

## Performing Notes on “Balm of Gilead”

### Musical and Textual Origins

Like many spirituals, the exact musical origins of the music of the now well-known “There is a Balm in Gilead” are uncertain. A version of the refrain appears in a hymn as early as 1854, and it also appeared in another variation in a 1925 Baptist shape-note hymnal. Textually, “balm of gilead” is a medicinal plant, but its meaning as a panacea for all ills originates in the King James Bible, perhaps most directly in Jeremiah 8:22, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of my people?”

This transcribed arrangement is of the recording from Soweto Gospel Choir’s 2007 album, *African Spirit*. Listening to and imitating that recording—and others by the group—is one way to uncover a rewarding and authentic performance.

As on the recording, the soloists and the djembe player should each freely improvise, reacting to each other and to what’s written in the choral parts.

### For the Djembe Player

The djembe player should improvise freely, reacting to the vocal soloist and the choir’s musical material. The “X note” rhythms in the score use lower notes for the lowest sounds on a djembe, and higher notes for the higher, light slaps. The middle notes are neutral and unstressed.

In this song, the Soweto Gospel Choir’s drummers keep the sixteenth note rhythms evenly present--i.e. they play something on every sixteenth note of the beat. Then they use accents and various parts of the drum to bring out certain accented beats more than others. But it may be easier for younger players to just play the accented notes; use the recording and/or your local percussionist as guides.

### Soweto Gospel Choir

In 2002, Soweto Gospel Choir was formed in Soweto, South Africa, by two choir directors, David Mulovhedzi and Beverly Bryer. The group’s first album, *Voices of Heaven*, was released in 2005, and reached the No. 1 spot on Billboard’s World Music Chart three weeks after its release in the United States. The group tours worldwide and has appeared in nearly all of the world’s most prestigious venues and festivals, including Carnegie Hall, the Sydney Opera House, the Nelson Mandela Theatre, the Montreal Jazz Festival, and the Royal Festival Hall in London. SGC has performed for such world dignitaries as President Bill Clinton, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela. They have shared the stage with such diverse artists and groups as the Black-Eyed Peas, Johnny Clegg, Celine Dion, Kirk Franklin, Josh Groban, the Harlem Gospel Choir, Herbie Hancock, Mark Knopfler, John Legend, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Ozzy Osborne, Andre Rieu, Diana Ross, Shakira, U2, Bebe Winans, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and the South African sensation, Zahara.

Soweto Gospel Choir has won nearly every award available in the gospel and world music categories, including three Grammy Awards: for their 2007 *Blessed*, their 2008 album *African Spirit*, and their 2018 album *Blessed*. They won a Sports Emmy in 2010 for their collaboration with U2 for ESPN’s promotional campaign for the 2010 World Cup. They have also received

three “associated” Grammy Awards, three SAMAs (South African Music Awards), and an Oscar nomination.

In March 2013, the choir’s fifth album, *Soweto Gospel Choir and Friends—Divine Decade*, was released as a celebration of the choir’s 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. In December 2013, Soweto Gospel Choir teamed with Woolworths for a YouTube video tribute to Nelson Mandela, as part of a flash mob event, with the song “Asimbonanga”. The clip went viral and received over 3 million hits in its first week of release.

The choir’s newest album is its 2018 *Freedom*, which won the “Best World Music Album” Grammy in February of 2019.

Soweto Gospel Choir has founded its own AIDS orphans foundation, Nkosi’s Haven Vukani, to assist organizations that receive little or no funding. In South Africa, the choir performs for a variety of charitable organizations.

For more and current information on Soweto Gospel Choir, including updated touring information, please visit their website at <http://www.sowetogospelchoir.com>

The choir’s Twitter feed is @sowetogospel and their Facebook page can be found by searching for “Official Soweto Gospel Choir.” Recordings of the group can be viewed on YouTube and purchased at all the major online music retailers.

#### **Arranger Fikile Sudimo**

Fikile Sudimo was a member of Soweto Gospel Choir who died in 2011. She was a devout Christian from Alexandra, near Johannesburg, and had performed regularly as a gospel singer in churches in that area.

#### **Transcriber and Arranger Dr. Kurt Runestad**

In the summer of 2010, American choral conductor Kurt Runestad transcribed Soweto Gospel Choir’s “Khumbaya” for use with his choirs at Doane College (in Crete, Nebraska) the following academic year, partnering with the Soweto Gospel Choir to get the piece out to a wider audience. He continues to partner with the group, attending several concerts, transcribing additional pieces, and in May 2018 had the great pleasure of bringing a group of Doane singers to Johannesburg, South Africa, where the groups spent a couple of hours together in a rehearsal and clinic. All of the Soweto Gospel Choir learning and performing is based solely on an aural learning tradition, so until recently their music has not been available in printed versions. At Doane University, where he has taught since 2004, Runestad conducts several of the college’s choirs, including the acclaimed Doane Choir, which under his direction has performed in 14 countries on four continents, and throughout the United States. Runestad graduated from St. Olaf College (Northfield, Minnesota) with a B.A. in music education, taught 10 years in the public schools of Iowa and Minnesota, and earned two graduate degrees in choral conducting from the University of Iowa (Iowa City, Iowa). He is a frequent clinician, arranger, and adjudicator for choirs throughout the Midwest. He and his wife, Carly Woythaler-Runestad, have two children, daughter Avery and son Owen.

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