

Four African Hymns

These four African hymns are representative of African Christian music. They come from Kenya and Tanzania and contain African music elements of syncopation, solo and response, and instruments found in many African songs.

Hosana, Aja Kwa Jina la Yesu was written by Baptist composer Reverend Manaseh G. Mutsoli from Kenya. This Christmas carol was first performed in 1979 at the Youth Choir festival sponsored by the National Christian Council of Kenya.

Mwamba ni Yesu is a popular congregational chorus. This setting is for choir. You might consider involving your audience by teaching the response and asking them to join in during the performance.

Utukufu Mbinguni Juu is based on a real African traditional song used by the Abaluyia ethnic group of Kenya as a victory song. Rev. M. G. Mutsoli borrowed the melody and arranged it for his choir in the Christian context to proclaim victory through Christ.

Psalms 136, Wimbo Wa Shukrani (Hymn of Thanks) was written by Glenn T. Boyd, music missionary with Baptist Seminary students in Arusha, Tanzania. It is based on a traditional Kihaya tune. Much like the biblical Hallel on which it is based, it is in call and response form as a litany of scripture.

As you prepare your choir keep in mind the following suggestions:

Key Selection

While each of these songs is written conveniently in the key of F or G, many African choirs do not feel bound by the fixed pitch. Keys are chosen to best suit the choir's singable range. Feel free to move the songs up or down.

Four-part Singing

Four-part singing is an assimilated African characteristic borrowed from western Christian hymns. Traditional African songs are generally in unison with some parallel third singing. Most part songs are written linearly, that is, each part is written and conceived as a melody and combined much like counterpoint. Therefore, parallels and dissonance are not as troublesome to the ear as traditional common practice part writing. Try teaching the songs as vocal lines.

Texts

Pronunciation

Each of these songs is in a regional African language called Swahili. Swahili is based on a group of ethnic languages called Bantu and borrows heavily from Arabic. Swahili is used in many parts of Eastern Africa, including the countries of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire. Unlike English, which has many sounds for vowels and their combinations, there are only five distinct sounds for the basic vowels a, e, i, o and u. These are always pronounced like the Latin or Italian vowels with a very open pronunciation: (a) 'ah' as in *father*, (e) 'eh' as in *bed*, (i) 'ee' as in *beet*, (o) 'oh' as in *go* and (u) 'u' as *blue*. The pronunciation of consonants is as follows: (y) is as in *yellow*, (g) is as in *good*, and (j) is very soft, as *dhy* (fricative). Unlike in English, "M" is a syllable of speech. For example in "Mwamba," you pronounce the 'm' as a separate syllable like m-wa-m-ba. In singing, these are often elided because of the music. Be sure to pronounce the 'w' in mwamba distinctly.

Textual Variance

In African music, there is great freedom, even expectation, for soloists to vary the text to suit the occasion. In solo and response songs, a caller is valued for his or her ability to vary and modify the call with appropriate words within the frame of reference of the participants. Generally, the response stays the same. Feel free to change the text and adapt to your situation.

Form

The most common singing form in Africa is the *call and response*. In the call and response, a leader calls out and encourages the singers to respond, creating a musical dialogue. Each of these songs has some element of call and response. The caller or solo is sometimes called a “mwimbishaji” or one who causes people to sing. In selecting your soloists, choose someone with a charismatic personality who will encourage the others to sing—someone in whom the group has confidence as a vocal leader.

Meter

African music is not metered in a linear fashion as in western music. These meters are provided to help you conceptualize the song. Like the cycles of seasons and daily tasks of life, African music is cyclical. The idea of a circle of music allows people to enter freely and build a community of and through song. Feel free to add interludes of rhythm and elongate cadences.

Performance

All music should be memorized. African music is always performed without books. Music is an oral form of communication. It involves the whole body in participation. I have included some suggestions for movement but feel free to create your own. Clapping in rhythms is appropriate.

Because these are designed for choir, you will want to include some kind of musical introduction. With the exception of “Hosana”, which is started *a cappella*, begin each song with an *ostinati* effect starting first with instruments and then voices, until you have the momentum to begin singing. In African music there is the expectance of the unexpected. Participants enjoy surprise elements in singing. Sometimes whistles, yells, and grunts are added as well as vocal trills at high moments in the performance. “Utukufu” is an example of a surprise abrupt ending. Repeat the chorus ad libitum until you reach a climax and stop the song abruptly. Prepare your choir in advance so that you don’t have vocal stragglers.

Instrumentation

Rhythm is an essential ingredient to African music. Any rhythm instrument is suitable. I have included suggested rhythms and instruments, but feel free to experiment.

Vocal Style

Generally, the singing tone is straight or without vibrato. In all the songs, except “Hosana,” the singing is punctuated and very pronounced keeping in the style of the percussion. In “Hosana,” strive for a full, yet straight tone, with very open vowels.

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Mwamba ni Yesu

Swahili text: as sung by Rev. M.G. Mutsoli
 English text: J. Nathan Corbitt

Traditional Swahili chorus
 arr. J. Nathan Corbitt

$\text{♩} = 88$

Solo:

1. Mwa - mba, mwa- mba —
 (Who is the rock?) —
 2. A - ba - ri - ki —
 (He bless - es us) —

Introduction:

S
 A
 T
 B

Mwa- mba ————— Ye - su mwa - mba ————— *Hm (Grunt)*
 after intro only

Mwa- mba Ye - su, mwa - mba —————

5

Mwa - mba, mwa - mba —————

Response:

Mwa- mba ni Ye - su, mwa - mba
 (The rock is Je - sus, Je - sus)

9

Last time

Grunt

mwa- mba ni Ye - su, mwa - mba ————— *Grunt on ending*

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Mwamba ni Yesu

3. Solo: Anaponya (he heals)
Response: Mwamba ni Yesu, mwamba
4. Solo: Analinda (he protects)
Response: Mwamba ni Yesu, mwamba
5. Solo: Aokoa (he saves)
Response: Mwamba ni Yesu, mwamba

English Text:

3. Solo: He heals from sin.
Response: The rock is Jesus, Jesus. (OR: Jesus, the rock is Jesus.)
4. Solo: The rock protects.
Response: The rock is Jesus, Jesus.
5. Solo: He rescues all.
Response: The rock is Jesus, Jesus.

Performance Sugestions:

Begin with instruments. Then add voices, one at a time (S, B, T then A) on introduction, repeating intro as many times as needed.

An optional ending would be to subtract voices, one at a time (A, T, B then S), ending with instruments.

Suggested Instrumentation:

The image shows musical notation for four instruments: Drum, Cowbell, Triangle, and Shaker (Sandblock or beaded gourd). The notation is in 2/4 time. The Drum part starts with a quarter note, followed by two eighth notes, then a quarter note, and ends with a quarter rest. The Cowbell part has a whole rest for the first measure, followed by a quarter note in the second measure. The Triangle part has a quarter note in the first measure, followed by a quarter rest in the second measure. The Shaker part has a quarter note in the first measure, followed by a quarter rest in the second measure. The notation includes repeat signs and a double bar line at the end of each part.

Movement:

The suggested movement is a two-measure pattern of walking in place, with shifting of weight between the feet. Begin with feet slightly apart. On the first beat of the two-measure pattern, stomp your foot forward as if smashing a bug. Walk in place for the remainder of the two-measure pattern.