

Robert Nathaniel Dett Biography

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Biography

African American composer, conductor, and music educator Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) elevated the African American folk spiritual into an art form.

Robert Dett was born in Ontario, Canada, on Oct. 11, 1882, the youngest of four children of educated and musically talented parents. In 1893 the family moved to Niagara Falls, NY, where they operated a tourist home.

Dett studied piano in childhood and composed several pieces, but his serious music training began in 1901 on entering Halstead Conservatory, Brockport, New York. In 1903 he enrolled at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, graduating in 1908 with a bachelor of music degree.

Dett began teaching in 1908 at Lane College, Jackson, Tennessee. From 1911 he taught in Lincoln Institute, Jefferson City, Missouri. But it was at Hampton Institute, Virginia, that he made his most significant creative contributions (1913-1932). He organized the Hampton Choral Union to bring the people of the community and Hampton Institute closer together, and the Musical Art Society, which presented one of the country's outstanding college concert programs; and he directed the famous Hampton Institute Choir. He also organized and directed the school of music.

In 1920 Dett studied at Harvard University, winning one prize for his essay, "The Emancipation of Negro Music," and another for the best composition in concerted vocal music, *Don't Be Weary Traveler*. Other honors included an honorary doctor of music degree from Howard University, Washington, D.C., in 1924; an honorary doctor of music degree from Oberlin College in 1926; and the Harmon Award for creative achievement in 1928.

Dett was an idealist who loved humanity and was dedicated to uplifting his race through education. As a teacher, he sought to inspire rather than to dictate. As a choral conductor, he received national and international fame. Critics highly praised the concerts given by the Hampton Institute Choir in New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia. In a 1930 goodwill tour the choir gave concerts in the capitals of seven European countries.

As a composer, Dett was a skillful craftsman in the language and style of the romanticists. He achieved his goal--to give African Americans pride by creating something which would be musically his own yet would bear comparison with other peoples' artistic utterances. His published compositions include 5 piano suites and 12 piano solos, 23 vocal solos, 46 choral works, 2 collections of spirituals (one collection comprising four volumes), an oratorio with orchestral accompaniment and a violin selection.