

The Work of Eurydice V. Osterman

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African American Choral Literature

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Eurydice V. Osterman is a black female composer, arranger, organist, pianist, conductor, music educator, and author. She was born in 1950 in Atlanta Georgia and spent her youth in both North Carolina and Indiana. She received her education and training from Andrews University and the University of Alabama.<sup>1</sup> She began teaching in Ohio and Louisiana, until she accepted a position at Oakwood University in 1978 as theory professor and director of the Oakwood College Choir. Under her leadership, the choir went on tours each year, performed at World's Fair events and other well-known opportunities, and recorded for Wintley Phipps's album *I Choose You Again*. In 1994 she began conducting the Aeolians, the select choir of Oakwood University. In 2009, Osterman became the chair of the music department at Northern Caribbean University in Jamaica, completely revitalizing the music program.<sup>2</sup> She has won several awards and acclaim for her work in music education and for her composition, has written two books, *What God Says About Music* and *Worship: From Praise Him to Praise Hymn*, and has many compositions through different publishing companies, as well as her own, AWSAHM MUSIC. She has written and arranged anthems, spirituals, hymns, and Christmas music for choirs and solo vocalists and classical and sacred music for piano, organ, and orchestra.<sup>3</sup>

Eurydice Osterman's music spans many different genres but her religious faith holds strong through all of her work. Her book, *What God Says About Music*, discusses the power of music on the mind, body, and spirit in reference to one's relationship with their faith. In *What God Says About Music*, Osterman writes, "Although music serves many purposes in our lives, its functions for us as Christians is to serve as a vehicle by which we may glorify God whether or not the music is sacred or secular...It is also an effective tool which we can use to impress

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<sup>1</sup> "Eurydice Valenis Osterman," n.d. [http://africandiasporamusicproject.org/eurydice\\_osterman](http://africandiasporamusicproject.org/eurydice_osterman).

<sup>2</sup> "Eurydice V. Osterman, DMA, Presented with the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award by Marquis Who's Who," November 18, 2020. <https://www.24-7pressrelease.com/press-release/477370/eurydice-v-osterman-dma-presented-with-the-albert-nelson-marquis-lifetime-achievement-award-by-marquis-whos-who>.

<sup>3</sup> Eurydice Osterman, n.d. [http://www.iamaonline.com/Bio/Eurydice\\_Osterman.htm](http://www.iamaonline.com/Bio/Eurydice_Osterman.htm).

spiritual truths upon our hearts and to direct our focus upward.”<sup>4</sup> She discusses that humans are inherently both secular and spiritual beings and must find a balance in their consumption of music in order to not “kill one’s spirituality.”

Osterman’s book, *Worship: Praise Him to Praise Hymn*, addresses traditional worship and praise worship and how to make the transition and distinction between them. She speaks at length on the history and evolution of secular music through jazz, rock, and Motown and their effects of sacred worship music. She warns against the influences of jazz and rock on gospel music, saying this influence shifts the attention to the musician and turns music into a “commercial product.”<sup>5</sup> She provides a chart instrument to evaluate songs on the appropriateness of its melody, harmony/chords, rhythm/beat/syncopation, text, and overall song characteristics.

With this in mind, Osterman’s religious values shine through in her compositions and arrangements. Her pieces are well crafted and beautiful to the ear without being flashy or taking away from the nature of the text. Her piece, *Alleluia*, was performed at the 1981 Festival of Choirs by the Oakwood College Choir. It is written for SATB divisi choir a cappella.<sup>6</sup> The entire piece only contains the single word “Alleluia.” It is sometimes extended to five syllables, with the second syllable emphasizing the [i] sound before the final j glide. At the start of the piece, most of the pitches are repetitive, but this syllable is normally met with a step down or up and then returning to the previous pitch in most parts. The piece is fairly syncopated throughout, creating the effect of mixed meter even before any meter changes occur. The majority of the piece is in common time but does change to 3/4 at times, as well as two measures of 2/4 with triplets. This effect changes what syllable of the word is on the downbeat of the measure and

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<sup>4</sup> Osterman, Eurydice V. *What God Says about Music*. Huntsville, AL: Awshm Music, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Osterman, Eurydice V. *Worship: from Praise Him to Praise Hymn*. Xlibris Corporation, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Eurydice V. Osterman. “Alleluia.” *GIA Publications, Inc.*, n.d.  
<https://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/alleluia-print-g9893>.

creates different accents sung by the choir. The piece is generally homophonic, but the treble voices and tenor/bass voices often sing separately from each other - creating almost a double choir effect. There is a lot of call and response between the different voices. Osterman creates another textural change by sometimes having some voices hold the syllables out while others sing the word shorter above these chords. The voices are often stacked in thirds, or seconds to create dissonance. Due to the repetitiveness of the pitches and the parallel voice leading that occurs, the piece has a chantlike and early music sound. It begins in G major, with multiple key changes to B major, F major, and A major. The piece begins with the musical direction “joyful,” and the inherent nature of the composition is extremely joyful. It begins softly and builds to a grand fortissimo before dropping back down in volume again to build towards the end. The syncopation creates a bouncy, rhythmic atmosphere, and the choice of chords create a satisfying build of tension and release. It is upbeat with a quick tempo. The piece is written in praise for Eastertide and follows her musical and religious morals of honoring God and not oneself or including inappropriate references. The piece is incredibly simple and repetitive, but her use of differentiation in rhythm, meter, melody, keys, and texture make it exciting and stimulating to perform and listen to.

Her composition style is consistent even with arrangements of existing spirituals. Her arrangement of “Climbing to Zion” for SATB choir and solo, which is performed by Wintley Phipps,<sup>7</sup> contains many of the same stylistic choices that make Osterman unique. The piece is syncopated and rhythmic throughout. It is homophonic and follows a chorus verse back and forth. The choir begins the piece by humming and then supports the soloist with held chords underneath. There is a call and response between the soloist and the choir during the verses. One

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<sup>7</sup> Eurydice V. Osterman. “Climbing to Zion.” *GIA Publications, Inc.*, n.d. <https://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/climbing-to-zion-print-g10145>.

of the main features of this piece is its many key changes, similar to the previous one. The piece begins in B major and changes keys about three times up to D major. The key ascends and creates text painting as the singer describes his journey of climbing up the mountain and ascending to heaven. The key changes create an interesting change from the otherwise repetitive spiritual but does not make the piece too “showy.” The piece also does not leave much room for ornamentation or improvisation from the soloist to draw attention. The integrity lies within the text and the praise from the choir and the soloist working together. At the end of the piece, the performers can choose to vamp the ending and create more of a larger ending if they want to but it is not written in the music and is not required to create a moving performance and demonstration of worship.

Eurydice V. Osterman is an accomplished African American woman in the sacred music field and has done so much great work in her teachings, lectures, books, compositions, and arrangements. She is a woman of her faith and morals and brings this to everything she does, especially her music. She continues to create space for African American women in sacred music and publish beautiful music that honors her God and what she believes in.

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