

Soweto Gospel Choir



VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL 2023

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SOWETO GOSPEL CHOIR

Soweto Gospel Choir was formed to celebrate the unique and inspirational power

of African gospel music. The choir draws on the best talent from the many churches in and around Soweto, South Africa's famous township, mixing earthy rhythms with rich harmonies to uplift the soul and express the energy of their homeland. By blending elements of African gospel, traditional spirituals, and American popular music, the choir shares the joy of faith through music with audiences around the world.

Soweto Gospel Choir first performed at a historic 2003 concert for international hero and human rights activist Nelson Mandela; the group's 2018 album *Freedom* is a heartfelt tribute to Mandela, honoring the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth. Their albums *Blessed* and *African Spirit* won the Grammy Award for Best Traditional World Music Album in 2007 and 2008. They have toured the globe—appearing on popular TV shows, recording with famous musicians, and performing at festivals like the

2010 FIFA World Cup Kick-Off Concert with the Black Eyed Peas, Shakira, Angelique Kidjo, and John Legend. One of the group's songs was featured in the Disney Pixar film *WALL-E*.

Charitable giving is important to Soweto Gospel Choir; they have raised millions of dollars from all over the world for groups helping to deal with the medical condition AIDS, an urgent health concern on the African continent. In 2003, the choir founded its own AIDS orphans foundation, Nkosi's Haven Vukani, to support families and organizations that receive little to no government assistance.

Through vibrant vocals, percussion, movement, and costume, the colorful Soweto Gospel Choir joyously shares African traditions in which song, dance, and drumming are an integral part of life and faith.

Source: Adapted from Soweto Gospel Choir, www.sowetogospelchoir.com

GOOD GOSPEL! WHAT IS IT?

While commonly associated with religious music, the musical genre known as gospel can vary from culture to culture. Often, this music is written and performed for religious or ceremonial purposes; gospel music has been used to help spread Christianity to new audiences. But it can also be composed and performed simply for entertainment and pleasurable listening. Gospel music typically features strong, emotion-fueled vocals and rich harmonies, and is generally performed with choirs that are accompanied by piano or organ, percussion, or other instruments.

Rooted in the oral tradition—history and culture passed along by word of mouth, not written down—gospel music often uses a technique known as call and response. This is when a song-leader sings a particular phrase, the “call,” which is answered or echoed by another phrase, the “response,” sung by fellow singers or even the listeners. No hymnal reading is required, allowing everyone the opportunity to join in the song, even those who can’t read.

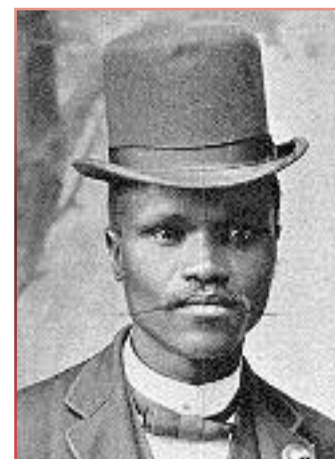
Other hallmarks of gospel music include musical and lyrical repetition; complex rhythms that come from layers of voices, clapping, or percussion; and lyrics that are often uplifting or inspirational.

While Soweto Gospel Choir focuses mainly on the South African gospel tradition, the group also draws on influences from African American gospel music that evolved in the United States. Let’s take a look at how gospel developed in both nations...

South African Gospel

Vocal music is the oldest traditional music in South Africa. Singing was a communal activity that accompanied dances and other social gatherings. This vibrant vocal tradition was in place when missionaries came to South Africa to spread the Christian faith. The missionaries’ arrival influenced South African music as their European hymns were blended with African musical styles. In the late 1800s, early African composers such as John Knox Bokwe began composing hymns that drew on traditional harmonic patterns of the Xhosa, the second largest ethnic group in South Africa after the Zulus.

In 1897, teacher and choirmaster Enoch Sontonga composed the hymn “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika (God Bless Africa)” for his school choir. The song was later adopted by the anti-apartheid movement—those fighting oppression of the Black population by whites—and ultimately became the national anthem of a democratic South Africa.



Enoch Sontonga.

The missionary influence, plus the later influence of American spirituals, spurred a gospel movement that is still strong in South Africa today. Drawing on the traditions of churches such as the Zion Christian Church, South African gospel artists’ styles range from the more traditional to contemporary pop-infused sounds. In its many forms, gospel is one of the best-selling music genres in South Africa today.

The missionary emphasis on choirs, combined with the traditional vocal music of South Africa, also gave rise to a type of *cappella*, or instrument-less, singing that blends the style of Western hymns with indigenous, or native, harmonies. This tradition is still alive today in the *isicathamiya* form, a type of a cappella gospel music sung by choirs, made famous internationally by the group Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

The style’s name comes from a Zulu word meaning “to walk softly” or “cat-like.” Isicathamiya began in the South African mines of the early 1900s, where Zulu workers would sing to each other after-hours as entertainment. The loud voices and high kicks of traditional Zulu song and dance would most certainly have disturbed the mine bosses, so the miners’ music became softer, their tiptoed dancing more cat-like.

Isicathamiya also drew inspiration from American gospel and minstrel singing, which became popular in South Africa in the early parts of the twentieth century. Even today, the songs have a gospel feel and speak of a higher purpose, and there are still weekly isicathamiya choir competitions in cities like Johannesburg and Durban.

African American Gospel

In the United States, gospel music can be traced back to the seventeenth century and the time of slavery. African American slaves used the tradition of repetition and call and response when they sang spirituals—songs that blended their owners’ European-based church hymns and the African musical elements slaves brought with them to America—while working in the fields. Spirituals were songs of survival, uplift, and faith.

As African Americans established their own churches in the nineteenth century, their religious music continued to evolve into a rhythmic and highly emotional style that usually involved the entire congregation—singing, clapping, and moving with the music. In the twentieth century, instruments such as tambourines and electric guitars were added to the sound, and gospel music spread as African Americans moved from the rural South to cities across the nation.



Mahalia Jackson, 1962, from the Carl Van Vechten photograph collection, Library of Congress.

The advent of broadcast radio in the 1920s also helped widen gospel music’s audience, as did recordings of gospel artists. In 1938, Sister Rosetta Tharpe scored the first million-selling gospel record with her hit single “This Train.” After World War II, gospel music moved to larger and larger venues, fueled by the soaring popularity of artists like Mahalia Jackson and the Caravans, Swan Silvertones, and Clara Ward Singers.

In the United States today, gospel is still a vital musical genre, with a variety of subgenres that include urban contemporary gospel, gospel blues, Southern gospel, progressive Southern gospel, Christian country music, bluegrass gospel, and Celtic gospel.

SOURCES: Adapted from *Soweto Gospel Choir Performance Guide for Teachers*, Lied Center for Performing Arts; University of Southern California Gospel Music History Archive, digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/collections; Brand South Africa, www.brandsouthafrica.com; Music in Africa, www.musicinafrica.net.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Consider how South African and African American gospel music developed. Do you see any similarities? Differences? How did the arrival of missionaries affect gospel music’s development in South Africa? How did slavery affect gospel music’s development in America? Why do you think gospel performed as a choir might be more powerful or meaningful than with solo artists? Write down your thoughts or discuss them in class.

Try This

The technique of call and response is a key component of much gospel music. It can be found in other type of music as well, from pop songs to sports-arena chants. Can you think of any examples of call and response? Try them in your classroom!

GOSPEL GLOSSARY

A cappella

Italian for “in the style of the chapel,” this term means choral music that is unaccompanied by musical instruments—singing only.

Alto

Italian for “high,” this term was formerly used for the highest range of a male voice, but is now used to generally describe the lower vocal range for women. In a choir or chorus, alto is the second highest vocal part.

Bass

The lowest male voice part.

Call and response

A musical interaction in which the first and often solo phrase, the “call,” is answered or echoed by a second and often ensemble phrase, the “response.”

Choir

A group of singers. Generally, choir refers to such a group in a church or religious setting and chorus refers to a vocal group in a non-religious setting. The terms are often used interchangeably.

Choral

Having to do with music made by a choir or chorus.

Chorus

A group of singers, also called a choir. In the typical chorus or choir, each voice part (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) has more than one singer. The name comes from the Greek term *choros*, which in Greek theater was a group of actors onstage who commented on the action of a play with song, dance, and speech performed together. Choral singing is one of the most popular ways to make music; schools, churches, clubs, and other institutions often have their own chorus or choir.

Ensemble

The entire group that performs a piece. In choral music, all the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses performing together make up the ensemble.



Falsetto

A theatrically high vocal range that a male sings, often used for special effect. It is above the singer’s normal range and enables the vocalist to reach higher notes.

Solo

A musical passage for one singer or instrumentalist only.

Soprano

The highest vocal part. Usually only females and young males can reach the notes required to sing soprano.

Tenor

The highest natural range of a male voice.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Does your school, club, or other organization have a chorus? What kind of music does that ensemble perform? Music and musical groups can serve different purposes—ceremonial, religious, as recreation, entertainment, or artistic expression. What purpose does the chorus or choir you know of serve—for its singers, its listeners, the community?

Now think of other types of musical groups (examples: military marching band, hip-hop group, K-pop act, mariachi band). What meaning does each ensemble and its music have for those who perform and listen to it? Write down your ideas in an essay, capture them in a chart, or present them orally in class.

SOUTH AFRICA: RAINBOW NATION

As its name suggests, South Africa is the southernmost country on the African continent. It's a nation of diverse cultures and traditions—both of its indigenous, or native, peoples and the different groups that settled there. Sometimes called the “Rainbow Nation” because of its multicultural makeup, South Africa has eleven official languages!

The South African landscape is mostly made up of a central plateau—a high, flat area—covered with rolling grasslands and tree-dotted plains. To the north is the Kalahari Desert, where some descendants of the San Bushmen, the nomadic tribes who inhabited South Africa about twenty-four thousand years ago, still live. But people have been living in South Africa for even longer than that. In northern South Africa near the city of Johannesburg, archaeologists have unearthed some of the earliest human fossils ever found—more than two million years old! No wonder the region is nicknamed the “Cradle of Humankind.”

Steep slopes dropping from the southern, eastern, and western edges of the interior plateau are known as the Great Escarpment. The eastern portion of the Great Escarpment is called the Drakensberg, meaning “Dragon Mountains,” because of its appearance from below. Nestled high in the soaring, snow-capped peaks of this eastern range there is another, entirely different nation within South Africa's borders: Lesotho. Much of South Africa's water supply comes from this tiny, land-locked “Kingdom of the Sky.”

Many of South Africa's larger cities, such as Durban, Cape Town, and Port Elizabeth, are located in low-lying areas along the coast, with the South Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Indian Ocean to the east. Amazing sea creatures—nearly two thousand marine species—live in the waters around South Africa. The country is home, in fact, to almost 10 percent of the world's known fish, bird, and plant species, and about 6 percent of its mammals and reptiles—from armadillos to hippos to turtles to zebras! All this, even though South Africa makes up only about 1 percent of the Earth's land surface!

South Africa strives to preserve its abundant wildlife with numerous protected land and marine areas, like the famous Kruger National Park, and thousands of privately-owned game reserves. Still, many of South Africa's animals are threat-



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Republic of South Africa

CAPITALS:

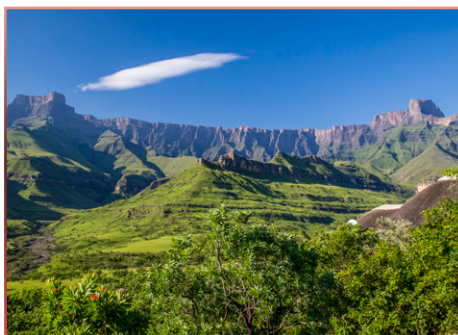
Pretoria (administrative),
Cape Town (legislative),
Bloemfontein (judicial)

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:

Afrikaans, English,
isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu,
Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana,
siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga

MONEY: Rand

AREA: 466,832 square
miles (1,219,090 square
kilometers)



Photos L-R: Charles Bell by Jan van Riebeeck. Drakensberg, by Diriyé Amey. Cheetah, by Mukul2u.

ened by habitat loss and illegal hunting, like elephants prized by hunters for their ivory tusks. Many species are in danger of extinction, including the cheetah, African wild dog, and blue crane, South Africa's national bird.

Joining the San and the Khoikhoi—another indigenous group—already in South Africa, Bantu tribes entered the region from the north by the 1400s. Later that century, European ships bound for the Far East began stopping on the South African coast for supplies. In 1652, the Netherlands established the southern city of Cape Town and populated it with Dutch settlers, whose descendants are called Afrikaners. After the British seized the area in 1806, many of the Afrikaners trekked north and settled in colonies there.

The discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1800s spurred wealth and immigration, and intensified the already poor treatment of South Africa's native inhabitants, as well as people from South and East Asia and other parts of Africa who'd come to South Africa as slaves, servants, and workers. In the Second South African War (1899-1902), the British defeated the Afrikaners; still, the British and Afrikaners ruled together beginning in 1910, when four

colonies in the region were united officially as South Africa.

In 1948, the Afrikaner-dominated National Party was voted into power and instituted a policy called apartheid—the separation of the races—which favored the white minority at the expense of the Black majority. The African National Congress (ANC) led the opposition to apartheid, and several top ANC leaders, such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, spent decades in South Africa's prisons. After many turbulent years of intense protest and conflict, as well as boycotts by some Western nations and institutions, the government was finally willing to end apartheid and permit fair representation for all.

South Africa has been a democratic republic since holding its first truly open election in 1994, which made Nelson Mandela, released from prison in 1990, the country's president. Ongoing problems with unemployment, poverty, and the life-threatening medical condition AIDS, a health crisis across Africa, remain challenges for the government. But South Africa's plentiful natural resources, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing have made its economy one of the largest on the African continent.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Colonialism is when one country takes full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and exploiting it economically. What groups of people have settled in South Africa? How and why? With colonialism in mind, how is South Africa's history similar to and different from the United States of America? What challenges facing South Africa today might be a legacy of colonialism and apartheid? Could South Africa's nickname of "Rainbow Nation" also apply to our country? Why or why not? Research online or in the library if you need more information, then write down your thoughts or discuss or present them in class.

SOURCES: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>; ShowMe South Africa, www.showme.co.za; NatGeo Kids, <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/south-africa>.



Photos L-R: Baboons, Central Intelligence Agency. Camps Bay, by Warrickball. Wild dog, by Ian Sewell. Blue Crans, by Charles Sharp.

APARTHEID: SEPARATE AND NOT EQUAL

Imagine being told you couldn't hang out with your best friend because your skin was a different color than theirs. Imagine being forced to live in a different part of your city, to go to a different school, to play on a different playground, or to shop at a different grocery store because of the color of your skin. Unfair, right? This is called segregation, when people are kept apart by their skin color, racial background, or some other reason. In the United States, racial segregation existed for centuries, from the days of slavery to the era of Jim Crow. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other Black leaders, was a mass popular movement for African Americans to gain equal rights under the law.

Like America, South Africa has struggled with segregation as well. There, it was called apartheid. Apartheid, meaning "apartness" in Afrikaans (the language of Afrikaners, the white descendants of the country's early Dutch settlers), was the legal system for racial separation in South Africa from 1948 until 1994. Though there were more Black people than white people living in South Africa, white people ruled the country, a situation known as minority rule. In the apartheid system imposed by the minority rule, South Africans were divided by their race, and the races were forced to live separately from each other. Even before the apartheid laws, segregation had for many decades been a distinctive feature of South African political, social, and economic life.

and forcibly moved many people. It became illegal for people of different races to marry and for Black people to own land in white areas. The rights of Black people to vote or have political representation were also restricted.



Frederik de Klerk and Nelson Mandela shake hands at the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in January 1992.

Protests erupted across South Africa, and the nonviolent resistance of anti-apartheid demonstrators was often met with government brutality, including the massacre of seventy-two demonstrators in Sharpeville in 1960. Some leading anti-apartheid activists were sent to prison, like Nelson Mandela, jailed from 1962 to 1990. In 1976, Black students led protests in Soweto because Africans were forced to study some subjects at school in Afrikaans, the language of the apartheid government. Police response to the student demonstrations was again brutal; at least 176 people, many of them children, were killed in the Soweto uprising, with some estimates in the several hundreds.

Finally, after much struggle as well as pressure from the international community, the South African government began dismantling apartheid in the early 1990s, when President F. W. de Klerk legalized formerly banned political parties and released political prisoners like Mandela. In 1994, a new constitution was written mandating equal rights for all, and Mandela became president in the country's first fair and open elections.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Consider the situations and events that led to both the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. What are the similarities? What are the differences? With these two human rights movements in mind, what might we predict about current movements against oppression in other parts of the world? Discuss these questions in small groups, write down your answers, and share with the class.



Durban Sign 1989 by Guinnog.

Under apartheid, laws sorted all South Africans into four categories: Bantu (Blacks), "coloreds" (those of mixed race), Asians, and white. The laws allowed white people to keep Black people out of certain areas. Black people had to carry special passes or have permission to live and work in certain areas. The government separated mixed communities

SOURCES: Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, Stanford University, www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu; KidzSearch Encyclopedia for Kids, www.kidzsearch.com.

SOWETO: HEART OF SOUTH AFRICA

From its beginnings as a creation of apartheid South Africa, the township of Soweto has become the vibrant, forward-looking heart of Johannesburg, the country's largest city. It is a cultural melting pot of over a million people, many of whom remain there because of its heritage as the center of the struggle against apartheid. With its proximity to Johannesburg, the economic engine of South Africa, Soweto is the most metropolitan township in the country and sets the cultural and political trends.

The name Soweto is an acronym for South Western Township, established in the early days of Johannesburg to house workers for the mining industry. Labor was drawn from many countries of Southern Africa, and this was the origin of the broad diversity of cultures in South Africa. During the time of apartheid, "townships" were established by whites. These were segregated public housing areas for nonwhites, usually built on the outskirts of cities.



FNB Stadium by Prosthetic Head.

Klipspruit, the first suburb of Soweto, was established in 1904 as part of the plan to segregate the population on racial grounds and to keep Johannesburg "white." Over the years, though the apartheid regime continued to relocate Black people to Soweto from "white" Johannesburg, little was done to improve infrastructure, so for much of its history Soweto struggled under the weight of overpopulation and very poor living conditions. However, the people of Soweto made the best of it and created a rich culture that continues to evolve. Today, Soweto is a metropolis of some forty suburbs spanning every socioeconomic class.

SOURCE: Adapted from ShowMe South Africa, www.showme.co.za.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Nelson Mandela.

Since 1995 when the new democratic government came to power, much has been done to upgrade the infrastructure and beautify Soweto by creating parks and planting trees.

Soweto has become an international "brand"—exemplified by popular cultural exports like Soweto Gospel Choir—because of the key role it played in the creation and eventual downfall of the apartheid system. The student uprising in 1976 as well as the defiance campaigns of the 1980s began in Soweto and spread from there throughout South Africa.

Many world-famous sons and daughters of the apartheid struggle once lived in Soweto—Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, both Nobel Peace Prize winners, Walter and Albertina Sisulu, and many others. Hector Pieterse, a youth who was shot dead by the police in the 1976 student uprising in Soweto, came to symbolize the rebellion as it spread throughout the country and changed the course of history in South Africa.

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the Soweto landscape has changed dramatically. Electrical, road, and sanitation infrastructure has been upgraded. Parks have been created. Mansions have been built by the rich and famous. Heritage sites in memory of the years of struggle have been created. Restaurants, nightclubs, hotels, and recreational facilities have sprung up to cater to the growing tourist trade. The magnificent Soccer City stadium was built to host the opening and final matches of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, making South Africa the first African nation to host the important soccer championship.

Try This

Soweto Gospel Choir's 2018 album *Freedom* is a tribute to Nelson Mandela. Research the life and work of this world-renowned anti-apartheid leader and human rights activist—or others who also once lived in Soweto, like Desmond Tutu or the Sisulus—and share what you discover with your class in a presentation.

RESOURCES

Books

Mama Africa!: How Miriam Makeba Spread Hope with Her Song by Kathryn Erskine (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017). Award-winning picture-book biography for grades 1-3 of the South African singer who raised her voice against apartheid.

The Soccer Fence: A Story of Friendship, Hope, and Apartheid in South Africa by Phil Bildner (Putnam, 2014). Story of friendship and sport set at the fall of apartheid, for grades 1-5.

Nelson Mandela by Nelson Kadir (Harper Collins/Katherine Tegan, 2013). Award-winning picture-book biography for grades 1-3.

South Africa by Ettagale Blauer (Children's Press, 2013). Describes the nation's history, geography, population, wildlife, climate, economy, religion, and culture, for grades 4-6.

Internet

Soweto Gospel Choir official website, www.sowetogospelchoir.com.

Soweto Gospel Choir Performance Guide for Teachers, Lied Center for Performing Arts, www.browardcenter.org/assets/doc/Soweto_-_StudyGuide_042018-f52d8a0ec7.pdf.

Soweto Gospel Choir Teacher Resource Guide, University Musical Society, ums.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Soweto_Resource_Guide.pdf.

Virginia Standards of Learning

Music: K.3-7, 9; 1.3-7, 9; 2.3-7, 9; 3.3, 5-7; 4.3-7; 5.3-7; EI.3-7, 10-11; 6.3-7, 10-11; 7.3-6, 11; 8.3-6; MIB.3-7, 10-11; MII.3-6, 11; MIAD.3-6; MCB.3-7, 11; MCI.3-6, 11; MCAD.3-6; HM.3-6, 11; HMT.3-6, 11; HIB.3-6, 11; HII.3-6; HIAD.3-6; HIAR.3-6; HCB.3-6, 11; HCI.3-6; HCAD.3-6; HCAR.3-6



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How did this performance contribute to experiential learning in your classroom?

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If you could change one thing about this experience, what would it be?

Please include quotes and comments from your students as well!

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School: _____ City: _____

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