

## NJ State Song Report

There is much disagreement over how to resolve the NJ state song impasse. Some feel that we should find a recognizable Broadway or popular tune; some feel that the state song should be “jazzy” and upbeat, and some feel that, because more than one piece has vied for the honor, the issue is contentious and best left unresolved.

Well, if one is looking for a Broadway or popular tune, only three state songs fit that category: Oklahoma, New York, and Georgia, and the latter two are not even about their respective states; one is about a city, the other an allegorical love song.

Seven states use pre-existing traditional melodies: Iowa, Maryland, and Michigan are all set to “O Tannenbaum” (!); Connecticut uses “Yankee Doodle”; Kansas sings “Home on the Range”, Louisiana: “You Are My Sunshine”, and Florida uses Stephen Foster’s politically incorrect “Swanee River”.

If one thinks that state songs should be “upbeat”, note that out of our 49 state songs, 34 are stately and majestic. Only 15 are “upbeat”. The stately character of two thirds of our state songs is because, like national anthems, they comprise a subgenre of ceremonial music that requires certain conventions of decorum. Fittingly, the conservative settings of most of these pieces avoid a specifically dated “snazzy” style (1950’s rock, 1920’s fight song, or contemporary “top ten” pop for example). Our own National Anthem, and “America the Beautiful” are both stately works. “New Jersey My Home” is a stately work.

From this we can conclude that our State Song should be an elegant, dignified piece. And it should be imperative that the lyrics are exceptionally well crafted and suited directly to their purpose. To address these issues, a little listening is necessary (we are, after all, talking about music).

Return to the “Music” section of the website (where you found this report). Scroll down to the two videos. Start with the second video, labeled “A&B”.

In this video are very brief openings of four ratified state songs. Group A is comprised of two that are, self-evidently, beautifully written: Minnesota and Oregon. The songs in “Group B”, Pennsylvania and S. Dakota, demonstrate that selecting a song that is upbeat or “pop” in style can yield uneven results. This comparison is very revealing.

Then click on the upper video (it is the one with a still photo of a choir singing). A single hearing easily puts this work into the “A” group (the total listening time for both videos is 4’18”).

It is also highly recommended that you go back to the home page and click on the “Classroom” button. Scroll through a breakdown of the lyrics of “New Jersey My Home”. You will find that it is a painstakingly crafted geography and history lesson, couched in competently written verse, and containing more informational content than most of the other state songs (listening to all 49 of them bears this out).

That is to say, “New Jersey My Home” is worthy of ratification by virtue, not only of its quality, but, just as importantly, its style. This is what state songs sound like.

There is yet another reason for selecting “New Jersey My Home” to be our Official State Song. Significantly, it is the only work given top recommendation out of 243 other works in a competition held by the New Jersey Council on the Arts in 1996. The NJCOA selected a panel of professional composers and songwriters as judges, the only qualified body ever assembled to make this decision, and they chose my piece. Ratifying “New Jersey My Home” would at last honor the rightful winner of that competition, and acknowledge the NJCOA’s rightful final word on the matter (this also makes for an easy and obvious defense of the proposed resolution).

Dissenting opinions on this issue are inevitable. Read up on Maya Lin’s 1982 Vietnam Wall Memorial in Washington DC, referred to at its unveiling as “a monument to defeat,” and a “black gash of shame,” and which is now universally acknowledged as a masterwork.

That is to say, unanimity must not be the goal (how many bills before any legislative body have *ever* passed unanimously!) Rather, it is to end legislative bickering, take advantage of a properly crafted NJCOA-sanctioned submission, and to resolve the issue.

And dismissing the issue entirely because of multiple contenders is, simply put, faulty thinking. There will always be multiple contenders for this, and the longer you wait the more contenders there will be. Letting them pile up just complicates things; dismissing it doesn’t make it go away; we remain the only state in the country without a state song. The NJCOA did the job for you: the panel combed through 243 compositions and presented their no.1 choice. You have your winner; settle this once and for all. 49 states have done it. Join the club.

I would like to add that I am qualified to present this material: I hold a PhD in music composition from CUNY, and have two published choral works, with numerous performances of my music by professional and semi-professional choral and chamber ensembles in New Jersey, Boston, NYC, Wash. DC, Spain, and Italy. In addition, for seventeen years I taught choral music, music theory, and composition at the Bergen County Academies, recently rated the fifth best high school in the country.

Continuing to dismiss the issue because it is a low priority doesn’t make any sense, as New Jersey has a State Bird, a State Candy, and (I am not making this up), a State Dirt. Simply put, it is time to resolve this.