

- **Lift Up Your Voice: The Gospel Experience**

- **World Rhythms**

Notes on performing music from the African and African-American tradition

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**Techniques:** scooping, sliding, throwing, shouting, back-phrasing: *how* you get to the note is more important than the note itself.

**Rhythm** is not about counting, it is about feeling it in the body. Groove is more than rhythm, it is the intrinsic “feel”, like a Viennese waltz rhythm. The voice is a rhythm instrument as well as a lyric instrument. Singing is often in partnership with dance and percussion.

**Movement:** whether choreographed or not, There is almost always movement connected with singing. Use gesture freely.

### **Singing African Music**

**Tone:** forward, nasal, bright, and brassy. Straight tone, no vibrato. Outdoor music, to be heard over drums.

**pronunciation:** no diphthongs. Vowels in West African languages have pure, straight vowels.

**Ululation:** a high tongue-trilling over the top of tutti sections, a spontaneous cry of joy, encouragement, energy.

**Phrasing:** Often loose and behind the beat.

**Form:** spontaneous, improvised. Can begin with one voice and add as you go. Add harmonies to vary texture.

### **Singing Gospel Music**

**Tone:** a blend of African tone with Opera. bright, brassy, full, soloistic, with wide and slow vibrato. Sing with attitude. This is not “pretty” singing. Get nasty!

**Pronunciation:** Gospel and blues originated in the U.S. South and the pronunciation reflects this: “I” becomes “ah”, “my” is “mah”, “hand” is “heh-yund”. “I Got a Home in the Rock” becomes “ah gaht uh hah-oh-mm iyun d’ Rahk”

**Consonants and vowels:** sing through phonating consonants such as Y, M, N, L  
Brighten and accent plosives like P, K, G.  
Use a glottal attack at accent vowels: “a-le-lu-ia”. Get some air in front of “h” words such as halleluia”.

**Diphthongs:** pronounced, can create powerful musical tension, eg. “home” becomes “hah-oh-mm”.

**Accents:** each phrase has its “forward and back”. eg: “Can’t no-bo-dy do me like Je-sus.”

Exaggerate to create groove and prevent oversinging.

**Form:** modular. There is usually no set form in gospel music as the purpose is to inspire and transport the listener in the moment. The director “improvises” the form as the song goes along.

**Contrast:** creating tension with “pull” and “snap”. Often very fast and very slow tempi, very loud and soft dynamics.

**Clapping and moving:** The clap is always on 2 and 4. The main beat is in the feet, the clap is the echo. Movement: the sway, small steps, let the body follow. Balls of the feet stay on the riser.

**Choir and soloist:** the soloist finds a complementary rhythm to the choir part, sings in the spaces. Choir sings in strict time, soloist in free time over top. The choir inspires the soloist, the soloist inspires the choir, so that both together can inspire the listeners.

All gospel soloing is improvisational at heart. Solos should never be sung the same way twice!

### **Music Resources**

*Singing in the African-American Tradition*, Ysaye Barnwell (2 volumes)

*Let Your Voice Be Heard! Songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe* (World Music Press)

*African American Heritage Hymnal* GIA Pub.

*Circle of Song*, Kate Marks, Full Circle Press

Sheet music publishers such as Word Music, Brentwood-Benson Publishing

### **Recordings**

#### **Traditional:**

Blind Boys of Alabama, Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, Dixie Hummingbirds, Mighty Clouds of Joy,<sup>1</sup> “Wade in The Water” (4 cd collection, Smithsonian Folkways), “The LadyKillers” DVD - extras  
Youtube: Google “Gospel Choirs”

#### **Contemporary:**

WOW! Gospel recordings, best of each year  
wowgospelonline.com; Kurt Carr, John P. Kee, Milton Brunson, Norman Hutchins, Kirk Franklin, Donnie McClurkin, Vicki Wynans, Richard Smallwood, Aretha Franklin “Amazing Grace”, The Clark Sisters, Fred Hammond.