



**THE CHESTER CHILDREN'S CHORUS**

*presents*

# **IN THE SPIRIT OF THE SPIRITUAL**

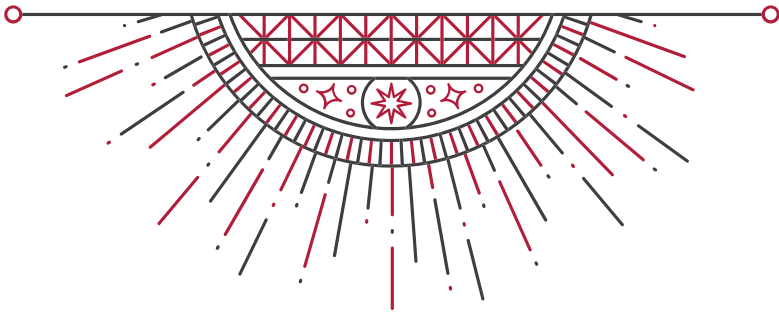
*A Performance Featuring  
the Songs and Letters of  
Enslaved African-American  
Men and Women*

**JOHN ALSTON, VOICE  
JAY FLUELLEN, PIANO**

**Saturday, February 27, 2021  
at 7:00 PM, EST**

**<https://youtu.be/jc2qIKNCyW0>**

*Recorded at the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas,  
Philadelphia, PA*



## THE PROGRAM

Prelude—*Lament*

*Let My People Go*

An Anonymous Appeal  
to the Bishop of London, 1723

*Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*

Phoebe Brownrigg to her daughter,  
Amy Nixon, 1835

*I Want to Die Easy*

*Joshua Fit the Battle of Jerico*

Louisa Alexander to her husband,  
Archer Alexander, 1863

*Steal Away*

Henry Bibb to His Former Master,  
William Gatewood, 1844

*Good News*

*Alston is reading abbreviated versions of the letters;  
the full text of each can be found on the following pages.*

# THE PERFORMERS

**John Alston, VOICE:** John Alston founded the Chester Children's Chorus in 1994 while an Associate Professor of Music at Swarthmore College. Originally comprised of seven boys from one elementary school in Chester, PA, the Chorus now annually serves more than one hundred boys and girls in third through twelfth grades from every school in Chester. The Chorus's year-round programming leverages the power of music and community to encourage each child to become the best version of themselves.

Early in his career, Alston frequently performed as a bass soloist and in classical music ensembles throughout the United States. About his singing, the Washington Post wrote, "the revelation on the program was the quality of bass John Alston's singing... his voice is graceful in its movements...and his diction and emotional shading of the words are exemplary." Alston earned his Doctorate of Music in Choral Conducting from Indiana University.

Alston originally conceived of and performed *In the Spirit of the Spiritual* in 2004 as a statement on racism, caste, and injustice. He decided to resurrect the program in 2021 to amplify the awakening awareness of social injustice.



**Jay Fluellen, PIANO:** Jay Fluellen is a Philadelphia musician known as a composer, educator, accompanist, pianist, and singer. He has composed for many of Philadelphia's music institutions and ensembles including the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia Jazz Project, Orchestra 2001, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Network for New Music, Bucks County Choral Society, and the Relache New Music Ensemble. Fluellen has a doctorate in music composition from Temple University and a certification in music education from Eastern University. Currently a teacher with the School District of Philadelphia at Northeast High School, Fluellen has taught college-level courses in the fields of music composition, written and aural theory, music history, piano, and conducting. Since January 1997, he has served as Co-Minister of Music at the historic African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia.

# AN ANONYMOUS APPEAL TO THE BISHOP OF LONDON, 1723

*(note: formatted per the original)*

August the forth 1723

to The Right Raverrand father in god my Lord arch Bishop of Lonnd

this coms to sattesfie your honour that there is in this Land of  
verJennia a Sort of people that is Calld molatters which are Baptised  
and brouaht up in the way of the Christan faith and followes the wayes  
and Rulles of the Chrch of England and sum of them has white fathars  
and sum white mothers and there is in this Land a Law or act which  
keeps and makes them and there seed SLaves forever - -

and most honoured sir a mongst the Rest of your Charitabell acts and  
deed wee your humbell and poore partishinners doo begg Sir your aid  
and assistancce in this one thing which Lise as I doo understand in  
your LordShips brest which is that your honour will by the help of our  
Suffervering [i.e., sovereign] Lord King George and the Rest of the  
Rullers will Release us out of this Cruell Bondegg and this wee beg  
for Jesus Christs his Sake who has commaded us to seeke first the  
kingdom of god and all things shall be addid un to us

and here it is to bee notd that one brother is a SLave to another and  
one Sister to anothe which is quite out of the way and as for mee my  
selfe I am my brothers SLave but my name is Secrett

and here it is to bee notd againe that wee are commandded to keep  
holey the Sabbath day and wee doo hardly know when it comes for  
our task mastrs are has hard with us as the Egypttions was with the  
Chilldann of Issarall god be marcifill unto us

here follows our Sevarity and Sorrowfull Sarvice we are hard used  
up on Every account in the first place wee are in Ignorance of our  
Salvation and in the next place wee are kept out of the Church and  
matrimony is deened us and to be plain they doo Look no more up  
on us then if wee ware dogs which I hope when these Strange Lines

## AN ANONYMOUS APPEAL *(continued)*

comes to your Lord Ships hands will be Looket in to and here wee  
beg for Jesus Christ his Sake that as your honour do hope for the  
marcy of god att the day of death and the Redemption of our Saviour  
Christ that when this comes to your Lord Ships hands your honour will  
Take Sum pittty of us who is your humble butt Sorrowfull portitiners

and Sir wee your humble perticners do humbly beg the favour of your  
Lord Ship that your honour will grant and Settell one thing upon us  
which is that our childarn may be broatt up in the way of the Christian  
faith and our desire is that they may be Larnd the Lords prayer the  
creed and the ten commandements and that they may appeare Every  
Lord's day att Church before the Curatt to bee Exammond for our  
desire is that godlines Should abbound amongs us and wee desire  
that our Childarn be putt to Scool and Larnd to Reed through the Bybell  
which is all att prasant with our prayers to god for itt's good Success  
before your honour these from your humbell Servants in the Lord

my Riting is vary bad I whope yr honour will take the will for the deede  
I am but a poore SLave that writt itt and has no other time butt Sunday  
and hardly that att Sumtimes

September the 8th 1723

To the Right Reverrand father in god  
my Lord arch bishup of London

these with care

wee dare nott Subscribe any mans name to this for feare of our  
masters for if they knew that wee have Sent home to your honour  
wee Should goo neare to Swing upon the gallass tree

***This letter was first published in The William and Mary  
Quarterly, 3rd series, vol. LI, no.4, October 1994.***

***It is perhaps the earliest written plea by an enslaved person  
for freedom and better treatment because he/she has  
embraced Christianity.***

**PHOEBE BROWNRIGG  
TO HER DAUGHTER  
AMY NIXON**

*Edenton, North Carolina, September 13, 1835*

My dear daughter – I have for some time had hope of seeing you once more in this world, but now that hope is entirely gone forever. I expect to start next month for Alabama, on the Mississippi. Perhaps before you get this letter I may be on my way.

My dear daughter Amy, if we never meet in this world, I hope we shall meet in heaven, where we shall part no more. Although we are absent in body, we can be present in spirit. Then let us pray for each other, and try to hold out faithful to the end.

Your father and myself came down to see our grandchildren, brother Simon, and all our friends for the last time. I found your children just recovered from the measles. They all send their love to you. Your father, brother, and sisters join me in a great deal of love to you and my dear little grandchildren. Kiss them for their old grandmother.

Farewell, my dear child. I hope the Lord will bless you and your children, and enable you to raise them and be comfortable in life, happy in death, and may we all meet around our father's throne in heaven, never no more to part. Farewell, my dear child.

Your affectionate mother,

***A year or so after Ms. Brownrigg wrote this letter to her daughter, Amy Nixon and her husband Thomas were able to raise enough money to purchase their freedom, as well as the freedom of two of their seven children. Blassingame, page 22.***

**LOUISA ALEXANDER  
TO HER HUSBAND  
ARCHER ALEXANDER**

*Naylors Store, Missouri, November 16th, 1863*

My dear husband – I received your letter today and lost no time in asking Mr. Jim if he would sell me, and what he would take for me. He flew at me and said I would never get free only at the point of a bayonet, and there was no use in my ever speaking to him anymore about it. I don't see how i can ever get away, except you get soldiers to take me from the house, as he is watching me day and night. If I can get away, I will, but the people here are all afraid to take me away.

He is always abusing Lincoln, and calls him an old rascal. He is the greatest rebel under heaven. It is a sin to have him loose. He says if he had hold of Lincoln he would chop him up into mincemeat. I had good courage all along till until now, but now I am almost heart-broken. Answer this letter as soon as possible.

I am your affectionate wife,

Louisa Alexander

***Two weeks after writing to her husband Archer, Louisa Alexander escaped with her youngest daughter. In the 1870's, Archer Alexander served as the model for Thomas Ball's Freedom's Monument (Emancipation Memorial) in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C. Blassingame, page 119.***

## HENRY BIBB TO HIS FORMER OWNER

*Detroit, March 23rd, 1844*

To William Gatewood

Dear Sir – I am happy to inform you that you are not mistaken in the man whom you sold as property, but I thank God I am not property now, and am regarded as a man like yourself. And although I live far north, I am enjoying a comfortable living by my own industry. If you should ever chance to be travelling this way, and will call on me, I will use you better than you did me while you held me as a slave. Think not that I have any malice against you for the cruel treatment which you inflicted on me while I was in your power. As it was the custom of your country to treat your fellow men as you did me and my little family, I can freely forgive you.

I wish to be remembered in love to my aged mother and friends. Please tell her that if we should never meet again in this life, my prayer shall be to God that we may meet in heaven, where parting shall be no more.

You may perhaps think hard of us for running away from slavery. But as to myself, I have but one apology to make for it, which is this: I have only to regret that I did not start at an earlier period.

I should be pleased to hear from you again and should also be very happy to correspond with you often, should it be agreeable to yourself. I subscribe myself a friend to the oppressed – and Liberty forever.

Henry Bibb

***After many attempts, Henry Bibb escaped to Detroit in 1840. In 1850, after passage of the Fugitive Slave law, Bibb moved to Canada and founded the Refugees' Home Society and published a newspaper, Voice of the Fugitive. In 1852 he was elected a vice-president of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. Blassingame, page 48-49.***



## Sources

The Brownrigg, Archer, and Bibb letters can be found in the wonderfully annotated *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Ed. John Blassingame.

For further reading, please see *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* by Patrice Smith & Charles Johnson. Also see the thoroughly researched and comprehensive *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* by Pulitzer Prize winning author David Brion Davis.



**Founded in 1994, the Chester Children's Chorus provides an intensive, sophisticated, and joyful choral music experience to young people of the city of Chester, and supports their academic achievement and personal development.**

***The Chester Children's Chorus is an affiliated program of Swarthmore College and receives generous in-kind support from the College. The Chorus raises its own funds to cover all direct expenses; official tax receipts from charitable contributions to the Chorus come directly from the College.***