

Dear Mr. Gamboa:

Attached, you will find the report regarding a comparative and holistic analysis of “If My Jesus Wills” by Louise Shropshire and my own transcription of the recording of Zilphia Horton singing “We Will Overcome.” I have concluded the analysis, including an examination of text, rhythm, melody, phrasing, and other musical content.

The sections of the report are divided according to musical attribute: Text, Rhythm, and Melody. Each addresses its specific musical comparison, and they are summarized in the conclusion of my report.

Your help was greatly appreciated with the production of scores for the Shropshire copyrighted version and the audio recording of Zilphia Horton singing. Beyond this, all work in this report is my own.

I thank you kindly for the opportunity to work on this project, and I look forward greatly to the final product. If you have questions, please contact me at (262)-689-8163 or email me at [guokassv@mail.uc.edu](mailto:guokassv@mail.uc.edu).

Cordially yours,

Stephen V. Guokas,

## Musicological Report

On the basis of my musicological analyses of “If My Jesus Wills”, composed between 1932 and 1942 and copyrighted by Louise Shropshire in 1954 and the recording of Zilphia Horton singing “We Will Overcome” from around 1947, I have found that these two songs share many substantial musical characteristics. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the text of both songs, which I have included below.

### TEXT

My analysis shows that the text setting for the two songs is identical. Both consist of short, one-measure fragments that combine to form four measure phrases. This is emphasized through identical punctuation within the two works; this punctuation determines where the breaks, or pauses, occur in the music. Horton’s 1947 performance

of “We Will Overcome” documents slight adaptations to Shropshire’s original text. For example, Horton sings, “*We will* overcome”; as opposed to Shropshire’s “*I’ll* overcome” demonstrating a change in pronouns. These changes are marked below. In addition to the extraordinary textual similarities; I find that the style of declamation, as well as musical phrasing demonstrate that “We Will Overcome” as sung by Zilphia Horton is almost certainly derived from Shropshire’s “If My Jesus Wills”.

#### RHYTHM

Rhythmically, “If My Jesus Wills” and “I Will Overcome” are also almost identical. The major difference has to do with the text change of “I’ll” to “We will”, and the subsequent replacement of a single note in Shropshire’s version with two notes in Horton’s version. This was done for purely practical purposes: Horton has two syllables, and thus needs two notes, one per syllable. There also exists a slight difference in the “o-” of “overcome”; in this case, Shropshire has an extra note. This extra note is simply an ornament, or musical decoration, to the line, “I’ll overcome.” Its absence from Horton’s version is likely due to Horton hearing this song from the workers themselves--probably a simplified version of Shropshire’s song, which lacked the decoration.

#### MELODY

When one examines the melody, one finds strong differences between the songs. Zilphia Horton’s version emphasizes the third and fifth scale degrees, while Shropshire’s focus seems to be on tonic and the fifth. However, musical cadences, that is, the points of rest, fall on the same harmonic material, and the formal structure of the melody in both is, as the text, identical (see Table 1).

This melodic difference can be explained rather easily if one considers the oral mode of transmission for songs within the African-American spiritual tradition. Within this tradition, it is not uncommon for the text of one song to have many different melodies associated with it, though each would have identical or near identical phrase structures. This is also evident in the performance practices of this tradition; the same song, with the same text, might be performed completely differently depending on the denomination (Baptist, Adventist, Methodist, etc.), the specific Church or congregation; even the same choir for different services can interpret the same piece in a completely new manner. This corresponds well to how Zilphia Horton claims she knew the song, as she says that she heard it sung by a black woman, purportedly Lucille Simmons, at a union rally.

#### CONCLUSION

Taking this all into consideration, it is almost a certainty that Zilphia Horton singing, “I Will Overcome” was in fact performing a slightly adapted version Louise Shropshire’s song, “If My Jesus Wills, which was widely popular among African American congregations from the 1930’s to the 1950’s. As documented by independently recorded interviews, “If My Jesus Wills” was commonly known as “I’ll Overcome” for its repetitive refrain, which may have led to the erroneous title “We Will Overcome”. The analytical evidence is overwhelming: when Zilphia Horton sang “We Will Overcome” circa 1947, she would have had to have been familiar with some iteration of Louise Shropshire song, “If My Jesus Wills”. A comparative holistic analysis reveals nearly identical text, rhythms, and phrasing which strongly suggest that the two songs have one

source. In print (and in copyright) I conclude that this source is Louise Shropshire's "If My Jesus Wills".

These analyses bring new insight to the study of "We Shall Overcome", a song that the U.S. Library of Congress has called, "The Most Powerful Song of the Twentieth Century". An iconic freedom song that has been performed by musicians all over the globe including Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bruce Springsteen, to name a few. This study demonstrates that the song, with a text now slightly adjusted to "We *Shall* Overcome", finds its roots ultimately in the copyrighted song, "If My Jesus Wills" by Louise Shropshire.

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