

Exploring the Intersections Between Gospel Music and European Choral Traditions

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Session Overview This session explores gospel composers whose formal training in European music theory, composition, and choral traditions shaped their writing – and how their works offer accessible entry points for collegiate choral directors.

Isaac Cates

- Singer-songwriter, pianist, composer, arranger, conductor
- Studied Voice and Piano, UMKC Conservatory
- Background in African American Baptist church with both sacred/gospel and European choral traditions
- Founder, Ordained; debut album *Take My Life* (2006)
- Known for sophisticated harmonies, polyphonic rhythms, complex piano accompaniments

The Lord's Prayer

- 16th-note ostinato with additive entrances; marcato accents on weak beats
- Climactic diminished chord inverting three times → resolves V7
- Glissando technique: simultaneous pitch + vowel + register shift
- Rehearsal tip: speak ostinato rhythms first; add vocal fry via 'Y'/voiced 'H' onset

Take My Life (Lacrimosa)

- Interpolates opening 8 measures of Mozart's *Requiem* "Lacrimosa"
- Style transitions from European choral to gospel
- Vamp: circle-of-fifths progression; polyrhythmic 2-vs-3 texture
- Gospel-style soloist; some improvisation

Dr. Diane White-Clayton

- Composer, pianist, conductor, soprano, author
- Faculty at UCLA
- M.M. & D.M.A. in Composition, UC Santa Barbara
- Background in African American Baptist church with both sacred/gospel and European choral traditions
- Founder, BYTHAX publishing; Artistic Director, Dr. Dee & the BYTHAX Ensemble
- Describes her music as "a mélange of the power of gospel, the technique of classical, and the colors of jazz"

Be Thou Exalted

- 19th-c. influence — passing tones in inner voices, expressive dynamics, caesura pauses
- Polyphonic vamp in 12/8: march-like, Baroque buoyancy — rehearse as imitative passages in a J. S. Bach cantata
- Conductor may improvise embellishments in repeats; pianist encouraged to ornament
- Ideal for ensembles already familiar with Baroque vocal technique; programs well alongside Baroque repertoire

Dr. Raymond Wise

- Composer, conductor, pianist, countertenor, author, minister
- PhD in Music Education, Ohio State University
- Executive Director, African American Arts Institute, Indiana University Bloomington
- 680+ choral works: gospel, anthems, art songs, spirituals, etc.
- 2002 dissertation traces gospel's development 1900–2000
- Founder, Raise Productions; authored pedagogy texts for gospel & spirituals
- Mission: validate gospel in academia, bridge gospel/classical audiences, unite cultures

Glory and Honor

- Classical-style piano intro with arpeggiation & embellishment; hymn-like homophonic verse
- Use head voice for vamp with rising inversions
- Dynamic growth with open [a] vowel
- Rehearsal tip: speak text with articulations before adding pitch.

Lord, Send Your Spirit

- Excellent for introducing classically-trained singers to gospel pedagogy
- Teach primarily by rote modeling / call-and-response
- Conductor ad lib repeats in the vamps (change dynamics, use neutral syllables, isolate voice-parts, etc.)
- Perform memorized! 😊

Key Pedagogical Themes

- Vowel placement: closed/vertical (Western) → open/forward [a] (gospel)
- Healthy vocal ascents: encourage head voice and 'sigh-like' onset for high gospel passages
- Rote learning & call-and-response for rhythm, articulation, and style
- Conductor improvisation where applicable for flexible sections
- Conduct melodic rhythms rather than beat patterns when a rhythm section is present

Additional Composers to Explore

- Richard Smallwood — pioneer of Classical-gospel synthesis
- Roberta Martin — early gospel choral writing
- Dr. Mattie Moss Clark — choral gospel innovator
- Thomas Whitfield — sophisticated harmonies, choral arrangements
- Donald Lawrence — contemporary gospel choral works

Resources & QR Codes



Score Samples, Repertoire Lists,
Conductors Analysis Chart



LinkTree: Recordings, Research,
and more!