Index and Introduction to

The Microfilmed

Dett Papers, Dr. Robert Nathaniel (1882-1943)
Pianist, Composer, Conductor, Poet, and Educator

(partial roll, on same roll with Buffalo Challenger, 1968-1970)

Part of

The Buffalo Afro-American Collection
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The Afro-American Historical Association of the Niagara Frontier Inc.
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NOTE: At the time of microfilming, the original papers and documents in this title were in the possession of Mr. Frank B. Mesiah.

1974
Dr. Robert Nathaniel Dett

1882-1943

The name of Dr. Robert Nathaniel Dett, noted composer, conductor, pianist, poet, and educator, who died in Battle Creek, Michigan on October 2, 1943, only nine days before his 61st birthday, will always have a special significance for the music world. At the time of his death he had become a figure of international prominence through his compositions and the singing groups which he directed. He had also been an inspiration to countless students of music, the most prominent of whom is Miss Dorothy Major, celebrated soprano, who studied with Dr. Dett when she was a student at Hampton Institute.

Dr. Dett, youngest of the three sons of Robert Tue and Charlotte Johnson Dett, was born in Drummondville, Ontario, Canada, on October 11, 1882. He was a Presbyterian and a Republican. On December 27, 1916, he married Miss Helen Elise Smith, pianist of New York, who later was a music instructor at Hampton Institute and at Bennett College. They had two children, Mrs. Henry Noyes (Helen Dett), a graduate of Bennett College, and Miss Josephine Elizabeth Dett, who attended Bennett College and Hampton Institute, and one granddaughter.

MUSICAL EDUCATION

Dr. Dett was educated at the Niagara Falls Collegiate Institute; the Oliver Willis Halsted Conservatory of Music, Lockport, N.Y., from 1901-03; Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Oberlin, Ohio, where he received the Bachelor of Music degree in 1908; the University of Pennsylvania; the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago; Harvard University; Columbia University; and the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, N.Y., where he was awarded the Master of Music degree in 1931 and where he studied under Dr. Howard Hanson, director of the school. While abroad in 1929, Dr. Dett was a pupil of Mme. Nadia Boulanger at the Fountaine-bleau School of Music in France.

HONORS AND DISTINCTIONS

Dr. Dett was the recipient of two honorary doctorates one in 1924 from Howard University, and the other in 1926 from Oberlin University. The winner of the first Harmon Award in 1927 for creative achievement in music, Dr. Dett also won two prizes while studying at Harvard, the Bowdoin Prize, in 1920, for his essay on "The Emancipation of Negro Music," and the Francis Boott Prize, in 1920, for his Motet on a Negro Motive, Don't Be Weary, Traveler."

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

Dr Dett's professional experiences were many. He was church and social pianist in Niagara Falls, N.Y., from 1898-1903; director of music at Lane College, Jackson, Tenn., from 1908-'1911; and director of music at Lincoln Institute (now Lincoln University), Jefferson City, MO, from 1911-1913. He was instructor of music at Hampton Institute from 1912 until he became director of Hampton's school of music in 1926, a post which he held until 1932. He was director of the American Choir which broadcast over station WHAM, 1930-1931; director of the Negro Community Chorus, 1933-1934; director of the music department at Bennett
College, Greensboro, N.C., from 1937-1942; and director of music for USO Centers from 1942 until his death.

OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

Miscellaneous achievements which highlighted the career of Dr. Dett include the following: In 1919 he organized the Musical Art Society at Hampton Institute which, through its annual series of concerts and recitals by eminent exponents of music and the dance, has made Ogden Hall on the Hampton campus an outstanding cultural center of Tidewater Virginia.

In 1924, he was summoned by his home town, Niagara Falls, to be its guest artist for the inauguration of the celebration of Music Week. A chorus of 100 white singers was placed at his disposal, to interpret his compositions.

On December 17, 1926, Dr. Dett conducted the Hampton Institute Choir of 80 voices in an unaccompanied program of ancient and modern church music, including a number of his compositions, in a recital in the music hall of the Library of Congress under the auspices of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation.

In 1930, he led the Hampton Institute Choir on tours of the United States, Canada, and seven European countries. The choir sang before King Albert and Queen Astrid of Belgium, and Ramsay MacDonald, then British Prime Minister, and his daughter, Ishbel, at 10 Downing Street. It was the first mixed chorus to sing American music at Salzburg Cathedral in Austria, where Dr. Dett's music arrangements were later used.

In 1940, while director of music at Bennett, Dr. Dett made a tour of the eastern and Midwestern states and Canada with the Bennett College all-girl choir. Under his direction, this choir also sang on a coast-to-coast program on the Columbia Broadcasting System, interpreting six original compositions of its director.

In 1941 he was guest professor at Virginia State College in Ettrick, Va., participated in Chicago's annual Musical Festival, and was also guest professor at Northwestern University. During his stay in Chicago he was presented in a recital at the Wendell Phillips High School. One of Chicago's musical organizations bears his name, the R. Nathaniel Dett Club.

At the time of his death, Dr. Dett was fulfilling a six-week engagement in Battle Creek, Michigan, directing musical activities at a USO center. He had also organized a Negro WAC chorus at Fort Custer.

MEMBERSHIPS

Dr. Dett was a member of the N.E.A., the National Association of Teachers of Colored Schools, and the National Association of Negro Musicians of which he was chairman of the advisory board in 1919, president from 1924-26, and treasurer in 1926. He also belonged to the Knights of Pythias and the Masons.

PUBLICATIONS AND MUSICAL WORKS

Publications by Dr. Dett include works for orchestra, solo voice, piano, choir, and violin, and numerous arrangements of Negro spirituals. Perhaps his best known works are in choral form. His books are THE DETT COLLECTION OF NEGRO SPIRITUALS (4 books), 1937;
RELIGIOUS FOLK SONGS OF THE NEGRO as sung at Hampton Institute, 1927; and THE ALBUM OF A HEART (verse), 1911.

Among his well-known compositions are:

America, the Beautiful (ac)  Lamb, The
An American Sampler  Listen to the Lambs (motet)
Ascappezzo  Music in the Mine
Chariot Jubilee (motet)  Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadows
Enchantment Suite (for piano)  Marche Negre
Hew Down the Tree  My Magic Song
His Song  Open Yo' Eyes
Arietta  Rise Up Shepherd and Follow
Bennett Alma Mater Fairest (ac)  So, We'll Go No More A Roving
Bible Vignettes Suite  Tropic Winter Suite
Cinnamon Grove Suite  Weeping Mary (ac)
Hampton, My Home By The Sea  Don't Be weary, Traveler
I'll Never Turn Back
Magnolia Suite (for piano)  
I'm so Glad
In the Bottoms (suite for piano)

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" was written for the dedication of the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel at Bennett College in the Fall of 1941.

"The Ordering of Moses," an oratorio for four-part mixed chorus and orchestra, was first performed by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with Eugene Goosens conducting at the Cincinnati Festival in May, 1937.

At the time of his death, Dr. Dett was working on the third and fourth movements of a symphony which Columbia Broadcasting System had commissioned him to write.

In speaking of the future of Negro music, Dr. Dett once said: "We have this wonderful folk music—the melodies of an enslaved people, who poured out their longings, their griefs and their aspirations in the one great universal language. But this store will be of no value unless we utilize it, unless we treat it in such manner that it can be presented in choral form, in lyric and operatic works, in concertos and suites and Salon music—unless our musical architects take the loose timber of Negro themes and fashion from it music which will prove that we, too, have national feelings and characteristics, as have the European peoples whose forms we have zealously followed for so long." In the light of these views on the future of Negro music, he was the first American to utilize the Negro folk tune for classic development. In recent years he spent much of his time lecturing on Negro music and giving lecture-recitals on his own music.

It was once said of Dr. Dett: "He walked with kings yet did not lose the common touch." That phrase sums him up conclusively. He will always be remembered for his sincerity, humility, and modesty, his lofty ideals, his vision, his devotion to music and art, and his unfaltering belief in the Christian brotherhood of man. The terms teacher, artist, and friend were so intricately woven together as to make him a positive force for the good of both the Negro race and the nation.
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