

## Harry Thacker Burleigh, composer (1866-1949)

*Observed 11 September*



In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a poor black boy in Erie, Pennsylvania, was unlikely to aspire to the National Conservatory of Music in New York. But Henry Burleigh was given a scholarship as well as hired to do various odd jobs to help pay his expenses. His musical talents gave him a spot as a double bass player in the orchestra of the Conservatory. But as he worked around the building, Burleigh often sang the black spirituals of his home. These captured the attention on Antonin Dvořák, then the director of the Conservatory. The two spent much time together and some of what the great Czech composer heard from the young student found its way into *The New World Symphony*, first performed in 1893. Burleigh is said to have remarked that “it was the first time in the history of music that a Negro’s song had been a major theme in a great symphonic work”. The two musicians inspired one another during those few fruitful years at the Conservatory, as they both aspired to foster the development of a truly American music. Burleigh had begun singing in his childhood and was prominent at local events in Erie before leaving. By the mid ‘90s he was hired to be soloist at wealthy Saint George’s Episcopal Church in New York City. Despite rampant

exclusion of blacks from both society and corporate worship at the time, Burleigh gained many friends during his long years of service at Saint George's. For some of those years he was also the only black soloist in the choir of Temple Emanu-El. He also sang in many concerts, having a very wide repertoire from opera to spirituals. More than a performer, Burleigh continued to be a prolific composer and arranger, famous for both original art songs and concert arrangements of spirituals. He is accounted one of the most important American composers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, But perhaps his greatest legacy was bringing the "Negro spiritual" into the mainstream of American culture, thus enriching the spiritual lives of every generation since.

*Lessons*        Isaiah 42:10-12; Psalm 103:1-5,20-22; Romans 15:5-11; Luke 1:39-45

*Collect*        God our strong deliverer, we bless your Name for the gifts of grace given to Harry Thacker Burleigh to gather and preserve the good heritage of African-American music and to lift up in song the struggles of his people. Let that Spirit of love which spurred him draw us also to join hands throughout the earth in Christ's one great fellowship of love; through the same Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.