Celebrating WNY

Lesson – *Spirituals on the Underground Railroad*

Companion Video – "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"

Suggested Grade Level

Grades 1-6

Objective

Students will learn about the history of the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and understand the role that spirituals played in the Underground Railroad. They will learn about signal songs and map songs. They will explore the Buffalo/Niagara region's role in the Underground Railroad.

Suggested Materials

- BPO video of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"
- "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" music and lyrics (provided)
- Optional: video of *Follow the Drinking Gourd*- https://tinyurl.com/lm3j5dj

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Pr4.2.1a-6a
MU:Re7.1.1a-6a
MU:Cn11.1.1a-6a

New York State Social Studies Standards

Standard 1: History of the United States and New York
Standard 3: Geography
Standard 4: Economics
Standard 5: Civics, Citizenship, and Government

Procedure

1) This lesson focuses on spirituals as a tool for the Underground Railroad, but this form of song was used long before that time. Introduce students to the spiritual as a song that served many purposes for the enslaved African people in the 17th-19th centuries. These songs were used as:
    a) protest to slavery
    b) a source of motivation and inspiration
    c) as an expression of community and values
    d) In the 1960s and 70s many spirituals were "updated" with new lyrics to become freedom songs and used in the Civil Rights Movement.

BPO

2) When the Underground Railroad was created to help slaves escape to freedom in the North, spirituals took on an important role – as coded messages. There were two types of coded spirituals: "the signal song" and the "map song." Discuss as a group what the Underground Railroad looked like and how these spirituals might have played a part. Was it an actual railroad? What information do students think a "signal song" gave slaves? How about a "map song"?
    a) Signal songs alerted slaves to upcoming events that would help them escape.
    b) Map songs created "maps" by giving instructions and landmarks to follow while traveling on the Underground Railroad
3) Introduce students to the music and lyrics of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Play the video of the Buffalo Philharmonic performing the piece.
4) Share some history of this piece with the students:
    a) For many years, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was believed to be originally composed by Brit Willis, a half-Choctaw (Native American) man, who lived on a plantation in Mississippi. However, recently historians have found evidence that it was Brit's slaves who first created the song. When Brit Willis left for the Trail of Tears — the route taken by Native Americans when the U.S. government ordered them to relocate to the West — he took his two slaves, Wallace and Minerva Willis along. Brit Willis rented the slaves out to Spencer Academy for Choctaw boys in Oklahoma where the couple entertained students by singing some of their original songs, including "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." A minister at the school was so impressed with the song that somewhere around 1873, he notated the music and words and sent it to the Jubilee Singers, a choir at Fisk University in Tennessee.
    b) The Jubilee Singers performed the song during their tour of the United States and Europe and actually made the first recording of the song in 1909. The song became very popular in the US and abroad and was said to be one of Harriet Tubman's favorite spirituals. Harriet escaped slavery, bought a home in Auburn, NY, and returned to the south fifteen times during her life in order to lead hundreds of slaves to freedom in the north. Some accounts say that along the Underground Railroad, slaves would often substitute the name "Harriet" for the word "chariot" while singing.
5) Sing through the song together. The song is set up as a call and refrain, with every other phrase containing the words "coming for to carry me home." In singing with the students, you may want to sing the calls and have students simply respond with the refrains.

    "Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home"

6) This song is a "signal song." Ask students to brainstorm what this song might be signaling. Coded/signal meaning – "Chariots" refers to the wagons and carriages that were used to help transport slaves to safe houses or churches. These "Chariot" drivers were Underground Railroad "conductors." They would help usher the slaves to safety. The song served as a message to the slaves that help would be arriving soon. They had

to be alert and ready to leave. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was not only an inspirational song, it was a sign of hope that real help was on the way.

Extended Learning: Map Songs

Introduce students to the most famous "map song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd." Each verse gives instructions on a path to freedom. Share the lyrics of the chorus with students (see below). Then brainstorm with students how this song might draw a map for slaves who would hear it. Find a recording of the song here: https://tinyurl.com/lm3j5dj.

Chorus:
When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

Coded meaning:
"When the sun comes back" means winter and early spring when migratory quails are beginning to return from the North. The Drinking Gourd represents the Big Dipper. This verse tells slaves to leave in the winter and walk towards the Big Dipper or Drinking Gourd (walk North). Eventually they will meet a guide (the "old man") who will escort them for the remainder of the trip.

Extended Learning: Underground Railroad in WNY

Several escape routes on the Underground Railroad ended in the Buffalo/Niagara region, where slaves crossed over the Niagara River into Canada. Three of the most famous points in our region are:

Michigan Street Baptist Church, Buffalo, NY
Foot of West Ferry St., Buffalo, NY
Tryon's Folly, Lewiston, NY

Ask students to do some research on these locations in the Buffalo/Niagara region where the Underground Railroad helped escaped slaves find freedom. Give students an opportunity to share their research.

Swing low, sweet chariot

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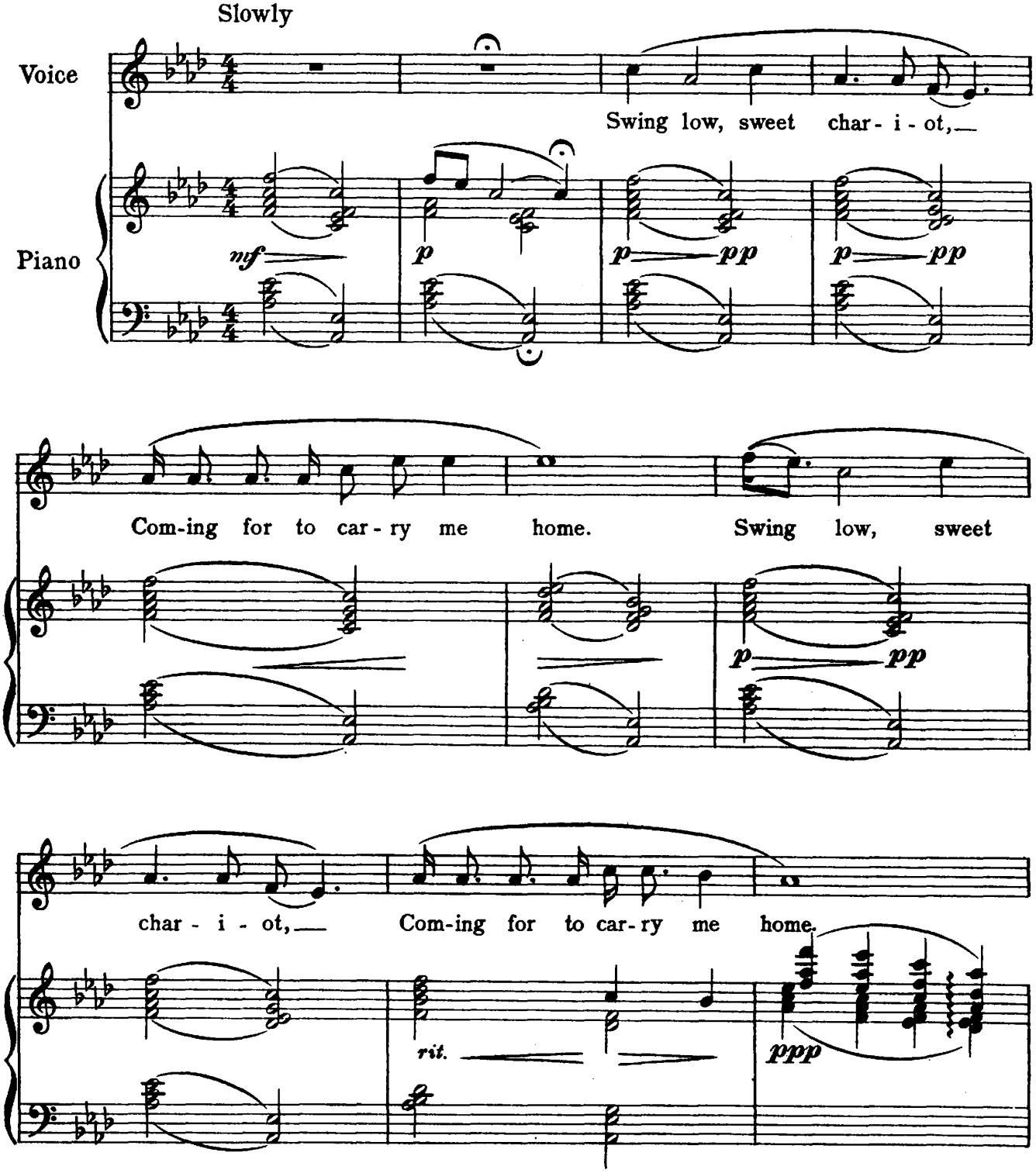
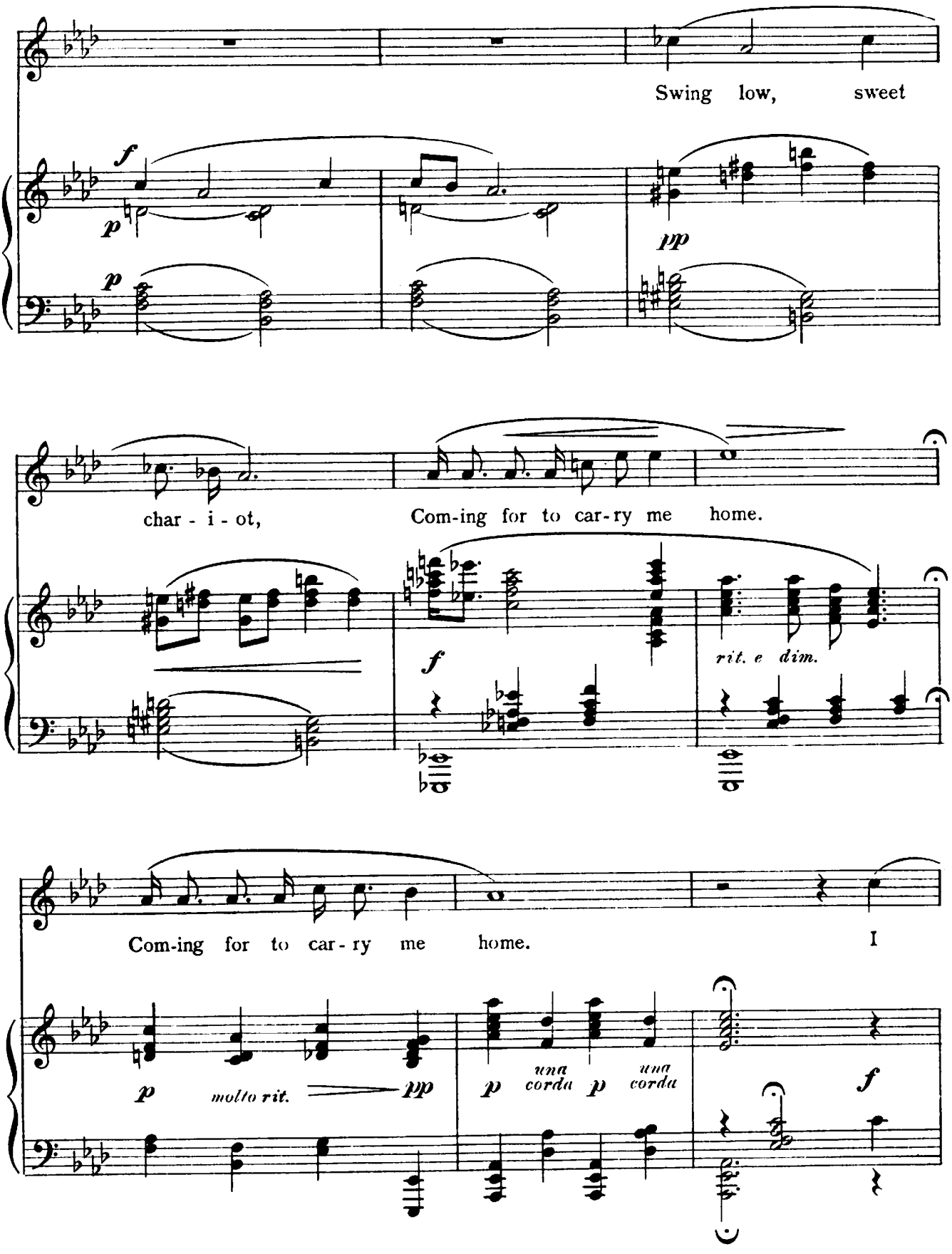
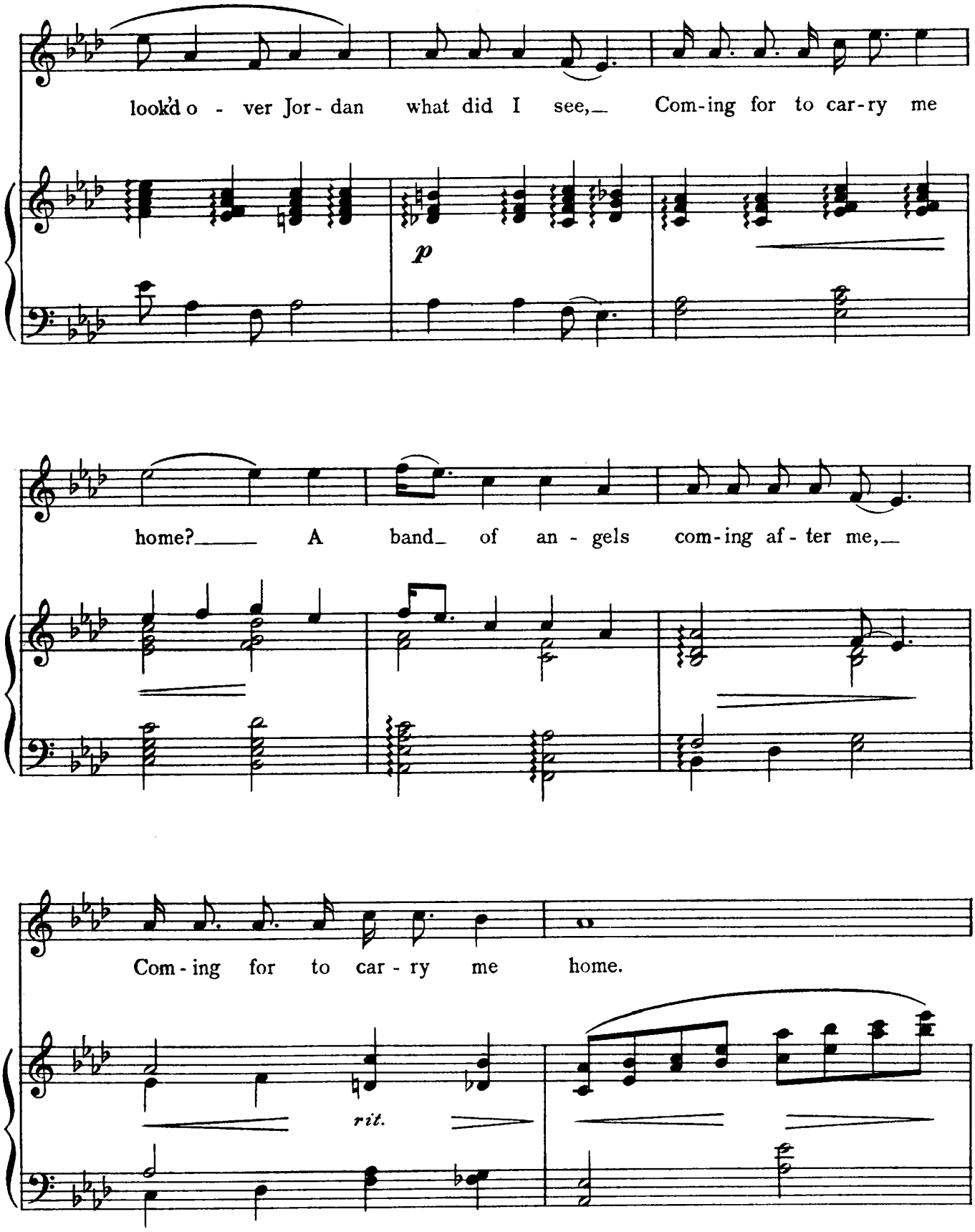
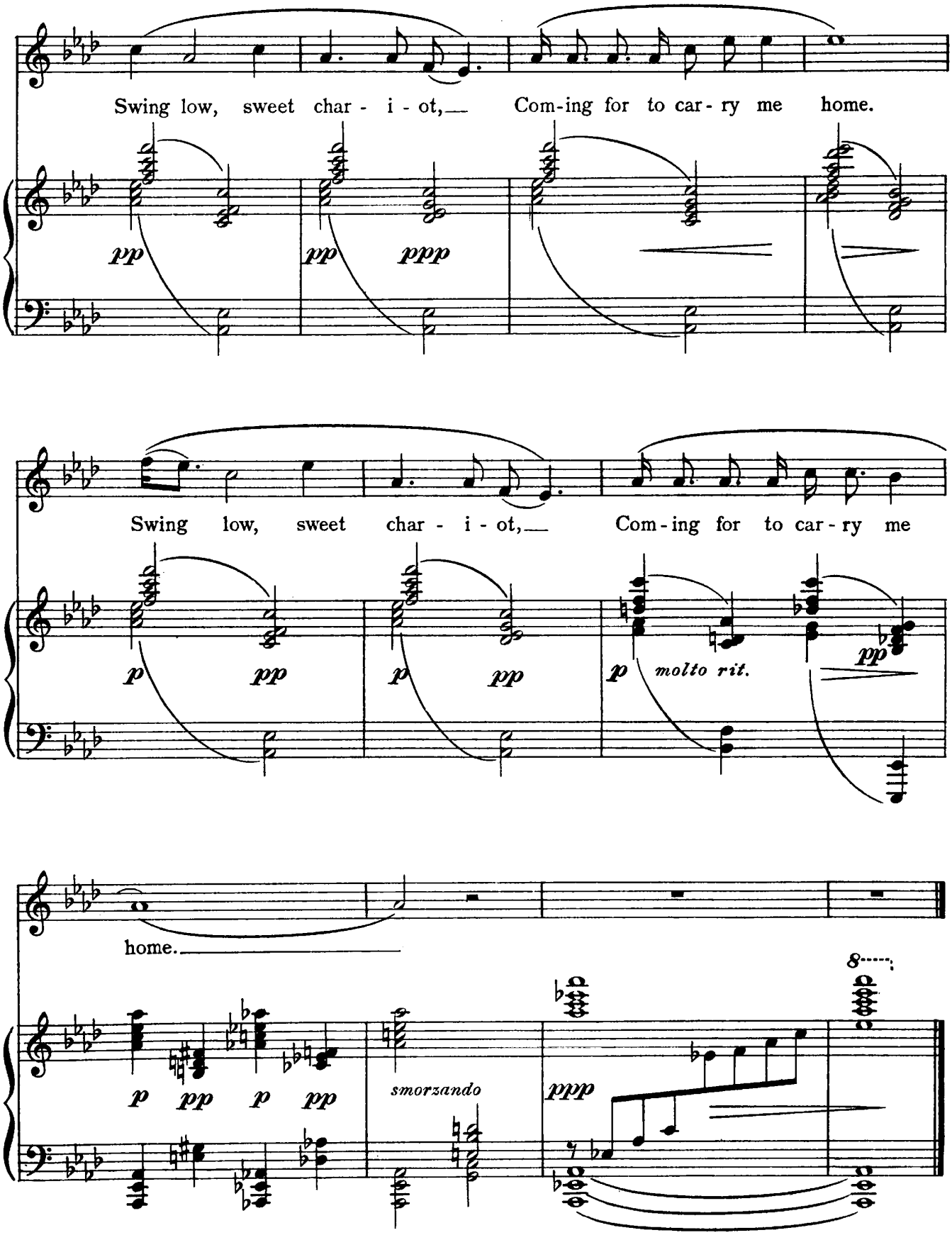
Negro Spiritual
Arranged by
H. T. BURLEIGH



This PDF courtesy of Art Song Central - The singer's resource for free sheet music - http://artsongcentral.com


Swing low, sweet
char - i - ot,
Com-ing for to car-ry me home.
rit. e dim.
Com-ing for to car - ry me home.
I
molto rit.
una corda
una corda


look'd o - ver Jor - dan what did I see,_ Com-ing for to car-ry me
p
home?_____ A band_ of an - gels com-ing af - ter me,_
Com - ing for to car - ry me home.
rit.


Swing low, sweet char - i - ot,— Com-ing for to car - ry me home.
pp pp ppp
Swing low, sweet char - i - ot,— Com-ing for to car - ry me
p pp p pp p molto rit. pp
home.
p pp p pp
smorzando
ppp
8