

“The Vocal Music of Jacob J. Sawyer (1856-1885): A Content Analysis of the Lyrics”

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Poster Abstract

The inclusion of one of Sawyer’s compositions in James M. Trotter’s famous book *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (Boston, 1880) marked Sawyer, still in his early 20s at that time, as an exemplary and well-known composer. His early death from tuberculosis let him sink into oblivion. As reported at a previous conference, the author of this poster recently discovered Sawyer’s birth and death records as well as numerous newspaper articles from the late 1870s and early 1880s that provide biographical information and information about Sawyer’s work as a musician and composer, who collaborated with some of the most famous African-American musicians of the time. This poster will, for the first time, focus on Sawyer’s lyrics in his vocal compositions, 32 of which are known today. While some of the songs and choral pieces are themed around love or religion (Sawyer even published arrangements of well-known Spirituals), many of his vocal compositions were written for Minstrel ensembles that he led and, thus, are themed around the life of African-Americans. For example, we find derogatory language in pieces such as “Blow, Gabriel, Blow” (1882):

Darkies pray fo’ de time draws nigh,

Blow, Gabriel, Blow,

We’ll soon be mountin’ up on high,

Blow, etc.

Chicken coops you mus’ leave alone,

Blow, etc.

Or Satan ‘ll cotch you shu’s you’s bo’n,

Blow, etc.

For the purpose of this poster, the themes of all known 32 vocal compositions are analyzed and tabulated, and several example of lyrics on the various themes will be given. This poster attempts to make a contribution to the rediscovery of Jacob Sawyer as well as to the history of African-American minstrel music.