

Rainbow Round My Shoulder arr. Robert DeCourmier

Background:

John A. Lomax, a respected American ethnomusicologist who recorded folk music all over the country included among his recordings, the song *Goin' Home* from which "Rainbow" is derived. In his book, "American Ballads and Folk Songs" published in 1934, he explained that the line "Got a rainbow tied all 'round my shoulder" refers to the "Rainbow" as "the arc of a swinging pick, probably going so fast it becomes red hot." This song was included in a section of his book called "Songs from Southern Chain Gangs".

Recording of an actual chain gang – on a different song but with a similar “axe rhythms”.

From John Lomax’s First Southern Prison Recordings 1933

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O3vEOwFuOo>

Go about six minutes into this recording to hear a similar song to “Rainbow.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWWgN7837Tk>

This is a “chain-gang” song and would have been sung to rhythms of work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4F6OfjIHYk>

Vocal tone: Think full, robust, rich in tone with open rounded vowels.

Phrasing: The melody is repetitive. Lean into the half note “f” in each “d”-”f”- “d” phrase. With 2 syllable words at the end of phrases accent the first syllable and taper the second as in “shoulder”, “mornin”, “letter” etc.

Diction: Sing the dialect as written; round vowels are appropriate.

From the arranger: “The sound (wah!) which appears in the vocal parts should be a percussive breathy sound one makes when swinging a sledge hammer or a pickaxe.”

Breathing: All phrases are short so breathing should not be a problem. Since this is a work song, your breathing should parallel how you would breathe swinging an axe.

Dynamics: Dynamic markings indicate that the song simply builds very gradually in dynamics.

It is one long crescendo.

Texture: The song begins with all voices in unison (maybe low for high tenor voices) pages 3-5.

It grows to 2 part – pages 6-8, 3 part – pages 9 -10, and then 4 part to the end. The voicing magnifies the gradual crescendo of the dynamics.

Articulation: Observe accents that are found throughout the score. Crescendo notes that are tied across the barline (last verse, tenor II).

Key changes: Be ready for them!

