

Performing Notes on “Khumbaya”

The spiritual “Khumbaya” was first recorded in 1926 by a folk song collector in Georgia. The word “Khumbaya” is Gullah (a Creole language) for “Come by Here.” The singers are pleading for God to join them; they are in need of His help, because they are crying and in despair.

There was a *New York Times* article on “Khumbaya” that conductors and performers may find illuminating: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/20/us/20religion.html?_r=0

Found on Soweto Gospel Choir’s 2007 CD, *Blessed*, there are at least two recordings of “Khumbaya” by the group. (In concert the SGC has sometimes performed the piece with an instrumental accompaniment track.) This transcription is of the acappella version, as heard on the CD. Listening to and imitating that recording—and others by the group—is one way to uncover a rewarding and authentic performance.

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

The refrains and verses should be contrasting; the refrains are more restrained and quiet, while the verses are rhythmically active, accented, and louder. The verses have more urgency in their plea.

In the two refrains (bars 4-11 and 20-28), when the parts are split further than four parts, the choir should be evenly divided: a third of the choir should sing in bar 4, and two-thirds of the choir should answer in bar 5 (and so forth). (So, use a three-part split for both men and women.)

The Zulu text in the bass line near the end of the piece is a South African chant, which according to the arranger Lucas Bok has no direct translation. But Bok explains that “the mood this section creates is one of hope, celebration, and optimism, knowing that as we sing ‘Oh Lord, Khumbaya,’ we already begin to celebrate knowing that our prayers have been answered.”

That Zulu text is pronounced as follows:

Helele Mamma, Helele Ma Hay-lay-lay mahmah, hay-lay-lay mah

For the Djembe Player

As stated above, the djembe player should improvise freely, reacting to the vocal soloist and the choir’s musical material.

Here are some starting points in terms of rhythmic ideas. The first four measures have motives from the CD recording, and the next four measures have some easier alternatives for beginning players. All the motives written here retain the flavor of what’s heard on Soweto Gospel Choir’s recording.

Djembe motive from Soweto Gospel Choir CD

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a djembe motive. The top staff is in 4/4 time and features a complex rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes with accents and slaps. The bottom staff is labeled 'Slightly Easier' and 'Or easier yet', showing simplified versions of the same pattern with fewer notes and accents.

Many djembe players 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.

Most percussionists also add additional rhythmic material, called “fill,” at times when the other musical parts are holding notes or playing rhythms that are more static. So, when the choir is holding a longer note, the djembe player can branch out even further from the above motives. Experiment!

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 Grammy Awards for their 2007 CD, *Blessed* and their 2008 album *African Spirit*. 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 10th 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.

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 Lucas Bok

Lucas Deon Bok was first introduced to music by his father, a guitarist. By the age of seven, Lucas was playing the bass guitar, then moved on to acoustic guitar and joined a church choir. He writes music, plays many instruments, and has performed not only with Soweto Gospel Choir but also with the group In Harmony. He was the music director of the Berea Christian Tabernacle prior to his joining Soweto Gospel Choir. He arranged “Khumbaya” for Soweto Gospel Choir and was instrumental to the group’s success, both on and off the stage, serving as assistant director and accepting both of the Grammy Awards on behalf of the group. He earned ESPN’s Sports Emmy for “Outstanding Music Composition” for the arrangements he wrote for U2 and Soweto Gospel Choir. He owns his own company, Lucas Bok Productions, and currently conducts the choir “Africa in Praise,” and is currently the music director at “Conquering Through Prayer Ministries International.” He also runs a training program, “Music Empowerment Academy,” which allows him to educate musicians and singers on music business, praise and worship, and the art of merging these important elements. He worked with Peter Gabriel on the song “Down to Earth” which appeared on the 2008 movie *Wall-E*. That song was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Song. Lucas says that “Everything concerning my life is music, music, music.” He has been married to his wife Michele for eight years, and they have two daughters.

Transcriber and Editor Dr. Kurt Runestad

In the summer of 2010, American choral conductor Kurt Runestad transcribed “Khumbaya” for use with his choirs at Doane College (in Crete, Nebraska) the following academic year. The choir toured throughout the United States and to Brazil that year, and everywhere people asked him for a copy of the score. The following year, during a sabbatical, he contacted Soweto Gospel Choir and began working toward getting the piece out to a wider audience. Soweto Gospel Choir management informed him that the choir is based solely on an aural learning tradition, and therefore has never had their music available in printed versions. Opportunity! After some false starts and delays, Runestad helped arrange for the piece to be listed on the choral marketplace, MusicSpoke, www.musicspoke.com At Doane College, where he has taught since 2004, Kurt Runestad conducts several of the college’s choirs, including the acclaimed Doane Choir, which under his direction has performed in 12 countries 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.

MusicSpoke

www.musicspoke.com

Founders Jennifer Rosenblatt and Kurt Knecht describe MusicSpoke this way: “MusicSpoke is a marketplace committed to musicians. We don’t publish pieces of music. We find gifted composers that we believe in and give them the tools and freedom to promote themselves. We provide an easy way to find high quality sheet music. Our platform makes it easy to search by composer, ensemble, theme, and other tags. Each score has its own page allowing users to hear and see the entire piece. Scores are available for immediate digital download and printing, based on the number of licenses purchased. We are committed to connecting conductors and performers with composers. When you purchase a piece, you will be put in contact with the composer so that you can ask questions, set up a Skype rehearsal, do a commission, or just send some fan mail. Everyone loves fan mail. Our MusicSpoke Composers receive the majority of the proceeds from sales and retain control over their own works. In the current system, over 90% of all sales dollars go to companies not composers. We are committed to supporting the creators of the works. We believe that it is the right thing to do.”