

Performing Notes on “Shosholoza”

Musical and Textual Origins

The South African folksong “Shosholoza” is so popular in South Africa that it has been called the country’s second National Anthem. It was originally a work song, sung by miners who worked in the South African diamond and gold mines, and gained additional popularity as a song of celebration and unity when Nelson Mandela was released from prison on February 11, 1990. Mandela himself said he used to sing the song during his imprisonment, to pass the time while working.

Googling “Shosholoza” will yield a plentitude of background information, including this succinct summary of the piece:

<https://theculturetrip.com/africa/south-africa/articles/how-a-mining-song-became-south-africas-anthem-of-unity-shosholoza/>

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.

The ending of this arrangement is altered and shortened from the recorded version, omitting the spoken text that is present on the *African Spirit* recording. (There is a live Soweto Gospel Choir version of this song on YouTube that does this as well.) The chorus is repeated an extra time at the end of this arrangements, to fill out the ending; additional choreography or clapping could be added that last time, for variety.

As on the recording, the vocal soloist should feel free to improvise, reacting to the choral parts and the djembe.

Like most South Africa choirs, the Soweto Gospel Choir rarely stands and sings in performance. Their music works well as a processional or recessional, and limited choreography (usually still on the risers, in a choral formation) can be added. The music should be performed with joy.

Text and Translation

The words of “Shosholoza” are a mix of Nbele and Zulu, two of South Africa’s eleven official languages. The language blending makes a direct translation problematic, but *Wikipedia* lists the translation this way:

Shosholoza ku lezontaba
 Go forward from those mountains
Stimela siphume South Africa
 On this train from South Africa
Wena uyabaleka ku lezontaba
 You are running away from those mountains
Stimela siphume South Africa
 On this train from South Africa

Pronunciation, including an International Phonetic Alphabet transcription

Shosholozu ku lezontaba

Shoh-shoh-loh-zah koo lyeh-zone-tah-bah

[ʃʊʃʊlozɑ koo lʒɔntɑbɑ]

Stimela siphume South Africa

Stem-eh-lah see-poo-meh saooth ah-free-kah

[stimɛlɑ sipumɛ sauθ afrika]

Wena uyabaleka ku lezontaba

Weh-nah oo-yah-bah-leh-gah koo lyeh-zone-tah-bah

[wɛnɑ ujabalɛkɑ koo lʒɔntɑbɑ]

For the Djembe Player

On the recording, the Soweto Gospel Choir's djembe player plays nearly the same riff on the djembe throughout the tune, but the djembe player(s) should feel free to improvise freely, reacting to the vocal soloist and the choir's musical material. Use the Soweto Gospel Choir's recording(s) as an aural guide.

Most of the South Africa djembe players play a steady rhythm (putting a note on every sixteenth note of the ongoing rhythm), but accenting and shading the most important rhythms with volume and by using different parts of the drum.

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 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.

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 Lukas Bok

South African musician 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 added 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 several pieces for the Soweto Gospel Choir and was instrumental to the group’s success, 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, 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,” from the 2008 movie *Wall-E*; the song was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Song. His latest venture is the musical *Thuma Mina – The Awakening*, for which he wrote all the music. The first international tour of the musical will be at the 2019 Edinburgh Festival.

Lucas says that “Everything concerning my life is music, music, music.” He has been married to his wife Michele for eleven years, and they have three daughters.

Transcriber / Arranger Dr. Kurt Runestad

American choral conductor Kurt Runestad has been privileged to teach at Doane University (Crete, Nebraska) since the fall of 2004. In the summer of 2010, Runestad transcribed Soweto Gospel Choir’s “Khumbaya” for use with his choirs at Doane the following academic year. This first partnership with the Soweto Gospel Choir has led to several additional collaborations; he has attended several concerts, transcribed additional pieces, and in May 2018 had the great pleasure of bringing a group of Doane singers to Johannesburg, South Africa, where the Doane singers and the SGC spent a couple of hours together in a rehearsal and clinic. All of the SGC 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, Runestad conducts several of the college's choirs, including the acclaimed Doane Choir, which under his direction has performed in fourteen 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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