

Mr. Gamboa,

You have asked me to conduct a musicological comparison and analysis of the following two songs:

1. The US Copyright Office deposit copy of "If My Jesus Wills" by Louise Shropshire, which was composed sometime between 1932 and 1942.

Lyrics: "I'll Overcome, I'll Overcome, I'll Overcome Someday
If My Jesus Wills, I Do Believe, I'll Overcome Someday" and

2. A recording of the song, "We Will Overcome" as performed by Zilphia Horton (circa 1947).

Lyrics: "We Will Overcome, We Will Overcome, We Will Overcome Someday
Oh Down in my heart, I Do Believe, We Will Overcome Someday"

A transcription of Zilphia Horton's recording of "We Will Overcome" was prepared for the purposes of comparison.

After careful analysis, it seems likely and even probable that Louise Shropshire's "If My Jesus Wills" had some influence on the tune "We Will Overcome", which is believed to have been adapted into the freedom song, "We Shall Overcome". The lyrics to the songs give the most obvious connection, but musical aspects of the two tunes' choruses also show strong parallels in rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and formal characteristics.

Regarding rhythm, the most important parallel between "If My Jesus Wills" and "We Will Overcome" is the meter. Both tunes use a quadruple meter and both switch at will between duple and triple (or simple and compound) division of the beat. Both tunes also tend to show most rhythmic activity in the first half of each measure, with the second half of most measures consisting of a sustained note. However, much of that similarity is explained by the requirements of text setting. Since they have such similar texts, the rhythms are more likely to bear strong similarities of duration: "We Will Overcome" and "I'll overcome" both suggest a sustained note on the syllable "-come."

The harmonies of the two pieces (only implied in the case of "We Will Overcome," but written in Shropshire's tune) share much in terms of large-scale motion. Both choruses start on a tonic chord and (with small deviations) stay on that chord until the end of their first phrase on a dominant seventh chord. These harmonies relate to the similar form of the two tunes' choruses. Both are comprised of a single period of two four-measure phrases, the first ending on a half cadence and the last ending on the tonic. Furthermore, the first phrases of both tunes have similar structures. The first phrase of "We Will Overcome" takes the form of a textbook sentence structure: a melodic segment is sung ("We will overcome"), then repeated ("We will overcome") and followed by another melodic segment exactly twice as long as the original segment ("We will overcome some day"). "If My Jesus Wills" has a very similar structure, but the repetition of the first melodic segment is slightly altered, creating a near sentence-structure. Still,

the phrase structure of the two choruses is so similar in their harmonic, rhythmic, and lyrical content that it is very likely that one was modeled after the other.

CONCLUSION

In listening to these two songs, the ordinary “lay” listener would likely recognize the striking and substantial lyrical, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and formal similarities between them. Further study would likely identify additional similarities between these two works. My analysis shows that the substantial similarities between "If My Jesus Wills" and "We Will Overcome" almost surpass the possibility of coincidence. I therefore conclude that "I Will Overcome" as performed by Zilphia Horton in 1947 was not created independently of "If My Jesus Wills" composed by Louise Shropshire sometime between 1932 and 1942.

Report submitted on September 8, 2015 by:

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We Will Overcome

The image shows a musical score for the song "We Will Overcome". It consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody is written on a treble clef. The first staff contains the lyrics "We will o - ver - come, We will o - ver - come, We will o - ver - come some -". The second staff starts with a measure rest marked with a "4", followed by the lyrics "day _____ Oh down in my heart I do be - lieve We will o - ver - come some - day." The music features several triplet markings over groups of three notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

We will o - ver - come, We will o - ver - come, We will o - ver - come some -

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day _____ Oh down in my heart I do be - lieve We will o - ver - come some - day.