

# God's Trombones

## Seven Negro Sermons in Verse

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by James Weldon Johnson

Choral Part



Music by Gordon Myers

SATB, Baritone Solo and Brass

PARACLETE PRESS

# James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871. He was educated at Atlanta and Columbia Universities. He was among the first black men to break through the barriers of segregation, and was the first black admitted to the bar in Florida. He, along with his composer brother, J. Rosamund Johnson and their friend, Bob Cole, wrote a number of successful Broadway musicals and popular songs in the early 1900s. James Weldon Johnson wrote the poem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," J. Rosamund set it to music and the inspiring result is now considered by many to be the Negro National Anthem.

Mr. Johnson spoke fluent Spanish and was American Consul in Venezuela and in Nicaragua. He was Executive Director of the NAACP and was Professor of Creative Literature at Fisk University. His autobiography, "Along This Way," published in 1933, also has become an American Classic and is important reading for anyone interested in the history of Black America.

James Weldon Johnson died in 1938.



*A recording of this work is available on Gloriæ Dei Cantores 017 God's Trombones. An order of the recording may be placed simultaneously with octavo purchase.*

*Please refer to p. 130 for program notes.*

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dedicated to Grace Nail Johnson

# God's Trombones

A Prayer and Seven Negro Folk Sermons

## I. Listen, Lord – A Prayer

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

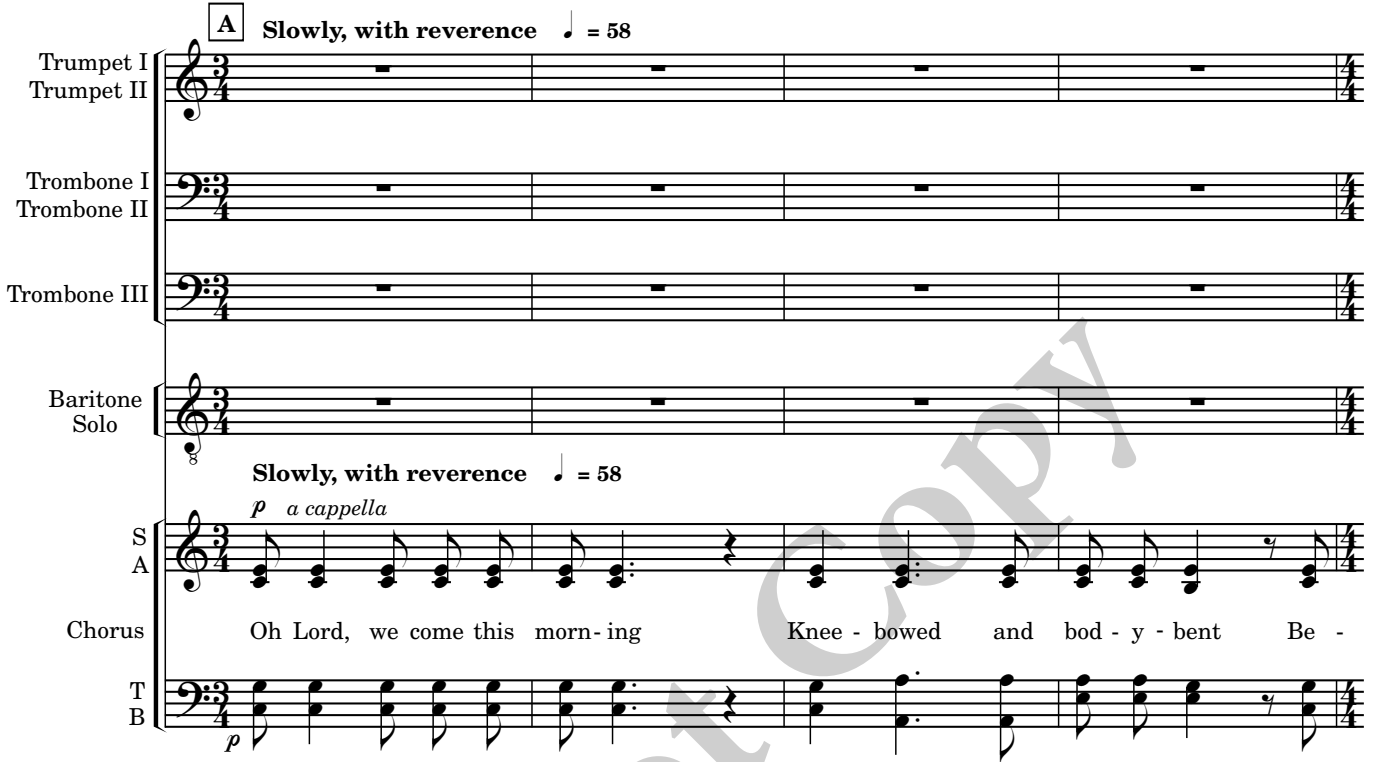
**A** Slowly, with reverence ♩ = 58

Trumpet I  
Trumpet II  
Trombone I  
Trombone II  
Trombone III  
Baritone Solo

8 Slowly, with reverence ♩ = 58  
*p* a cappella

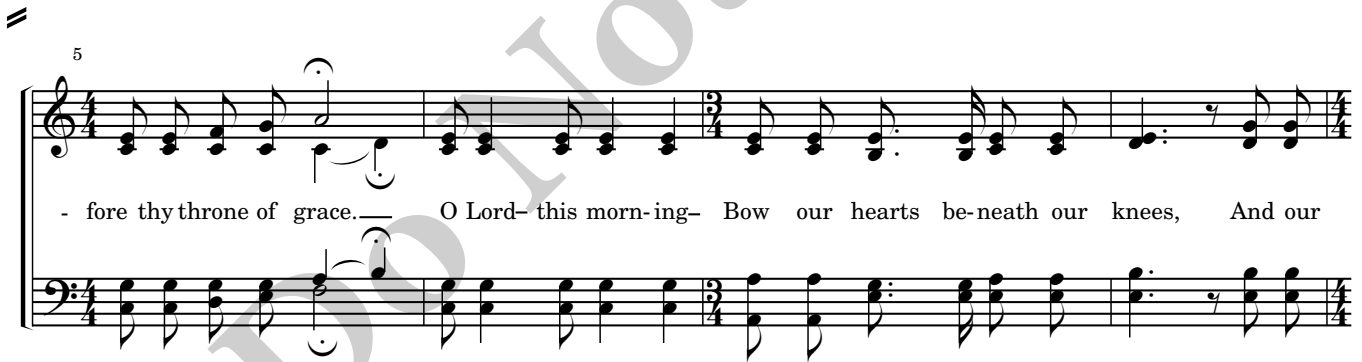
S  
A  
Chorus Oh Lord, we come this morn-ing Knee - bowed and bod - y - bent Be -

T  
B  
*p*



5

- fore thy throne of grace. — O Lord— this morn-ing— Bow our hearts be-neath our knees, And our



9

knees in some lone - some val - ley. We come this morn - ing— Like emp - ty pitch - ers to a full —

*mp* *p* *mf*

*mp* *p* *mf*



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13

— foun - tain, With no mer - its of our own. O Lord— o - pen up a win - dow of

17

heaven, And lean out far o - ver the bat - tle - ments of glo - ry, And lis - ten this morn - ing,

21

Lord, have mer - cy on

lis - ten this morn - ing, lis - ten this morn - ing. Lis - ten this morn - ing,

25

proud and dy - ing sin - ners — Sin - ners hang - ing o - ver the mouth — of hell, Who seem to

lis - ten this morn - ing, lis - ten this morn - ing, lis - ten this morn - ing,

28

love their dis - tance well. Lord — ride by this morn - ing —

lis - ten this morn - ing, lis - ten this morn - ing. Lis - ten this morn - ing,

31

*mp* *cresc.*

Mount your milk-white horse And ride, ride - a this morn - ing And in your ride, ride by old hell,

and lis - ten this morn - ing, and lis - ten this morn - ing,

34

*f* *cresc.* *mf* *p*

Ride by the din - gy gates of hell, And stop poor sin - ners in their

lis - ten this morn - ing, Stop poor

37

*mf* *mf*

head - long - plunge. And

sin - ners, And stop - poor - sin - ners in their head - long - plunge,

40

*p* *p*

stop poor sin - ners, and stop poor sin - ners in their head - long - plunge and

And stop poor sin - ners, And stop poor sin - ners, and stop poor sin - ners,

# II. The Creation

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

**A** **Largo** ♩ = 52  
with a feeling of space

*p*

Trumpet I  
Trumpet II

*p*

Trombone I  
Trombone II

*p*

Trombone III

*mp*

Baritone Solo

And God stepped out on space, \_\_\_\_\_

S  
A

Chorus

T  
B

6 *pp*

*pp*

*pp*

*f*

ad lib.

And he looked a-round and said: I'm lone -

11 *pp* ♩ = 69

*mf* ad lib.

*pp*

*pp*

*mf* *mp* ♩ = 69

ly - I'll make me a

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16

world. And far as the eye of God could see

21

Dark-ness cov-ered ev-'ry-thing, Black-er than a hun-dred mid-nights— Down-

25

— in a cy-press swamp. Then God smiled, And the light— broke,

31

And the dark-ness rolled up on one side,— And the light stood shin-ing on the



35 *p.* *mp rit.* **B**

oth-er, And God said: That's good! Then God reached out and took the

41

light in his hands, and God rolled the light a-round in his hands Un-

46 *p.* *pp* *mp*

- til he made the sun; And he set that sun a-blaz-ing in the heavens. And the

50 *p* *p* *p*

light that was left from mak-ing the sun God gath-ered it up in a shin - ing

# III. The Prodigal Son

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

**A** Crisply ♩ = 72

Trombone I *mp*

Trombone II *mp*

Trombone III *mp*

Baritone Solo

S A Chorus *mf*

T B

Young man— Young

6

*pp*

*pp*

man—

*p*

Young man— Young

*mf*

Your arm's too short to box with God.

10 **B** *p*

*p*

Solo *mf*

10

man—

*p*

Your arm's too short to box with God.

But Je - sus spake— in a par - a - ble,

15

And he said: A cer-tain man had two sons. Je- sus did-n't give this man-

19

— a name, But his name is God Al - migh-ty. And Je- sus did-n't call these sons-

23

— by name, But ev - 'ry young man, Ev - 'ry- where, Is one of these two—

27 *mp*

sons.— And the youn- ger son said to his fa - ther, He said:

30

Trb. III

Fa-ther, di-vide up the prop - er-ty, And give me my por- tion now.— And the

34

fa-ther with tears in his eyes said: Son, Don't leave your fa -

38

- ther's house. But the boy was stub-born in his head, And haugh-ty in his

42

heart, And he took his share of his fa-ther's goods, And went in - to a

47

far - off coun - try.

52

There comes a time, There comes a time When ev-'ry young man looks

# IV. Go Down Death

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

**A**

Baritone Solo

*a cappella*

Slowly (♩ = 60)

*p mp mf*

S  
A

Chorus

T  
B

Weep not, weep not, She is not dead; She's rest-ing in the bos-om of

Je - sus. weep no more; weep no more;

Je - sus. Heart - brok - en hus - band Grief - strick - en son

weep no more; She's on - ly just gone home.

She's on - ly just gone home.

Left - lone - some daugh - ter just gone home. She's on - ly just gone home.

*p mp mf cresc. rit. p*

**B** A tempo

17

*mf*

Day be-fore yes-ter-day morn-ing, God was look-ing down from his great, high hea-ven,

(Hum)

*mp*

20

Look-ing down on all his chil-dren, And his eye fell on Sis-ter Car-

(Hum)

(Hum)

23

-o-line, Toss-ing on her bed of pain. And God's big

(Hum)

*mp*

*p*

on— her bed— of pain.

*mp*

26

heart was touched with pi-ty, with the ev-er-last-ing pi-ty. And

(Hum)

*p*

*mp*

*mf*

*mp*

Hm.

*p*

29 *mf*

God sat back on his throne, And he com-mand-ed that tall, bright an-gel stand-ing at his

33 *f* *mp*

right— hand: Call me Death! And that tall, bright an-gel cried in a

Call me Death!

*f*

37 *mf* *f* *f*

voice that broke like a clap of thun-der:— Call Death!— Call Death!—

Call Death!—

*f*

42 *p* *mf*

And the e-cho sound-ed down the streets of heaven

Call Death!— Call Death! Call Death! Call

*f* *mf* *mp* *mp*





11

mp *pp*

mp *pp*

mp *pp*

birds, fly-ing through the trees, The gar-den looked like it was de -

15

**A**

mf *mp*

II

- sert - ed. And God called out and said: A - dam, A - dam, where

20

mp

mp

mp

p

p

f

mp

mf

art thou? And A-dam, with Eve be - hind his back, Came out from where he was

25

p

mf

p

p

hid - ing. And God said: A - dam, What hast thou done?

*f* ad lib. **A tempo**

30 *f* *mp* *pp* *p* **Slower** **A tempo**

Thou hast eat-en of the tree! And A-dam, with his

36 *pp* *p* *pp* *mp* **rit**

head-hung-down, Blamed-it on-the-wo-man.

40

40 *a cappella* *mf*

T I  
T II

Solo voices

B I  
B II

*mf*

Back there, six thou-sand years a-go, Man first-fell by-wo-man- Lord,— Lord, and he's

# VI. The Crucifixion

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

**A** **Dirge-like** ♩ = 76  
II *pp*

Trombone I  
Trombone II  
(Trombone I tacet)  
*pp*

Trombone III

Baritone Solo *p*  
Je - sus, my gen - tle

S  
A  
Chorus  
T  
B

6

Je - sus, walk - ing in the dark of the Gar - den — The Gar - den of Geth - sem - a - ne,

10

say - ing to the three dis - ci - ples: Sor - row is in my soul—

*mp*

15

E - ven un - to death; Tar-ry ye here a lit-tle while, And watch with

≡

**B**

20

me.

S  
A

20

Je - sus, My bur-dened Je - sus, Pray-ing in the dark of the

T  
B

*mp*

≡

24

Fa - ther, Oh,

24

Gar - den — The Gar-den of Geth-sem-a-ne. Say - ing:

*> p*

29

Fa - ther, This bit-ter cup, this bit-ter cup, Let it pass from

**C**  
Solo I  
*p*

*mp*  
me.

*mp*  
Je - sus, my sorrow-ing Je - sus, The sweat like drops of blood up - on his

*mp*

38

brow, — Talk-ing with his Fa-ther, While the three dis-ci-ples slept, — Say - ing:

# VII. Let My People Go

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

**A** ♩ = 84

Baritone Solo *mp* God said to Mo-ses:

S A *a cappella mp* (Hum) *mf* I've

T B *mp* *mf*

5

seen the aw - ful suf - fer - ing Of my peo - ple down in E - gypt.

*f*

9

And I can't stand it no long - er; Mo - ses, go down, Go down—

*mf f p mf ff*

*mf f p mf ff*

14

*mf*

and *mp* *mf* And

in - to E - gypt, tell old — Pha - raoh To let my peo - ple go.

*mp* *mf*

19

*f*

Mo - ses with his rod in — hand Went down and said to Pha - raoh: — Thus

*p* (Hum) —

*p* *f*

23

*p* *mf*

saith the Lord God of Is - ra - el, Let my peo - ple go. And

(Hum) — Let my peo - ple go.

*p* *mf*

27 Recit.

Pha - raoh looked at Mo - ses, He stopped still and looked at Mo - ses; And he

30 Spoken in tempo

said to Mo-ses: Who is this Lord? I know all the Gods of E- gypt,

**A tempo**

(Hum)

33

But I know no God of Is - ra - el; So go back, Mo - ses, and

(Hum)

35 **f** Singing *mp*

tell your God, I will not let this peo-ple go. But God said:—

(Hum) **f** *mf*

Go a -

39 **B**

- gain, Mo - ses, And say once more to Pha - raoh, Thus

**ff**

**ff**



# VIII. The Judgment Day

James Weldon Johnson

Gordon Myers

*f* *mf* *f* *mf* *mf* *f* *mf* *mf* *ff* *mf* *f* *fff* *f* *fff* *f*

*♩* = 96

Trumpet I  
Trumpet II

Trombone I  
Trombone II

Trombone III

Baritone solo

S  
A

Chorus

T  
B

In that great day, Peo- ple, in that great

5

day, God's a- going to rain down fire. God's a- going to sit in the

9 *mf* *p*

9 *mp* *f* *mf*

mid - dle of the air To judge the quick and the dead. To judge the quick and the

*mp* *f* *mf*

13 *mf* *p* **A**

Bar. Solo *mp* 3

13 *mp*

dead.

*mp*

18 *p* *p*

God's a-going to call for Ga-bri-el, That tall, bright an-gel, Ga-bri-el; And

22 *mf* *mf*

God's a-go-ing to say to him: Ga-bri-el, — Ga-bri-el, — Blow your sil-ver

26 *f* *f* *ff*

trum-pet, And wake the liv-ing na-tions. And Ga-briel's going to ask him:

## Program Notes

James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones—Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* was published by The Viking Press in 1927. Having enjoyed many reprintings, it has become a classic in American Literature.

In the Preface of his book, Mr. Johnson writes, "The history of the Negro preacher reaches back to Colonial days . . . in the two or three decades before the Civil War Negro preachers in the north, many of them well-educated and cultured, were courageous spokesmen against slavery and all its evils."

Mr. Johnson describes having heard an old time preacher in Kansas City: "He started intoning the old folk-sermon that begins with the Creation of the World and ends with the Judgment Day . . . It was a moment alive and quivering; and all the while the preacher held it in the palm of his hand. He was wonderful in the way he employed his conscious and unconscious art. He strode the pulpit up and down in what was actually a very rhythmic dance, and he brought into play the full gamut of his wonderful voice, a voice—what shall I say—not of an organ or a trumpet, but rather of a trombone, the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice—and with greater amplitude. He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded—he blared, he crashed, he thundered. I sat fascinated; and more I was, perhaps against my will deeply moved; the emotional effect upon me was irresistible. Before he had finished I took a slip of paper and I somewhat surreptitiously jotted down some ideas for the first poem, 'The Creation'."

Mr. Johnson ends his Preface with: "The old-time preacher is rapidly passing. I have here tried to fix something of him."

While browsing in a Times Square book store in the early 1950s, Aaron Douglas' dramatic art work on the cover of *God's Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson caught my eye. And the little book containing *Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (plus an opening prayer) has been my friend and companion ever since.

When it came time to choose a project for my doctoral thesis at Teachers College, Columbia University, I elected to set to music all seven of Mr. Johnson's sermons. Approaching the task, I kept the sound of a church choir, the lilt of a folk song and the vitality of the Negro Spiritual in my ear, and set out to blend them into one consistent concert idiom.

It was the summer of 1960. The *New York Pro Musica*, of which I was a performing member, had just completed some 45 performances of its revival of the Twelfth Century "The Play of Daniel" in England, Italy and one of our stages in France was at L'Abbaye de Royaumont, a few miles north of Paris. When our tour ended in England, my wife, Harriet, and I spent a day in London where we located and purchased two copies of *God's Trombones* before returning to Royaumont for a two week stay.

At Royaumont I was given a room with a piano in which to work. I gritted my teeth, tore apart the two copies of *God's Trombones*, and Scotch-taped the pages of each sermon together and mounted them on the wall. The texts of the *Seven Sermons*, then, were in full view before me. I marked with a pencil which part of the text might be sung by a preacher, which might be sung by his congregation (a mixed chorus), which might be accompanied and which might best be sung *a cappella*. Also, where the music might be loud, where soft, where fast or slow and where dramatic and where lyric. In short, like an architect, I created a set of plans, as it were, an outline indicating the form and the shape the new work was to take, even before sitting down to write a single note of music!

Of course, various melodic and rhythmic elements had suggested themselves over the years, so it should be said I did not begin composing with an empty head—that is, any emptier than it already was! As it turned out, I completed the music for five of the eight sections of the work—about 55 minutes worth—in thirteen days. Working so closely with Mr. Johnson's poems, I began to feel that we had become old and treasured friends.

Our *God's Trombones* was premiered at Teacher's College on February 21, 1964 by the Pascack Valley High School Choir from Hillsdale, New Jersey which was magnificently trained by their conductor, Donald McDaniel. The brass ensemble was assembled by a fellow doctoral candidate, Jim Eversole and I sang the solo part of the preacher myself.