



 VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL

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The Kingdom Choir

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THE KINGDOM CHOIR

Led by Karen Gibson, one of the UK’s most respected gospel tutors and choir conductors, the Kingdom Choir is a group of singers dedicated to creating a sound that expresses the community they share. Founded in the UK, they have been performing for over 20 years at venues all around the world. The choir is well-known for its united sound, warm energy, and enthusiastic performance, hallmarks of gospel music as a genre.

The group’s members pride themselves on their close bond—on feeling like family. “Rehearsals are about the singing, and that’s great,” Karen says. “But actually, it’s just about being with them, really... Every time we get together, there’s joy.” Music has helped members of The Kingdom Choir feel a powerful sense of connection and overcome personal struggles. Karen urges her singers to strive for their best and helps them to let go of any fear and anxiety standing in the way. “Loving one another, dreaming big, praying, worshipping—I think that’s the strength of this choir,” says Karen.

On May 19th, 2018, The Kingdom Choir performed “Stand By Me” at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle—a performance watched by over two billion people worldwide. Their powerful rendition of the song resonated with audiences in the UK and globally. “The people who stop me down the road are all colors, all races, all classes, all ages,” Karen recounts. “They’ll talk about inclusivity. They don’t use that word, but one lady said, ‘It felt like it was our wedding.’ Or, there is a four-year-old little girl... and when she saw the choir on the TV, she said, ‘Look, Mummy, they look like me.’”

“We’re getting to share how we do life with other people and that’s amazing,” says tenor Collette Watson-Blythe. Since 2018, The Kingdom Choir has carried the same ethos forward, reaching audiences globally with their show-stopping vocals and message of joy and harmony.



SOURCE: Adapted from The Kingdom Choir, <https://kingdomchoir.com>.

Get to know the choir’s singers at <https://www.aboutthekingdomchoir.com>.

GOOD GOSPEL! WHAT IS IT?

The musical genre known as gospel encompasses a variety of cultures and traditions. Often, gospel is written and performed for religious or ceremonial purposes. It originates in Christian traditions like the singing of hymns and spirituals. But gospel can also be composed and sung simply for entertainment and pleasurable listening. Gospel music typically features strong, emotion-fueled vocals and rich harmonies, and is generally performed by choirs that are accompanied by piano, 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 reading of lyrics is required, allowing everyone the opportunity to join in the song, even those who can’t read or don’t have hymnals (books of hymns).

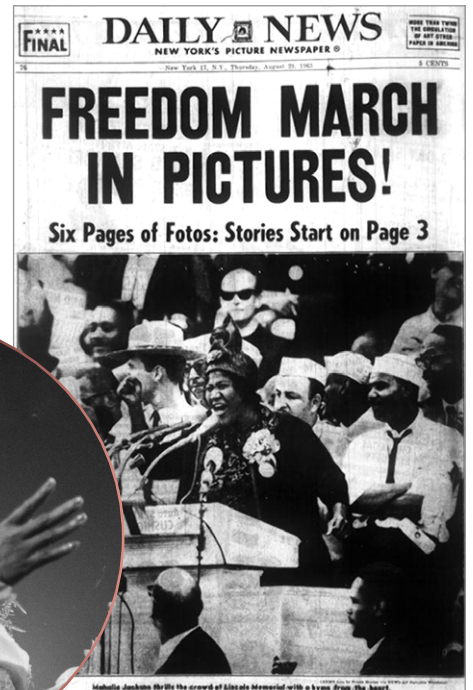
Other hallmarks of gospel music include musical and lyrical repetition, complex rhythms that come from layers of voices, clapping, or percussion, and lyrics that are often uplifting or inspirational.

African American Gospel

In the United States, gospel music can be traced back to the seventeenth century and the time of slavery. Enslaved African Americans used the musical elements of repetition and call and response when they sang spirituals—songs that blended slaveholders’ European-based church hymns and the African musical traditions enslaved people brought with them to America. New as well as preexisting religious lyrics were imbued with rhythms that created a sense of momentum and were sung with a powerful expressiveness that gave voice to the struggles and hopes of enslaved people. 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 stomping their feet. 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 in the 1960s.
Comet Photo AG, Squarespace.*

The advent of broadcast radio in the 1920s 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, The Caravans, the Swan Silvertones, and The Clara Ward Singers. Gospel songs like “We Shall Overcome” were a rallying cry during the Civil Rights Movement for racial equality in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today, with TV and internet, there is no geographic limit to the audiences gospel music can reach. Gospel remains a vital musical genre in the United States, 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.

Gospel has also impacted more secular (non-religious) music genres like soul, blues, and pop music, and there is considerable overlap between these types of music. Aretha Franklin, the “Queen of Soul,” began her career as a gospel singer. Gospel-style vocals, rhythms, and call and response are elements you can find in a great deal of music produced today.

British Gospel

Gospel music is highly popular among Black communities in the United Kingdom. The UK has its own vibrant gospel music, of which Karen Gibson and The Kingdom Choir are a sterling example.



*London Community Gospel Choir.
Skip The Budgie.*

There is a great deal of overlap between British and American gospel traditions, and these connections actually go back long before the development of gospel as a distinct musical genre. People and ideas traveled across and around the Atlantic Ocean during the period of British colonialism in North America and the Caribbean. Many clerics and missionaries, along with their religious texts and hymnals, came from Britain to the American colonies, resulting in a shared vocabulary of religious music across continents. Hymns from the British Anglican Church provided lyrics to some of the most famous gospel songs, like “Amazing Grace.”

Gospel’s history and influence go beyond the colonies that would become the United States. Enslaved Africans across the British Caribbean, like those in North America, sang spirituals and set hymns to rhythmic beats, producing Caribbean gospel music. African countries also have their own gospel music traditions. In South Africa, gospel has been an expression of religious faith as well as of activism and protest against apartheid, just as gospel figured prominently in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Today, international gospel singers and songwriters like Sinach from Nigeria enjoy popularity on a global scale, reaching tens of millions of people.

Black communities in the UK hail from many different backgrounds and create their own gospel with a blend of cultural influences, closely connected to gospel music worldwide. In fact, gospel is increasingly popular in the UK among all audiences. Along with The Kingdom Choir, groups such as the London Community Gospel Choir (LCGC), founded in 1982 by Bazil Meade, and singers such as Ryan Hylton, Noel Hugh Robinson, Sharyn, and Blessing Annatoria are all part of a flourishing British gospel scene.

Try this

- The technique of call and response is a key component of much gospel music. It can be found in other types 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!

Research & Reflect

- Listen to a gospel song from the 1940s-1960s (like “Lead Me to That Rock,” here at the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ftvbib000114>) or an old spiritual (like “My Good Lord Done Been Here,” here at the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000443>). What can you infer about the singer and context? What are the similarities and differences between that piece and The Kingdom Choir’s performance? Do you see any comparisons with other genres of music?

THE DIVERSE AFRICAN DIASPORA

1.5 billion people live in Africa, nearly 20% of the world's total population. But many people of African descent—over 200 million—live outside of the African continent. These populations make up the global African *diaspora*, a word used to describe a population scattered across regions that are different from their geographic place of origin.



Most of this movement is the result of the transatlantic slave trade of the 1500s-1800s, which forced millions of people from West Africa to make their lives in the Americas. Most enslaved Africans were forced to work on the brutal and labor-intensive sugar plantations of the Caribbean islands and Brazil. Slave ships brought about 4.7 million enslaved people from West Africa to the Caribbean and 4.8 million enslaved people from West Africa to Brazil, versus the 388,000 enslaved people who were brought from West Africa to North America. As a result, in most Caribbean countries today, Black people make up a large majority, and over half of all Brazilians have African ancestry.

Although the imposed migrations of the transatlantic slave trade have had immense impact on history, culture, and population globally, enslavement is not the only cause of migration from Africa. As the world has become increasingly closely connected, the movement of people has become increasingly possible in all directions. Today, people migrate within and out of the African continent for many different reasons, such as to study, to work, or to flee crisis. There is a great deal of migration between and within African countries. In South Africa, for example, most recent immigrants are from the neighboring coun-

tries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. But many Africans move further afield to European countries, the Middle East, and North America, where they become part of the broader African diaspora.

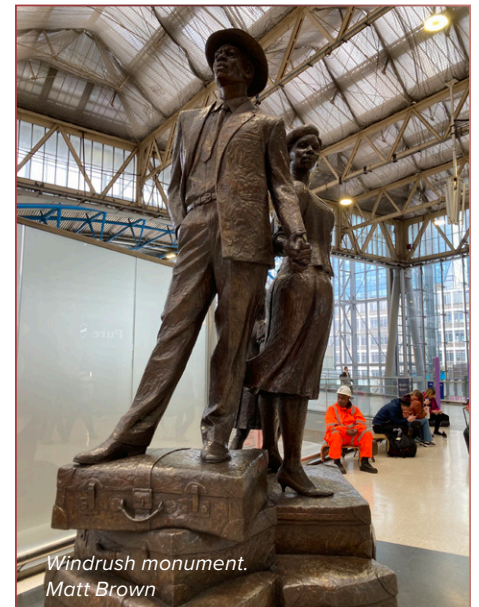
Black people outside of Africa also migrate based on opportunity, need, and family networks, creating new connections, neighborhoods, and cultural traditions. Haitians in the United States, Jamaicans in the United Kingdom, and Trinidadians in Canada are just a few examples of the shifting communities that make up the African diaspora. Altogether, zooming out, you can imagine the diaspora as a vast and diverse kaleidoscope of African and African-descended peoples worldwide.

Across the Pond

Africans have lived in Britain since long before the period of transatlantic slavery, with a presence going back to Roman times. Archaeology has uncovered the fourth century Ivory Bangle Lady, a wealthy North African woman who died in Roman Britain. Free Africans lived and worked in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain, too, as Miranda Kaufmann's book *Black Tudors* (One-world, 2017) has shown. John Blanke, as one example, was the royal trumpeter for King Henry VIII!

Many Black communities in Britain today have their roots in former British colonies. Following WWII, hundreds of thousands of people from the British Caribbean moved to Britain after the British Nationality Act allowed people from Britain's colonies to live and work there to spur post-war economic growth and reconstruction.

These migrants are known as the "Windrush Generation" after the ship HMT Empire Windrush, which brought



Windrush monument.
Matt Brown

over a thousand people from Jamaica, Trinidad, Saint Lucia, Grenada, and Barbados to Britain. Once they arrived,

Caribbean migrants struggled with racist attitudes and changing immigration policies designed to limit the numbers of Black people in the UK. They could not necessarily rely on the permits they possessed to avoid mistreatment and deportation. Despite these difficulties, the Windrush generation were able to make their homes in the UK, and successive immigrants have as well. Caribbean people of African descent are a vital and vibrant community in the UK, with festivities such as the Notting Hill Carnival and Leeds Carnival put on each year in traditionally Caribbean British neighborhoods. Caribbean music, culture, and turns of phrase have all left their mark on British culture at large.



People from countries in Africa have also immigrated to the UK, especially, in recent years, from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Ghana. Work and university studies are the two major reasons for immigration. Other Africans have come to Britain as refugees from Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to name a few examples. Immigration is still not easy, especially for refugees, who face the uncertainty of changing policies. Nonetheless, African immigrants are making their homes in Britain, enriching the broader cultural milieu with their own heritage and traditions.

A Global Community?

Many people of African descent worldwide are linked by interconnected art forms, styles, and traditions that have been passed down through generations and changed to adapt to different contexts. People in the African diaspora share some historical experiences of enslavement and colonialism, and many have had to confront racist attitudes. All these factors contribute to a sense of shared African identity and community across borders.

At the same time, it's important to keep in mind that there are many differences and distinct experiences across the African continent and the diaspora. African and African-descended peoples are incredibly diverse, comprising many nations, belief systems, and ethnic groups. Each community has its own individual story. It's a fascinating medley of cultures and histories!



Notting Hill Carnival, London, U.K. David Sedlecký.

• Research & Reflect

- What is your own cultural heritage and family history of migration?
- What different genres of music do you like to listen to?
- What do you know about the history associated with those genres? Can you think of a genre other than gospel that blends several different cultural influences?
- What historical factors influenced its development as a genre? Do some research and share your ideas with the class!

EMOTION AND EXPERIENCE

“She’s jamming, she can’t help it!”

“She’s tough.”

“That girl needs to sit down and rest a while!”

These are some of the phrases people might call out to show their approval while a singer performs gospel music in a religious setting. The congregation might also clap to the beat of the music, stamp their feet, and sing all together with the call and response, everyone participating in the communal experience of the music.

A powerful voice and intense emotional expression on the part of the singer are some of the key features of gospel in all its forms. In religious gospel music, it has special significance. Many of the world’s religions incorporate art and music that evoke emotion. In Christian gospel traditions, the singer’s full voice and energetic performance invite the presence of the Holy Spirit, transporting listeners in a meaningful and awe-inspiring religious experience. Gospel was closely entwined with the Christian religious revivals of the nineteenth century, which emphasized an individual’s personal experience of faith and religious inspiration.

The high levels of feeling in gospel songs affect singers and listeners in other ways, too. The longing, hope, and joy of the music provide an outlet for emotion, expressing grief and struggle as well as joy, praise, and hope for liberation. Despite the difficulties people may encounter in their day-to-day lives, a sense of freedom and release can be found in the emotional expression of gospel, just as the spirituals enslaved people sang were a lifeline that affirmed that their trials had meaning. Additionally, singing or listening to music as a group inspires positive feelings of togetherness and community. For their part, the singers of The Kingdom Choir discuss their personal religious faith, but also share a more general message of hope, unity, and overcoming struggle through gospel music.

Quotes from *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music* by Robert Darden (Bloomsbury, 2005).



Gospel singers. Britannica.

What Do You Think?

- How does The Kingdom Choir’s music make you feel?
- What musical elements do you think create this effect?
- Was there ever a time that music or creative expression helped you get through a bad day?
- How does the idea of feeling the Holy Spirit in a singer’s voice compare to the religious traditions you’re familiar with, or any other non-religious experiences you’ve had? Do you see similarities? Differences?
- Different kinds of musical performances have different expectations for how the audience should listen and show their appreciation. Can you name a few kinds of events and how the audience behaves at each? (Eg. pop concert, theater play, parade with marching band.)
- How does that audience behavior contribute to the overall effect of the performance?

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 generally used to 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 nonreligious 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.

Diaspora

The dispersion or spread of a people from their original homeland, or people who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland.

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

An artificially 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.

Spiritual

A type of religious folk song associated with enslaved African people, especially from the American South. Spirituals were usually either slow and sorrowful in tone or fast-paced and joyful. They featured religious lyrics and often involved call and response and creative, freeform melodies and rhythms.

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, enter-
- tainment, or artistic expression. What purpose does the
- chorus or choir you know of serve—for its singers, its
- listeners, the community?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Internet

“African American Gospel,” Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/ritual-and-worship/african-american-gospel>

“Spirituals,” Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/ritual-and-worship/spirituals>

“Gospel Music Guide: A Brief History of Gospel Music,” Masterclass. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/gospel-music-guide>

“Gospel Music,” Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/gospel-music>

GOSPEL, educational history series with video and audio designed for middle and high school students, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., PBS Learning Media.

<https://thinktv.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/gospel>

“Gospel Music and the Birth of Soul,” Teach Rock.

<https://teachrock.org/lesson/gospel-music-and-the-birth-of-soul>

“Black History of Britain,” English Heritage.

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/black-history>

“How gospel music helped power the Civil Rights Movement,” Brown University interview with Dr. Charisse Baron. <https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-01-13/barron>

Collected old and new gospel music on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, <https://folkways.si.edu/genre/gospel>

Books

People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music by Robert Darden (Bloomsbury, 2005). Accessible academic analysis of the historical evolution of gospel music from spirituals, with attention to music’s significance for personal expression, religion, and culture.

Martin & Mahalia: His Words, Her Song by Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2013). Picture book biography for grades K-5 of Martin Luther King, Jr and renowned gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, telling the stories of their lives and entwined activism during the Civil Rights Movement. Nominated for a NAACP Image Award for Children.

A Voice Named Aretha, by Katheryn Russell-Brown and Laura Freeman (Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 2020). Picture book biography for grades K-5 of famous gospel and soul singer Aretha Franklin focused on her work, values, and activism.

VIP: Mahalia Jackson, Freedom’s Voice by Denise Lewis Patrick and Jennifer Bricking (HarperCollins, 2021). Exciting and accessible biography of Mahalia Jackson for grades 3-6.

On My Journey Now: Looking at African-American History Through the Spirituals by Nikki Giovanni (Candlewick, 2007). Brief and poetic book centered on the expression of historical struggles and hopes through spirituals, with lyrics included; for grades 6 and up.

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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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FEEDBACK FORM

We need your feedback to make our Education Programs even better! Please take a moment to complete this form and either return it to the Virginia Arts Festival office at 440 Bank Street, Norfolk, VA 23510, fax it to (757) 605-3080, or e-mail your answers to education@vafest.org.

Event: _____

How did your students respond to the performance?

How did you prepare your students for this performance? Did you use the Education Guide? If so, how?
Did students enjoy the materials?

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

What role do the arts play in your school? In your classroom?

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

Please include quotes and comments from your students as well!

(Optional)

Name: _____

School: _____ City: _____

Would you like to be part of our database? Yes No