

The African American Culture: the History and Performance of Gospel Music

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Overview

As a nationally certified high school choral teacher, I strive to expose my students to the diverse cultures which exist within the school and national communities. In order to further broaden the learning environment, the exploration of a variety of musical styles is another of the educational goals I seek to accomplish.

This curriculum unit is designed to serve as a standards-based guide for vocal music educators. It can be utilized with students in grades 9-12. However, some facets of the curriculum are adaptable to middle school students as well. The standards which will be addressed as prescribed by the Pittsburgh Public School District are: 9-1 (Performance), 9-2 (Historical and cultural contexts), 9-3 (Critical response), and 9-4 (Aesthetic response).

The inclusion of sample lessons will further enable vocal music educators who include gospel music selections in their students' repertoire, to have an in depth reference/resource. The sample lessons will involve research assignments, listening and analysis of selected choral/gospel pieces. The students will be asked to detect specific historically connected aspects of the music. Additionally, basic vocal technique and musical characteristics which are unique to gospel music will be examined. The students will critique/assess their performances. Rubrics developed by the teacher and students will be incorporated. The opportunity to enhance the students' cognitive skills as they explore the cultural context of the unit will be embraced.

Throughout the unit, the use of the term gospel music will specifically refer to (black gospel) music. Since the focus is on African American culture, numerous and diverse sources on the history of African Americans in America will be explored. This information will be presented in lecture/discussion form during the lessons.

This unit was selected due to my interest in bringing authenticity and support to teachers who delve into the realm of this aesthetically charged style of music. The desire to offer a workable plan in preparing students for the performance of gospel music is another of my goals and reasons for this plan of study. A wide range of audiences and participants will be able to benefit

from this investigation. The curriculum will also enhance instructional content for the students that I teach. My own knowledge will increase through the study of this unique cultural style.

Rationale

The term “gospel music” has become generally familiar to many. Black gospel, however, has gained noticeable popularity during recent years. I became interested in this style of music as part of my students’ musical study after they competed in a choral competition. The students performed a gospel piece entitled, “Order My Steps,” by Glenn Burleigh and successfully received a superior rating following the adjudication process.

On yet another occasion, while examining musical selections for my choral students’ repertoire, I came upon the music of the African American composer, the late Moses Hogan. This gospel song was discovered during a lesson on benchmark choral music examples. It is entitled, “The Battle of Jericho,” a spiritual. The students expressed a strong interest in this rather challenging arrangement. They performed the selection during the Spring Concert as well as in yet another competition. This curriculum unit on the history and performance of gospel music presents an opportunity for my students to gain a deeper knowledge of the history of the music. Their comprehension of specific performance practices and the basis for gaining greater interpretive skills will also be greatly enhanced. For example, levels 4 and 5 gospel choral selections will adhere to the demands of excellence in performance. The curriculum unit is primarily geared toward students in grades 9-12, on the intermediate through advanced levels. The unit will include a suggested repertoire of spiritual/gospel selections. My research for this unit includes the “Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music.” During this symposium, Moses Hogan aptly remarks, (regarding the performance of gospel/spiritual vocal music)

“And then I was able to talk about spirituals. I asked them if they knew the origin of spirituals, and we talked about gospel music...Many times, when we sing gospel music as choir directors and want to expose our kids to those elements that belong to the African American choral traditions, we only focus on one aspect of the music...a beat, or something the choir has opportunity to rock to. It is important to say to the kids, “Why are we clapping? Why are we moving?” You need to make them aware that this music is born out of a worship experience...to understand the message of the song.” ([Http://www.newmusicbox.org](http://www.newmusicbox.org))

My purpose and motivation for this unit is partially explained by Mr. Hogans’ quote. Students should be given both the cognitive and aesthetic knowledge that embodies gospel music. In preparation for the study, as well as for the teaching of this unit, a look at the African American culture from an historical perspective is necessary. The information found can be used in lecture form.

The African Americans whose ancestors came to America as a result of the slave trade, which took place during the 1500's until approximately 1750, birthed an indelible musical trail. In Africa, music was a unifying force. Songs and music were included during everyday life. For example, there were songs of “*work, fishing, hunting, planting, and harvesting.*” (No Man Can Hinder Me, Velma Maia Thomas) “*The Africans who filled the slave vessels were enticed with*

“gifts” of red cloth and beads onto beckoning ships that lay waiting at sea.” (No Man Can Hinder Me) As they experienced starvation, death and despair while shackled, branded and whipped, the slaves would sing songs to express their plea for strength, fear and sorrow. Some of the African areas from which the songs came include South Africa and Kenya, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, West Africa. The Africans who were born in America sang the songs that had been sung before them. Some of the songs were in African languages and one of the forms was Call and Response with a song leader and congregation/group.

The songs played an extremely important part in the sustenance of African American people who lived on plantations. Sometimes songs were created on the spot in order to withstand the conditions of life in general as well as tasks such as picking cotton, which would last from dawn until dusk. Often the songs would express the appearance of actual happiness, although surface and temporal. *“Such were the songs that went across the Atlantic.”* (No Man Can Hinder Me) *The slaves would utilize a variety of hollers, cries and work songs along with “gospel.”* (African American Music, a Philosophical Look at African American Music in Society, Nathan Davis) Another writer comments that the songs are *“records of our history, : How else would a people tell their story if not through the means available?”...We made a song to be a quilt to wrap us “in the bosom of Abraham.”* (VH1 Music Studio)

W. E. Dubois expresses his viewpoint on the songs that evolved in this manner...*“And so by fateful chance the Negro-folksong” – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas...it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”* (Soul of Black Folk, W. E. Dubois)

The music of the Africans was replete with complex rhythms. Hand clapping and foot stomping were not restricted and took the part of drums in setting up early syncopation in slave songs. *“The slave melodies clearly showed the polyrhythms of their native Africa.”*
([Http://www.jass.com/syncopated.html](http://www.jass.com/syncopated.html))

William C. Banfield points out some aesthetic suggestions for a working theory of the *“Undeniable Groove”* in (This Is How We Flow, Rhythm in Black Cultures, Angela M. S. Nelson) He refers to rhythm as ...*“The determining factor, the controlling element in composition or creative expression.”*

Eileen Southern states, *“Rhythm is the most striking feature of slave music ...”* She also notes that ... *“it must have been in antebellum times when folk singers were closer to their African roots” ... “where it all began.”* (The Music of Black Americans, a History, 3rd edition, Eileen Southern)

Another important element was repetition, which was frequently used in slave/folk songs. The African style of call and response can readily be observed in many songs as a solo-chorus style is used during the performance.

Since the focus of this curriculum is on Black gospel music, its development and evolution will be addressed. During this period of history, the gospel and spiritual is summarized by Eileen Southern in this manner:

1. Gospel texts are subjective and hortative. The poems generally center on a single theme, which is stressed through the repetition of phrases. The subjects are wide ranging, such as conversion, salvation, yearning for spirituality, etc. Spiritual texts are group-oriented and tend to tell stories about Biblical events and figures, especially of the four Gospel books of the Bible and the Old Testament. Its themes and subjects are similar to those of the spiritual.
2. Gospel songs have instrumental accompaniment, which is as an “integral expression of the folk.” The spiritual is sung a capella.
3. Gospel has a characteristic rhythmic intensity because of its marked syncopation and percussive instrumental rhythms.
4. Gospel uses strophic forms, with verses and refrain, and, like white gospel, its songs tend to be sixteen or thirty-two measures in length. Spirituals typically consist of one strain repeated again and again, as *a,a,a,a*, etc; or of two strains as in *a b* patterns.
5. Gospel melody, with its flatted thirds and sevenths, is related to blues; the spiritual uses “bent tones” only occasionally.

The latter part of the 19th century gave way to the gospel song. It ... *“is an indigenous product of the Black church. In contrast to the Black spiritual, whose inception was in the cotton fields and in the rural setting of the camp meeting where large numbers of Blacks gathered in the open to listen to itinerant preachers, the Black gospel song came about in urban setting ...”* (Songs of Zion, edited by James Cleveland and Verolga Nix)

The spiritual is and continues to be performed and often used in conjunction with gospel music. The development of gospel music began in the 1920's in Chicago, Illinois. Thomas Dorsey, a composer, has been penned the “Father of Gospel Music.” It has been stated that he was the first individual to use the term “gospel” music. Black Gospel music was first used during various types of church services.

A pivotal point in music history took place during the Post-slavery era. American culture was strongly affected especially during the later part of the twentieth century when African Americans began the migration into the cities ... “they took their joyful church songs with them into the urban ghettos, into the storefront churches ... some of this music included spirituals, which were often referred to as “church songs.” (The Music of Black Americans, a History)

During the 1930's, gospel music became commercialized and later was performed in the secular realm. The 1940's through the 1970's revealed the continuous emotional and vibrant appeal of gospel music. David Baker (The Music of Black Americans, a History, 3rd edition, Eileen Southern) describes the changes in style as follows:

1. The change in the composition of the performance forces
2. The change in the nature of the keyboard accompaniment
3. The impact of individual styles upon the music as a genre

The surge of gospel music forges on with a noticeable change from its beginnings of piano and drums/percussion. As additional instruments such as the electric organ and amplified guitar were added in the 1950's, a fuller sound was created during the performance. During the 1960's, Black gospel music experienced technical changes which occurred both instrumentally and vocally. The gospel accompaniment moved from the simplistic/basic I, IV, V, I chords to "filler" or passing chords and more complex chords such as diminished, augmented and the 9th, 11th, and 13th chords. Extensive usage of modulations and improvisation was also effectively incorporated. Vocally, specific approaches were requested and noted by hymnists. Some of the specified vocal techniques were, "all singers should sing with wide open mouths, making their consonant sounds "short and distinct" and their vowel sound "long and intense." *Above all, the vocal and instrumental forces should be sensitive to each other: when there is vocal embellishment, the instrumental embellishment should be restrained.*" (The Music of Black Americans) Regarding vocal health/technique, it has become apparent to many gospel music directors that the use of proper breath support to preserve the voice of the singer is crucial. I consistently stress correct posture, breathing and diction for my students. Honing in on their overall vocal and musical skills in order to create life long learners is a constant daily focus in the choral music class.

The 70's performance of gospel music utilized string and brass instruments along with more percussion, such as bongos and conga drums. Other changes have included the use of full orchestras, synthesizers, and other electronic instruments. Vocally, and more recently, male voices were added to gospel choir and male quartets utilized a fuller sound with guitar, string bass and often the piano.

The 80's revealed the implementation of more lenient, yet limited improvised spirituals in conjunction with Black gospel song. A strong emphasis was placed on improvisation. Consequently, the written score is in a simplistic format. Often the improvisation can be heard in the lyrics and the rhythmic aspects of the music.

Other noticeable changes have occurred in Black gospel music from the 1900's through today. Some of the changes are: the use of gospel music in the Black church, the increase in popularity in numerous venues such as radio, television and concert halls. One important occurrence was the development of the Gospel Music Workshop of America, Inc., organized by James Cleveland. (I was a Voice Instructor for several years in this esteemed gospel organization)

From the seventies to the present day in the American musical arena, the performance of Black gospel music has continued to flourish. The music is enjoyed by persons from many different cultures and backgrounds.

The purpose of the information that has been presented is to provide the reader with a comprehensive resource on the evolution of Black gospel music in the African American culture. Music educators, specifically high school choral teachers, will have at their disposal a content-specific framework as well as suggested teaching strategies which will help to increase student learning.

The following is a list of suggested Gospel selections that can be used in the classroom or in a performance setting:

\$	Awesome God	Richard Mullens	Daybreak Publishing
\$	He's Been Faithful	Carol Joy Cymbala	Word Music
\$	Order My Steps	Glenn Burleigh/Schrader	Hope Publishing
\$	Music Down in My Soul	Moses Hogan	Hal Leonard
\$	Wade in the Water	Moses Hogan	Hal Leonard
\$	Oh Happy Day	Edwin Hawkins/Chinn	Hal Leonard
\$	Lean on Me	Kirk Franklin	Hal Leonard

Objectives

The detailed rigor of the purported activities in the curriculum will connect with the Arts and Humanities Standards that are prescribed by the Pittsburgh Board of Education. The standards will be expounded upon in the appendix of this document.

- students will illustrate the comprehension of substantive knowledge on the cultural background of African Americans through discussion and written assignments
- students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the connections between the performance of Black gospel music to the African American culture through discussion and written assignments
- students will perform level 4 and 5 gospel selections
- students will self-assess using a performance rubric
- students will critique/analyze gospel selections using characteristic sheets

Strategies

- During the study of the unit, I will instruct the students to answer questions and engage in discussions on the historical information.
- Another strategy that will be used is that of comparing and contrasting spirituals and gospel music.
- Yet another technique is the use of critical listening and the application of knowledge in making intelligent musical choices.
- Modeling and teacher demonstrations during the performance aspect of the lesson will also be used.
- Ongoing assessments will include teacher observation, student assessment tools such as rubrics and written tests in essay form and class assignments. (Oral and written question/answer assessments)
- Specific vocal exercises will aid in the performance of the selected repertoire.

Classroom Activities

The lessons will allow the students to analyze, describe, compare and contrast, and identify specific aspects of spirituals and gospel songs. The teacher is encouraged to utilize the historical account to provide a general introduction to the series of lessons. Careful selection of the material is advised in order to maximize the learning outcomes for all students. The unit lessons should be planned/taught to accommodate a wide range of ability levels. The following lesson excerpt is geared toward the intermediate and advanced student.

Class Session One

- discuss the usage of various songs (pre-slavery and the plantation era)
- play an example - have students discuss musical features
- guide students in continued discussion/listening activities
- instruct students to write a summary of session one

Class Session Two

- provide students with unique characteristics of spirituals (handouts)
- have students discuss - play a recorded example
- give historical insights
- have students sight read through a selected in-class example
- discuss musical/textual features
- play several recorded examples - allow students to point out vocal usage
- present specific information on spirituals, such as definitions and other pertinent facts
- in-class assignment - students should give written answers to questions using handouts

Sample Questions:

1. What is the meaning of specific sections of the text?
2. Is improvisation present? (Discuss the term)
3. What are the other musical distinctions in this music? Use information from handouts.

Class Session Three

- guide students in a discussion of gospel music (present background information)
- allow students to view a video of a gospel performance
- lead students in an oral critique/assessment of the performance

The subsequent lessons will encompass vocal application and performance practices. The students will view/listen to additional performances of the spiritual and gospel music. They will then analyze and make comparisons between the spiritual and gospel music. Other tasks will include additional exploration of gospel music repertoire. Preparation of the performance of a gospel choral selection of one of the composers featured in the historical account will also take place. The students will also be given the opportunity to further explore the music style as they

research gospel selections and composers/arrangers. The culmination of the lessons will be a concert which will include the selected gospel choral piece.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Books:

Davis, Nathan. 1995. African American Music: A Philosophical Look at African American Music in Society. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing. *

An in depth examination of African American music that includes music of Africa and the European influences. Targeted points are revealed regarding the “Harlem Renaissance” as well as other facets of the origins of African American music.

Dubois, W. E. 1994. The Soul of Black Folk. New York: Dover Books.*

A poetic and often lyrical account of the triumphs and struggles of African Americans (the journey to America and the post arrival). Throughout the book, direct and indirect significant Biblical references are made. Frequently, the links to African Americans and the American society reveal the state of the Black people in varied settings.

Halpern, Monica. 2006. Moving North: African Americans and the Great Migration 1915-1930 (Crossroads America). National Geographic.

An account is given of the state of Black people who ventured north to find a better life. The gains and losses are noted in the strains and the triumphs that were experienced as they entered into the unknown.

Johnston, Mada P. 1981. Songs of Zion. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

The book offers numerous songs that can be found in the Black worship experience. It contains historical information on the interpretation and the performance of the music. Entire sections are devoted to derivatives of spirituals and gospel music.

Southern, Eileen. 1997. The Music of Black Americans. 3rd Ed. New York. London: W. W. Norton and Company. *

This edition traces the history of African Americans from Africa to America. The story of the music which followed during this journey is shared. Current and in depth information on various styles of music can be found. Gospel music is a key featured style which is explored.

Journals/Magazines:

Strand, Katherine. 2003. "Teaching Musical Interpretation Through Choral Rehearsals."

Music Educators National Conference (September): 43-44. *

The writer stresses the need for more cognitive based goals for the choral music classes. She mentions planning lessons which focus on historical and interpretative approaches to the choral literature. Additionally, she emphasizes the necessity of preparing students to become independent learners.

Swenson, Susie. 2001. "African-American Spirituals - The Meaning Behind the Music"

Troubadour. (February).

The detailed insights are given on the symbolism that exists in Black spirituals.

Websites:

<http://www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=2079>. May 2003 (March, 2007)

A very candid discussion by the world re-known African-American composer, Moses Hogan, is given during a choral forum.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethnic/week426/belief.html>. "Gospel Music" (April 2007)

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/reference/articles/gospel_music.html. "Gospel Music" (April 2007)

http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/journey_3/p-11.html. "1866-1945: from Emancipation to Jim Crow" (April 2007)

The above Gospel music sources highlight and expound upon the gospel music experience in America.

<http://www.newsreel.org/nav/topics.asp?cat=28sub=15>. (April 2007)

An excellent source for videos that provide historical perspectives from the time of slavery through today.

http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm. (April 2007)

A PBS educational website which focuses on gospel music and history/culture as well as gospel artists.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/gospel-music?cat=entertainment#top>.

Gospel music: Definitions and Much More from Answers.com.

A thorough well-examined definition of gospel music is provided. Historical and more in depth information is given in paragraph form. Two featured articles are highlighted.

* Denotes materials suggested for instructors only.

Appendix - Content Standards

In addition to any appendices, a list of content standards addressed in the unit or document is included. Letters and numbers should be accompanied by the verbal description of the specific content standards addressed in the unit or document.

Appendix A

ARTS AND HUMANITIES

The following Pittsburgh Public School District standards will be addressed:

1. All students describe meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
2. All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand the important features of the works.
3. All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.
4. All students produce, perform, or exhibit their work in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meanings their work has for them.

State adopted standards that will be included are:

9.1 - Production, Performance and Exhibition: The goals for this area focus on the manipulative skills and conceptual understanding to be achieved by the learners in order to produce, perform and exhibit their own works in the arts.

9.2 - Historical and Cultural Contexts: The goals for this area focus on the skills and knowledge to be achieved by the learners that are needed to identify, compare, and analyze works in the arts in their historical and cultural context. Effort should be made to coordinate with districts' social studies, literature and other curricula when possible.

9.3 - Critical Response: The goals for this area focus on the skills and knowledge to be achieved by the learners that are needed to examine, analyze, interpret and evaluate works in the arts. Emphasis should be placed on developing various processes of critical analysis that will allow the learner to interpret meaning(s) of a work of art.

9.4 - Aesthetic Response: The goals for this area focus on the skill and knowledge to be achieved by the learners that are needed to investigate the philosophical aspects of works in the arts. The learner explores personal and historical definitions of art and arts' varied purposes. Emphasis should be placed on examining how aesthetic choices impact the intended and/or interpreted meanings.

Appendix B

Vocabulary

- spiritual
- Black gospel
- improvisation
- aesthetics
- syncopation
- rhythm
- repetition
- polyrhythms
- interpretations
- folk songs
- call and response
- antebellum
- embellishments
- indigenous
- work songs
- Harlem Renaissance
- Great Migration
- contemporary

Appendix C

The following rubrics can be used during the lessons as reference/assessment tools:

RUBRIC FOR CHORUS ASSIGNMENT

- thoughtful, insightful comments = A (90-100)
- somewhat thoughtful, shows some understanding = B (80-89)
- few thoughtful comments, some insight on concepts = C (70-79)
- very few thoughtful comments, little to no understanding = D (60-69)
- shows no understanding or effort = E (59 - 0)

CHORUS STUDENTS SELF/PEER ASSESSMENT GUIDE (Example)

Directions: After performing the selected section of “Order My Steps” and “Cantique de Jean Racine,” rate your performance using the following scale and descriptors:

1 = Poor = D 2 = Fair = C 3 = Good = B 4 = Very Good = A 5 = Excellent = A+

Musical Skills:

- Expression =
- Tone Production =
- Pronunciation =
- Accuracy of Notes =

Give general comments on the overall performance of each selection.

Final Score _____

Students' Name/Sectional Name _____

RUBRIC FOR CHORUS ESSAY TEST

- 5 (90-100) A - Shows depth of understanding
 - Exhibits fully developed answers with specific examples
 - Reveals well-organized answers using musical terms
 - Uses exemplary, detailed, clear responses
- 4 (80-89) B - Shows knowledge and good understanding
 - Includes some important ideas
 - Demonstrates some development and organization of main concepts
 - Exhibits some detail and clarity

- 3 (70-79) C - Demonstrates some knowledge that reveals some lack of understanding
 - Includes some important concepts
 - Shows satisfactory development with limited understanding

- 2 (60-69) D - Includes a few facts without development and organization
 - Demonstrates lack of knowledge and uses numerous inaccuracies
 - Shows poor response and lacks clarity

- 1 (59-0) E - Shows no knowledge or understanding
 - Demonstrates no understanding of terms and information studied