



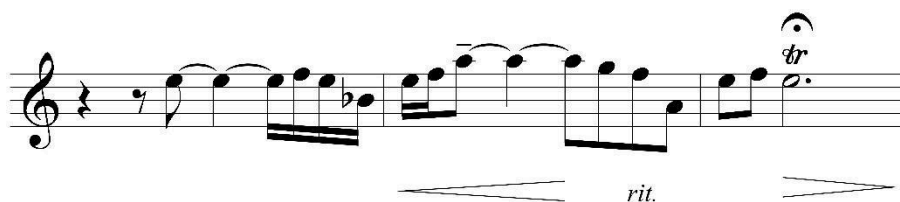
Dorothy Rudd Moore (1940-2022), most well-known for her opera *Frederick Douglass*, also wrote song cycles, chamber pieces, and orchestral music. Born in Wilmington, Delaware, her mother was a singer who started her on piano lessons at a young age. Her high-school teacher not only taught her music theory, but also taught her clarinet so that she could integrate the all-male Howard High School band. Moore earned a degree in Composition from Howard University and then received a Lucy Moten Fellowship for study at the American Conservatory at Fountainebleau, France where she took private composition lessons with Nadia Boulanger. Upon return from France, she lived in NYC where she studied with Chou Wen-Chung who was a student of Edgard Varèse. While primarily a composer, she was also a music educator, teaching at NYU, Bronx Community College and the Harlem School of the Arts. Moore married Kermit Moore, a cellist, composer, and conductor. Both were co-founders of Society of Black Composers, an organization which existed from 1968-1973 for the advancement and exposure of Black composers. The piece *Voices from the Light*, was premiered by the Girls Choir of Harlem in 1997 at Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. The piece was not heard again until 2022 and has only been performed five times in its history. Masterfully linking quotes from leading African American poets and Negro Spirituals amidst the tapestry of Moore's own text and music, this piece deserves its rightful space in the choral canon.

Dorothy Rudd Moore created her own text for this work with inspiration from Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen. She also incorporated the words of the Negro spirituals “Steal Away,” “Deep River,” “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as a reference to the ancestral griots of the enslaved Africans. We experience the pain and hurt of the protagonist first hearing a soft voice in their sleep then through whispers followed by a full chorus. While the new day awakens them, they still hear from those “bards long ago” talking about the hope of a joyful life—one of freedom and dancing.

I heard a voice in sleep last night
Before the dawn of day
Whose voice it was I do not know
It spoke to me so soft, so low
I asked him why the caged bird sings
I heard voices whisper in the night
Of southern mansions
With marble steps
And poplars standing still as death
And chains of bondmen
Tinkling in the field
Of roses broken down
I heard a chorus sing last night
I heard a chorus singing
It sang of chariots swinging low
It sang of troubles seen,
Nobody knows.
It sang of steal away
It sang of rivers
Of all who have known rivers
Of souls grown deep as the rivers
I wonder why the caged bird sings
I heard voices in the night
Before the dawn of day
They told me about their dream
Of a land across the sea
Of someplace in the sun
To dance and whirl!
Then rest, when the white day is
done.
I heard a voice in sleep last night
Just at the break of day
It spoke so sweet, so soft
In tenderness it told of dreams
Enwrapped in silken cloth
And laid in a box of gold

I heard voices in the night
Then came the dawn
The night was gone
Yet with the dawn
Voices I heard in the night
Spoke to me at break of day
As the light came down
I heard a voice from far away
Don't be afraid my child
We came to you in sleep last night
We bards from long ago
Our lips once touched that sacred fire
That bid us sing our son
We spoke to you last night
From far away
And yet so near to you
Don't be afraid my child
We are the scribes
We are the griots
We are the storytellers
We are witnesses
We know why the caged bird sings
Don't be afraid my child
We came to you in sleep last night
We spoke to you
From someplace far away
And yet so near to you
The voices in your sleep last night
Were voices from the Light
We are the voices from the Light
At dawn I dreamed
Of someplace in the sun
To fling my arms wide and dance
I know why the caged bird sings
And spreads its wings to flight
I know why the caged bird sings
I heard voices from the Light.

The music in *Voices from the Light* weaves a narrative as vivid and poignant as the text itself. In some instances, Moore overtly echoes the text, as found in the “tinkling” of the bondmen’s chains, rhythmic homages to the quoted Negro spirituals, and the recurring motif of the caged bird singing:



And while always keeping the voice leading singable, Moore explores a variety of tonal areas, many far-removed from the recurring home key of d minor. Reaping expansive landscapes from the smallest of musical seeds, the piece unfolds with fluid grace while suspending the listener in a dream-like reverie.

And while the triumphant movement from minor to Major elicits joy, that final chord is underscored with bass instruments playing the “Deep River” motif; the bird remains caged and there is still work to do.