

STAR SPANGLED MUSIC *Editions*

# Lift Every Voice and Sing

*African American Anthem*

1900

Words by James Weldon Johnson

Music by J. Rosamond Johnson

*(B-flat Major • High Voice)*

Edited by Mark Clague and Andrew Kuster

STAR SPANGLED MUSIC  
*Foundation*



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## Lift Every Voice and Sing, 1900

Lyric by James Weldon Johnson; Music by J. Rosamond Johnson

### Historical Note

Often referred to as the “African American National Anthem” or “Black National Anthem,” *Lift Every Voice and Sing* features words by James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) set to music by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954).

There are conflicting details about the song’s creation. Some sources report that the text preceded the music by five years. In his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), however James Weldon Johnson explains that the song was inspired by two things. First, Johnson admired a poem about Abraham Lincoln written by a Southern white man, but felt that “there was yet to be written a great poem on Lincoln, the expression of a Negro” (153). Asked to offer an address for a celebration of Lincoln’s Birthday in 1900, Johnson began to work on such a grand poem. In conversation with his brother and songwriting partner, however, the poem became a song to be performed by 500 black schoolchildren, including many from the Edwin M. Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida, where James Weldon Johnson served as principal.

After “grinding out” the words of the first stanza with pen on paper, the poet describes the “feverish ecstasy” of inspiration as the “spirit of the poem had taken hold.” He completed the three verses quickly, working now without pen and paper. As the lyric came into focus in his mind, the poet “could not keep back the tears.” For Johnson, the lyric expressed “the American Negro, historically and spiritually” (154–55).

“As soon as Rosamond had finished his noble setting,” James Weldon reports, “he sent a copy of the manuscript to our publishers in New York.” Copies were made for the chorus and “the song was taught to the children and sung very effectively at the celebration.” The Johnson brothers soon moved to New York, joining the artists and intellectuals at the center of the Harlem Renaissance. He noted that the song “passed out of our minds,” but that the schoolchildren of Jacksonville “kept singing the song.” Over the next two decades, the song took root in the black community. It “was being sung in schools and churches and on special occasions throughout the South,” Johnson writes (155).

In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for whom James Weldon Johnson served as executive secretary, adopted the song as the “Negro national hymn.” The question of

whether to call the song the “national anthem” or a “hymn” has created periodic controversy. The song was recently introduced to a new generation by Beyoncé as part of her 2018 Coachella set and its live recording *Homecoming* (2019).

Despite its popularity, the sheet music here is not widely available. The financial interest of its publisher certainly limited distribution in economically challenged communities. Johnson reported that “in traveling round, I have commonly found printed or typewritten copies of the words pasted in the backs of hymnals and the songbooks used in Sunday schools, Y.M.C.A’s and similar institutions; and I think that is the method by which it gets its widest circulation” (155). Johnson even heard it “fervently sung” by white students at Bryn Mawr College in honor of a speech he was giving on the campus.

### Performance Suggestions

As with any anthem it is both traditional and considered an expression of respect to stand while singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

### Sources

This edition based on the commercial sheet music edition published in 1921 by the Edward B. Marks Music Corporation (New York).

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# Lift Every Voice and Sing

Words  
James Weldon Johnson  
(1871–1938)

African-American Anthem  
1900

Music  
J. Rosamond Johnson  
(1873–1954)

Moderato e maestoso

The piano introduction is in 8/8 time, featuring a steady bass line and a more active treble line. It begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and includes a sforzando (*sfz*) accent on the second measure.

The first system shows the vocal melody starting at measure 6. The lyrics are: "1. Lift ev-'ry voice and sing, Till earth and hea - ven ring, Ring with the / 2. Ston - y the road we trod, Bit - ter the chast-'ning rod, Felt in the / 3. God of our wea - ry years, God of our si - lent tears, Thou who hast". The piano accompaniment is marked *mf* and includes a section symbol (§) above the first measure.

The second system continues the vocal melody starting at measure 12. The lyrics are: "har - mo - nies of Lib - er - ty; Let our re - joic - ing rise High as the / days when hope un - born — had died; Yet with a stead - y beat, Have not our / brought us thus far on — the way; Thou who hast by Thy might, Led us in -". The piano accompaniment includes a section symbol (§) above the first measure and a sforzando (*sfz*) accent on the final measure.

18

list - 'ning — skies, Let it re - sound loud as the roll - ing sea. —  
wear - y — feet Come to the place for which our fa - thers sighed? —  
- to the — light, Keep us for - ev - er in the path, — we pray. —

24

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us  
We have come ov - er a - way that with tears has been wa - tered  
Lest our feet stray from the pla - ces, our God, where we met Thee,

28

*rall. e molto cresc.* *allargando*

Sing a song full of the hope that the pres - ent has brought —  
We have come, tread - ing our path thro' the blood of the slaugh -  
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we for - get —

*mp* *sfz* *allargando*

## Lift Every Voice and Sing

32 *a tempo*  
*ff*

us; Fac - ing the ris - ing sun of our new day be -  
 - tered, Out from the gloom - y past, Till now we stand at —  
 Thee; Shad-owed be - neath Thy hand, May we for - ev - er —

*a tempo*  
*ff* *tremolo* *sffz*

36 *D.S.*

- gun, Let us march on till vic - to - ry — is won.  
 last Where the white gleam of our bright star — is cast.  
 stand, True to our God, True to our na - tive land.

*D.S.*