

JOAN SZYMKO

*Commissioned by GALA Choruses / [www.GalaChoruses.org](http://www.GalaChoruses.org)  
for GALA Festival 2020 in Minneapolis, MN*

## Lifting As We Climb

[libretto]

Commemorating the 100th Anniversary  
of the Ratification of the 19th Amendment  
and  
A Call to Protect the Emblem of Equality:  
THE VOTE

3 movements with interlude  
for  
SSAA CHORUS  
piano, alto saxophone & drum set,  
Narrators & Dramatic Speakers

## SPEAKING ROLES

**Narrators:** provide background information

**Speakers:** voices of historical figures, in their own words

NARRATOR 1

NARRATOR 2

SPEAKER 1: Lucretia Mott (1793–1880)

SPEAKER 2: Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906)  
Carrie Chapman Catt (1859–1947)

SPEAKER 3: Elizabeth Cady Stanton

SPEAKER 4: Lucy Stone (1818–1893)  
Alice Paul (1885–1977)  
Delores Huerta (1930–)

SPEAKER A: Sojourner Truth (1795–1883)  
Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954)  
Congressman John Lewis (1940–)

SPEAKER B: Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964)  
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper  
(1825–1911)  
Ida B. Wells (1862–1931)  
Stacy Abrams (1973–)

note:

It is recommended that choruses reach out to their respective communities to enlist the services of prominent activists and/or theatrical actors. Speakers A & B must be performed by African American women.

Epigraph (p.ii) and Epilogue (p.13) are *not to be performed*, but may be included in a concert program.

# Lifting As We Climb

*Hundreds of women  
gave the accumulated  
possibilities of an entire lifetime,  
thousands gave years of their lives,  
hundreds of thousands gave constant interest,  
and such aid as they could.  
It was a continuous, seemingly endless  
chain of activity...  
Young suffragists who helped forge the  
last links of that chain  
were not born when it began.  
Old suffragists who forged the first links  
were dead when it ended.<sup>1</sup>*

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poem, "What We Do—Now" ©Ellen Hagen

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<sup>1</sup> "The Women's Century 1820-1920", by Carrie Chapman Catt; Commencement message to Sweet Briar College, June 9, 1936 [www.loc.gov/rr/mss/text/catt.html#speech](http://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/text/catt.html#speech)

# LIFTING AS WE CLIMB

libretto conceived and created by Joan Szymko  
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## CHORUS

### Song No 1: "What We Do—Now"

We mourn, we bless,  
we blow, we wail, we  
wind—down, we sip,  
we spin, we blind, we  
bend, bow & hem. We  
hip, we blend, we bind,  
we shake, we shine,  
shine. We lips & we  
teeth, we praise & protest.  
We document & we  
drama. We demand &  
we flow, fold & hang  
loose. We measure &  
we moan, mourn & whine  
low. & we live, and we  
breathe. & some of the time,  
we don't.  
Tonight, I am here. Here  
& tired. Here & awake,  
sure, & alive. Yes here &  
still, still here, still & here  
& still awake & still still  
alive.

[song ending flows directly into  
underscore A: "Seneca Falls"]

## Narrative No.1: Shaking the Foundation

NARRATOR 1

Yes, we are here and tired. Tired of fighting again and again those powers that seek to disfranchise citizens of these United States. But as radical reformer, Lucretia Mott once said:

SPEAKER 1 (LUCRETIA MOTT)

"Any great change must expect opposition, because it shakes the very foundation of privilege."

NARRATOR 1

We are here and awake... to the reality that "the right to vote remains as fragile as it is fundamental"<sup>1</sup> and that the vote is a fundamental right of citizenship. We are still here and still alive and singing and commemorating and celebrating those radical reformers who led the way in—

*stepping forward*  
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 SPEAKER 2 (SUSAN B. ANTHONY)

"Stirring up the world to recognize the rights of women"

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*acknowledging SPEAKER 2 as if to introduce  
 her to the audience*

NARRATOR 1

Susan B Anthony

SPEAKER 2 (ANTHONY)

"Forget what the world thinks of you stepping out of your place; Think your best thoughts, speak your best words, work your best works, looking to your own conscience for approval."

SPEAKER 2 *turning to* SPEAKER 3

SPEAKER 3 (Elizabeth Cady Stanton)

"Did I not feel that the time had come for the questions of women's wrongs to be laid before the public? Did I not believe that woman herself must do this work, for women alone understand the height, depth, the breadth of her degradation"

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<sup>1</sup> "Give Us the Ballot" by Ari Berman

NARRATOR 1

Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke these words in her address to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, a groundbreaking gathering of progressive men and women who met to discuss the “social, civil and religious conditions and rights of Woman.”<sup>2</sup> Stanton was instrumental in drafting the convention’s Declaration of Sentiments with resolutions fashioned after the Declaration of Independence:

SPEAKER 3 (Stanton)

“We hold these truths to be self evident that all men and women are created equal... The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world:”

NARRATOR 1

Those facts laid out in the Sentiments described gross inequalities in women’s education, property rights, employment, religion, and in marriage. Upon marrying, a woman merged with her husband and became “civilly dead.” She had no rights of custody over her own children.

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SPEAKER 3 (Stanton)

“He has endeavored in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.”

NARRATOR 1

Over two days, the sentiments and resolutions were debated, especially:

SPEAKER 3 (Stanton)

“Resolved, that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise”

– Underscoring ends–

NARRATOR 1

Stanton’s insistence on including a resolution demanding the vote was thought too radical by most of those assembled, including Lucretia Mott:

SPEAKER 1 (LUCRETIA MOTT)

“Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous!”

NARRATOR 1

It met great opposition but with the support of Stanton’s friend, the esteemed Frederick Douglass, the demand for suffrage passed.

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<sup>2</sup> quoted from the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments,

NARRATOR 1

The torch had been lit, a movement begun! Over the following decade, National and regional Women's Rights Conventions were held annually. "The circle of women engaged in the debate widened steadily,

*[as each woman's name is called- each corresponding speaker steps forward]*

At the center were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the new movement's philosopher; Lucretia Mott, its moral force; Lucy Stone, its voice; and Susan Anthony, its organizer."<sup>3</sup>

SPEAKER 3 (Stanton)

"Our religion, laws, customs, are all founded on the belief that woman was made for man."

SPEAKER 1 (MOTT)

"The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source."

SPEAKER 4 (Lucy Stone)

"In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."

SPEAKER 2 (ANTHONY)

"Organize, agitate, educate must be our war cry."

NARRATOR 1

Stanton's and Anthony's relationship, begun in 1851, and lasting over a half-century was to become one of the most consequential partnerships in American history. "They were collaborators and co-conspirators, confidantes and critics, clashing sisters. Stanton was 'thought' and Anthony 'action'"<sup>4</sup>

SPEAKER 3 (Stanton)

"I forged the thunderbolts and she fired them!"

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<sup>3</sup>"The Women's Hour" by Elaine Weiss

<sup>4</sup>"The Women's Hour" by Elaine Weiss

## NARRATOR 1

Like Mott and Anthony, many of the early advocates for women's rights drew upon their Quaker values upholding gender equality. All of the early advocates for women's rights were also ardent abolitionists. The two causes sprang from the same seeds of moral reform.

## SPEAKER 1 (MOTT)

"Let woman then go on—not asking favors, but claiming as a right the removal of all hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being."

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## CHORUS

## Song No 2: "Organize, Educate, Educate!"

I ask no favors, I ask no favors for my sex;  
all I ask of my brethren is that they will  
take their feet from off our necks!

Organize, agitate, educate!  
We'll have our rights;  
see if we don't;  
and you can't stop us from them;  
see if you can; You may hiss as much as you like,  
but it's coming'

Organize, agitate, educate!  
We'll win the vote; see if we don't.  
It is the emblem of equality,  
the guarantee of liberty.

## SPEAKER 2 (ANTHONY)

"We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever."

## SPEAKER B (Anna Julia Cooper)

"We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the injustice of all special favoritism, whether of sex, race, country, or condition.  
If one link of the chain is broken, the chain is broken."

**CHORUS**

Organize, agitate, educate!  
 Roll up your sleeves, set your mind to making history,  
 and wage such a fight for liberty that the  
 whole world will respect our sex.

To the wrongs that need resistance,  
 To the right that needs assistance,  
 To the future in the distance, give yourselves!

**SPEAKER A (Mary Church Terrell)**

"The elective franchise is withheld from one half of its  
 citizens...because the word 'people,' by an unparalleled  
 exhibition of lexicon graphical acrobatics, has been  
 turned and twisted to mean all who were shrewd and  
 wise enough to have themselves born boys instead of  
 girls, or who took the trouble to be born white  
 instead of black."

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**CHORUS**

Organize, agitate, educate!  
 Roll up your sleeves, set your mind to making history,  
 and wage such a fight for equality  
 and the guarantee of liberty.  
 We'll have our rights!

**SPEAKER 4 (Lucy Stone)**

"Now all we need is to continue to speak the truth  
 fearlessly, and we shall add to our number those who  
 will turn the scale to the side of equal and  
 full justice in all things."

**SPEAKER 2 (ANTHONY)**

"Men, their rights and nothing more;  
 women, their rights. and nothing less."

**CHORUS**

Organize!

## Narrative No.2: We Are All Bound Up Together

### NARRATOR 2

At the first National Women's Rights convention after the Civil War, suffrage was the hot topic: A 15th Amendment to the Constitution had been proposed in Congress, establishing voting rights of black male citizens,— Stanton and Anthony had lobbied mightily to get the 15th to also outlaw discrimination in voting based on sex as well as on race. They were outraged that women had been shut out of the franchise at this opportune moment. Stanton lashed out with virulent, racist language decrying the black man as unqualified and illiterate. For many years she had agitated mightily for emancipation; Now, truly, she felt — it was the woman's turn for freedom!

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a prominent African-American abolitionist, poet, and suffragist rose to speak:

### *stepping forward*

Speaker B (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper)

"We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul."

### NARRATOR 2

Harper would have none of the equivalencies being made between women's status and slavery.

Speaker B (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper)

"You white women speak here of rights,  
I speak of wrongs...

This grand and glorious revolution

[piano underscore B begins:

"We Are All Bound Up Together#1"

which has commenced, will fail to reach its climax of success, until throughout the length and breadth of the American Republic, the nation shall be so color-blind, as to know no man by the color of his skin or the curl of his hair. It will then have no privileged class, trampling upon and outraging the unprivileged classes, but will be then one great privileged nation, whose privilege will be to produce the loftiest manhood and womanhood that humanity can attain."

### CHORUS

(joining underscoring, singing gently)

We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity.

*Narrator waits one beat at song closure*

NARRATOR 2

—And yet, the Fifteenth Amendment *divided* the Movement—

[beat]

While many continued to support its passage and the goal of universal suffrage, Stanton and Anthony became determined in their belief that women needed their own constitutional Amendment:

SPEAKER 2 (ANTHONY)

**“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”<sup>5</sup>**

SPEAKER A (Mary Church Terrell)

A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two - both sex and race... Colored men have only one— that of race. Colored women are the only group in this country who have two heavy handicaps to overcome, that of race as well as that of sex.

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NARRATOR 2

“Yet despite the blatant racism and class bias of the women’s suffrage movement, black women, discouraged and betrayed, continued to work for their right to vote, both as blacks and as women, through their own suffrage organizations.”<sup>6</sup> Until recently, the story of Black women suffragists had not been told—while there were important figures from the beginning, as the 19th century came to a close, a legion of black women from both North and South formed women’s clubs dedicated to educational uplift and social justice. Led by women such as Mary Church Terrell, (*Speaker A nods to the audience*) more and more black women joined the cause of women’s suffrage.

[underscore C begins: “Terrell speech”]

SPEAKER A (Terrell)

And so, lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go, struggling and striving, and hoping that the buds and blossoms of our desires will burst into glorious fruition ere long. With courage, born of success achieved in the past, with a keen sense of the responsibility which we shall continue to assume, we look forward to a future large with promise and hope. Seeking no favors because of our color, nor patronage because of our needs, we knock at the bar of justice, asking an equal chance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Complete text of the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment “ later passed as the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Andolsen, *Daughters of Jefferson, daughters of bootblacks*”; racism and Ameerican feminism (MAcon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2986)

<sup>7</sup> The National Association of Colored Women (NAWC) which Terrell co-founded and served as first president, adopted “Lifting As We Climb” as their motto.

[piano underscoring ends]  
(switch Narrators)

NARRATOR 1

Sadly, many white suffragists working for the cause did not extend an equal chance to their African-American sisters. The National American Women's Suffrage Association—the NAWSA, with Anthony at its helm, employed a 'Southern strategy' to appease the segregationists— as it was widely believed that gaining women's suffrage would be impossible without their support. *"The seeds of distrust planted in this era echoed the strained relationship between white feminists and black women in the women's rights movement of the 1960s and 70s,"*<sup>8</sup>—and to this present day.

NARRATOR 2

Between the Civil War and the final passage and ratification of the 19th amendment, two more generations of women's rights activists had taken on the fight. Again, there were divisions— this time over strategy.

Alice Paul, young, fearless, willing to use new, militant tactics, split from the NAWSA<sup>9</sup> and formed the National Women's Party. *"From parades to picketing the White House, to prison time, the NWP gained maximum national publicity for the movement."*<sup>10</sup>

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NARRATOR 1

Carrie Chapman Catt, to whom Susan B Anthony passed the torch, was every bit the organizer as Anthony, but was wary of radical tactics. She believed in a more diplomatic approach. Ultimately, Alice Paul and Carrie Catt, militancy and diplomacy— both carried the 19th Amendment through to its passage in Congress in 1919. In a dramatic political finale, Tennessee became the required 36th state to ratify it, and on August 18th, 1920 the Susan B Anthony Amendment became the law of the land.

NARRATOR 2

"While we rightly celebrate the bold and selfless efforts of the generations of women of all races and backgrounds who fought valiantly for the vote, let us

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<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Ladies" by Angela P. Dodson

<sup>9</sup> NAWSA: National American Women's Suffrage Association

<sup>10</sup> "A Women's Crusade: Alice Paul and the Battle for the Ballot" by Mary Walton

also remember... that the 19th Amendment is inherently intertwined with the 15th Amendment and the ongoing struggle for voting rights.”<sup>11</sup>

NARRATOR 1

In the decades following the passage of women’s suffrage, just as Jim Crow laws and violent threats had kept black men from exercising *their 15th Amendment rights*— black women were routinely turned away from the ballot box. Not until decades later, with passage and renewal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, were the tools of disenfranchisement finally outlawed. The VRA’s mandated federal oversight ensured that state and local governments could not pass laws or policies that deny American citizens the equal right to vote based on race.

NARRATOR 2

On June 25, 2013, the Supreme Court swept away a key provision of this landmark civil rights law in *Shelby County v. Holder*. That decision has led to a great resurgence in voter suppression laws. “What better way to honor the suffrage centennial than to address the ways in which citizens continue to be disenfranchised by voter suppression measures that function much like those from over a century ago?”<sup>12</sup>

[underscore D begins:

“What We Do—Now:reprise”]

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(SPEAKERS A & B alternating with accelerating pace)

SPEAKER B

Voter ID laws

SPEAKER A

closure of polling places forcing long lines

SPEAKER B

misinformation campaigns

SPEAKER A

increased restrictions on early voting

SPEAKER B

purging of voter rolls

SPEAKER A (John Lewis)

“Voting rights are under attack in America. There’s a deliberate and systematic attempt to prevent millions of elderly voters, young voters,

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<sup>11</sup> “How racism almost killed women’s right to vote” by Kimberly A Hamlin

<sup>12</sup> “How racism almost killed women’s right to vote” by Kimberly A Hamlin

students, minority and low income voters from exercising their constitutional right to engage in the democratic process.”<sup>13</sup>

NARRATOR 1

Tonight, we are Here & awake! We praise and we protest. And so let us also celebrate *today's* reformers and activists—

[piano underscoring ends]

NARRATOR 2

In Atlanta, the **New Georgia Project** works with local and national civil rights organizations to defend voting rights and advocate for policies that expand access to voting.

NARRATOR 1

**VoteRiders**, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization works to educate voters on ensuring they have the correct form of ID to successfully vote in their state.

NARRATOR 2

**Rock the Vote** provides guides for voter registration. This non-profit's mission is "to engage and build the political power of young people."

NARRATOR 1

Ahead of the 2020 election, **Four Directions**, a Native American voting rights advocacy group plans to work together with tribes to establish formal mailing addresses for voters in North Dakota and elsewhere, to ensure that Voter ID laws do not hinder Native voters.

SPEAKER 4 (Delores Huerta)

"Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world."

[piano underscore E begins:

"We Are All Bound Up Together" #2]

SPEAKER B (Stacy Abrams)

"This is the next battle for our democracy, one where all eligible citizens can have their say about the vision we want for our country.

SPEAKER A (Coretta Scott King)

"Struggle is a never ending process. Freedom is never really won, you earn it and win it in every generation."

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<sup>13</sup> Congressman John Lewis, in an impassioned speech on the floor of the House of Representatives

*stepping downstage as near to audience as possible*  
 (remaining reader lines said "off-book")

SPEAKER 1 (Mott)

"Any great change must expect opposition, because it shakes the very foundation of privilege."

*stepping downstage & joining hands with Mott*

SPEAKER 4 (Lucy Stone)

...all we need is to continue to speak the *truth* fearlessly, and we shall add to our number those who will turn the scale to the side of equal and full justice in all things.

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*as each speakers steps downstage she  
 joins hands with Mott and Stone*

SPEAKER B (Ida B. Wells)

The way to right the wrongs is to turn the light of *truth* upon them!

SPEAKER 3 (Stanton)

*Truth* is the only safe ground to stand upon.

Stanton and Anthony exchange a "knowing"  
 glance as they join hands

SPEAKER 2 (Anthony)

Failure is impossible!

SPEAKER A (Sojourner Truth)

"Life is a hard battle anyway. If we laugh and sing a little as we fight the good fight of freedom, it makes it all go easier. I will not allow my life's light to be determined by the darkness around me."

[underscoring becomes intro to final song]

CHORUS

Song No 3: We Shake We Shine

The struggle is never ending.  
 Freedom is never really won. You earn it and win it in each generation.

You earn it and win it for all of us,  
every one of us, for all of us— for the people.

We the people— Shake the foundations of privilege  
We the people —Shine the light of truth  
Right the wrongs!  
Press on! Hold on for the common good.

We shake, we shake  
We shine, we shine  
Onward and upward,  
Upward and onward—  
Lifting as we climb.

The struggle is never ending.  
Keep your hands on the plow—  
Upending hypocrisy,  
Defending democracy  
Demanding equality  
It's our turn, it's our time—  
Our turn, our time is now!

We shake, we shine  
Onward and upward,  
Upward and onward—  
Lifting as we climb!

**END**

[duration: 28:00]

### Epilogue

*(for written program— not to be spoken)*

“We shall someday be heeded, and when we shall have our  
amendment to the constitution of the United States,  
everybody will think it was always so, just exactly  
as many young people believe that all the privileges, all the freedoms, all the  
enjoyments which woman now possesses always were hers.

They have no idea how every single inch of ground  
that she stands upon today has been gained by the  
hard work of some little handful of women in the past.”

— Susan B Anthony

