or facial expressions, and the Singers cognizance of his being there, epitomizes a quietness that undergirds the Fisk Jubilee Singers' distinct performance style.

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<sup>7</sup> The racially white musical director of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, George L. White, did not stand in front of the ensemble and conduct, as this juxtaposition was too suggestive of an overseer among enslaved Africans. However, some Fisk Jubilee Singer directors preceding Kwami chose to stand in front of the ensemble and conduct performances. Accounts of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers can be found in Andrew Ward's *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America* (2000. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) and Toni Anderson's *Tell Them We are Singing for Jesus: The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers* (2010. Macon: Mercer University Press).

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#### Fisk Jubilee Singers 2011-2012

<i>Soprano</i>	Charles Mitchell
Rhea Beckett	<i>Alto</i>
Ronette Hoard	Sabrina Walker
Megan Larkin	Miracle Ham
Audrey Tillis	Christina Jackson
<i>Tenor</i>	Kristina Peterson
Renaldo Billups	Sabrina Walker
Cameron Clark	<i>Alternates</i>
Eric Copeland	Brianna Barbour
Marquis Murphy	Trishana Horton
<i>Bass</i>	Keondra Lewis
Antonio Hayes	Laquasha Logan
De'Andre Jones	Kenneth Taylor