

Performing Notes on “Swing Down”

Musical and Textual Origins

“Swing Down, Sweet Chariot” is a variant of the well-known spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The song was written sometime after 1865 by Wallis Willis, a Choctaw freedman from Oklahoma. Some believe that this song (like other spirituals) has a double meaning involving the Underground Railroad. Alexander Reid transcribed the words and melodies as sung by Willis, and sent them to the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, who popularized the song by performing it on their tours. The piece became further known during the 1960s folk music revival that accompanied the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. (All information in this paragraph from Wikipedia.)

Performance Notes

This transcription of “Swing Down” is from Soweto Gospel Choir’s 2005 album, *Blessed*. There is also a live recording of the piece on YouTube. Listening to and imitating Soweto Gospel Choir recordings of this piece and others is one way to uncover a rewarding and authentic performance.

MusicSpoke has two versions of the piece available: in its original Soweto Gospel Choir performance key (E major), and up a whole step (F-sharp major). The lowest bass notes (E2 and F#2) are featured prominently in both the solo and choral parts, so the conductor should perform the piece in the key that best fits the ensemble. G major or even A-flat major are also possibilities, though in those cases, some of the improvisatory solo material would be in a different place in the voice, or perhaps even in a different voice part altogether (alto soloists instead of a tenor and an alto). Also, since the bass soloist is electronically reinforced in all the recordings, some balance problems might occur. These might be helped by having the B2 section sing the bass solo line throughout, turning the piece into a bass section feature.

The A1 and A2 parts are identical until bar 92.

The six choruses of “I’ve Got a Home…” at the end of “Swing Down” (bars 68-end) are written out (so that the improvisatory material appears in the arrangement), but the singers and conductor could think of them structurally in this way:

Chorus 1-2	Loud
Chorus 3	Decrescendo
Chorus 4	New material (Zulu text) in A2 and T2—other parts softer
Chorus 5	Crescendo
Chorus 6	Loudest

In the live recording of the piece, there are also solo dancers that enliven these repeated choruses.

Like most South African choirs, Soweto Gospel Choir rarely stands still when performing. 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 authentic joy, a quality they bring to everything they do.

For the Soloists

Beginning at bar 68, the alto soloist's part is very improvisatory, and her exact material is often partially or completely inaudible in the recording. So, although some of her solo material is written out for reference in this arrangement, the soloist should not feel limited to only that. In this arrangement, the arranger also included a few motives from the tenor soloist's live recording (on YouTube) to add some variety to that solo line. Note that in the live performance, the alto soloist does not appear at all, so the tenor soloists thus becomes more improvisatory.

Text, Translation, and Pronunciation

Though mostly in English, "Swing Down" has a few words of Zulu beginning in measure 92.

Izulu ikhayalami (heaven is my home)
ee-zoo-loo ee-kah-yah-lah-mee
[izulu ikajalami]

Ikhaya labancwele (it is a home of the believers / saved)
ee-kah-yah lah-bahn-swehll
[ikaja ikajalami]

One additional pronunciation note: during the repeated "I've got a home on the..." motive in the last half of the piece, the word "the" should be pronounced "thee" since that phrase eventually finishes with "...other side."

For the Djembe Player

Most South African djembe players play a steady rhythm (putting a note on every subdivision of the ongoing rhythm) while accenting and shading the most important beats with volume and by using different parts of the drum. This applies throughout most of "Swing Down," and the notation indicates whether the pitch of the note is low, middle, or high. The neutral middle notes are always unstressed and soft while the high and (especially) low notes are played more loudly, and function as rhythmic drivers. Low notes are the loudest, played in the middle of the drum, while high "slap" notes are near the edges of the drum.

The djembe player(s) should always feel free to improvise, reacting to the vocal soloist and the choir's musical material. Again, use the Soweto Gospel Choir's recording as aural guides.

Soweto Gospel Choir

Soweto Gospel Choir was formed in Soweto (**South West Township**), a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002, and led by its founding musical director, David Mulovhedzi. 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, and the Royal Festival Hall in London. Soweto Gospel Choir has performed for such world dignitaries as President Bill Clinton, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela, and has shared the stage with such diverse artists and groups as the Black-Eyed Peas, Johnny Clegg,

Celine Dion, Josh Groban, the Harlem Gospel Choir, Herbie Hancock, John Legend, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Ozzy Osborne, Andre Rieu, Diana Ross, U2, Bebe Winans, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Soweto Gospel Choir has won nearly every award available in the gospel and world music categories, including three Grammy Awards for their albums *Blessed* (2007), *African Spirit* (2008), and *Freedom* (2018). Soweto Gospel Choir has founded its own AIDS orphans foundation, Nkosi's Haven Vukani, and the choir performs for a variety of charitable organizations in South Africa. 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.

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 additional collaboration; he has attended several concerts with and without Doane students, 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 Soweto Gospel Choir spent a couple of hours together in a rehearsal and clinic. 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.

MusicSpoke (www.musicspoke.com)

Founders Jennifer Roseblatt and Kurt Knecht describe MusicSpoke as "...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."