



# *Siyahamba*, South African Freedom Song

This popular freedom song was first made available in the United States through the publication *Freedom is Coming: Songs of Protest and Praise from South Africa*, ed. Anders Nyberg (Chapel Hill: Walton Music Corporation, 1984). Nyberg collected several South African songs in the 1970s. They were published by a music group “Fjedur” and the Church of Sweden Mission in 1980. The response to these songs throughout Scandinavia was excellent and, subsequently, they were made available to English speakers around the world.

A brief account of the political and social conditions in South Africa will help choristers understand how freedom songs like “Siyahamba” came to be published. Also, this article will help the director understand nuances in the text and meanings that may not be obvious to the Western singer. You will want to discuss the performance practice of this song with your choristers. Some liturgical possibilities for using “Siyahamba” are included also.

## **SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF SOUTH AFRICA**

On October 29, 1998, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu officially presented President Mandela the five volumes of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Tutu, head of the TRC, had heard long hours of personal testimony from the victims of atrocities committed under the tyranny of apartheid. The investigation had reached its first stage of completion. When Mandela received the TRC Report from Tutu, a choir was present at this formal gathering and broke into joyful song. Then, before a global audience, Mandela and Tutu danced in celebration, not because the recovery from apartheid was complete—far from it. These two winners of the Nobel Peace Prize danced and sang in solidarity with those who marched and sang before them in the face of unspeakable injustice. They danced in celebration of what had transpired to bring them to this point. They danced in the hope that the songs that had carried them this far along the “long walk to freedom”

(The title of Mandela’s autobiography) would sustain them in the difficult days ahead when political change would hopefully lead to change in the attitudes and lives of people. In the spring of 1999, there was a peaceful transfer of power from the aged Mandela to President Mbeki. Over 200 years of suffering led to this time of rejoicing.

There are many sources that describe the initial contact between the Portuguese and the Khoikhoi, the coastal inhabitants of Southern Africa, in the late fifteenth century. The later incursion of the Dutch and finally the British into South Africa as trade routes extended is also well documented.

Following over 175 years of war between the colonizers and the Africans, beginning with clashes in 1702 and culminating with the Last Frontier War in 1878, the early twentieth century begins with events that set the stage for formal apartheid structures by mid-century and intensification of oppression against black South Africans from 1960 until the election of Mandela in 1994.

The African National Congress (ANC) was formed in 1912 as an organization that would attempt to enter into discussion with whites concerning the rights of black South Africans. Consisting at first mostly of Xhosas, it did not become a more militant organization until the conflicts of the 1960s when hope for resolution through peaceful negotiations seemed impossible.

The Natives’ Land Act of 1913 followed immediately on the heels of the formation of the ANC, creating “overnight a floating landless proletariat whose labor could be used and manipulated at will, and ensured that ownership of the land had finally and securely passed into the hands of the ruling white race.” It was under this act that the solution to the “native problem” was separation of blacks from whites by the control of a black African’s right to own land.

Thus, in 1913 segregation was formally and legally instituted as a way of life, leading to virtual total control over the economic and social destiny of black South Africans in their own country.

At the conclusion of World War II, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. South Africa, however, heard the beat of a different drum, electing a slate of National Party leaders driven by Afrikaner nationalism.

Jan Christian Smuts was ousted from office and a 42-year reign of apartheid began. Segregation of the “natives” into “reserves” was replaced by a tightening of controls that extended into every aspect of life, enforced by a police state that institutionalized torture, detention without cause, and murder.

The Sharpeville massacre of 1960 radicalized the African National Congress, and the Pan African Conference announced a campaign against the Pass Laws on March 21. This in turn led to the institution of the first Emergency by the government on March 30, 1960, when all civil rights of black South Africans were suspended.

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robbin Island in 1964, and then Steve Biko was murdered, both Xhosas. Black South Africans were herded into the “independent homelands” of Transkei (1976) and Ciskei (1981), among others, to live a segregated impoverished existence. Soweto Day in 1984 was followed by the Mandela March on August 28, 1985. Police brutality intensified, setting the stage for the second Emergency, beginning on June 12, 1986.

Most of the world responded to the tyranny and brutality of apartheid by an economic embargo against the white South African government. It was in these days, especially since 1960, when songs like “Siyahamba” erupted from black South Africans as an expression of community, a declaration of the truth, and a witness of solidarity.

#### **THE TEXT OF “SIYAHAMBA”**

South African tribal languages make up a larger language group called “Bantu.” They share many words and a general structure among each other. The two major languages, representing the two larger tribes, are Xhosa, settled primarily in the western part of the country, and the Zulu, who live primarily in the

eastern part of the country.

Many people who speak Xhosa or Zulu also speak Afrikaans, a Dutch-inspired variant developed in South Africa, and English, the result of the British presence for 200 years. Xhosa is a language of clicking sounds (three in all). Zulu does not use the clicking sounds to as great an extent. There are no clicking sounds in the text of “Siyahamba.”

Usually translated as “We are marching in the light of God,” the simple text contains layers of meaning.

“We” is a word of community, the community of those living and the community of the living dead, those who have died but are still with us.

“Marching” is an action that unifies the community as they move physically and spiritually in the same direction. It is a physical, kinesthetic response to the Spirit, not a passive acquiescence.

“The Light of God” has meaning on several levels. While it is a symbol of creation and of Jesus Christ, “the light of the world,” it is also a common refrain in songs of healing (ngoma) throughout Southern and Central Africa. The refrain, “Let darkness be replaced with light,” is coded language for “seeing clearly.” God is the source of clear sight in the midst of the struggle, i.e., the source of discernment and truth. As we march we can see our way ahead. Our path is clear. Where there is light, there is hope.

#### **PERFORMANCE PRACTICE**

This music grows out of oral tradition. No two African choirs would sing a song exactly the same way. One disadvantage of musical notation is that it cannot account for the natural improvisation and variation that takes place in actual performance. This means that you may want to add “stanzas” or textual variations that fit the context of the worship service or part of the service where the song is used.

Contrary to most music in sub-Saharan Africa, the Bantu speaking groups do not use drums as often in their traditional music making. Movement, on the other hand, is requisite to the musical experience.

Because of intertribal exchanges, especially with the Shona in Zimbabwe just northeast of South Africa, drums can be found more often now than in the past.

In many African languages, there is not a single word for music as an abstract concept. “Music” is a holistic experience of singing, moving, and playing an instrument (especially drums).

Music is an active experience, not an academic course of study. Africans are a musical people. They understand themselves to be natural composers and possess the ability to perform complex cross rhythms. As a Zimbabwean pastor noted, “only a few of us were born with weak beats.”

For congregational use, a gentle swaying (shifting weight from one foot to another on the beat) is usually sufficient. Many congregations in the United States need to be given permission to do this, however. It is best if the choir can model this behavior. Movement is not an “add-on” but a way of expressing the energy of the visible community that singing engenders.

Most African songs are cyclical in form. While some say repetitive, I believe that cyclical structures are more like theme and variation than repetition. Cycles have standard numbers of pulses (not to be confused with the recurring accent of beats in meter).

“Siyahamba” is a standard 16 pulse (to the whole note) South African song. Movement should be related to the pulse (once per written measure).

Cycles vary as the song “heats up” through repetition of the cycles. “Heating up” (a term borrowed from Nathan Corbitt, an ethnomusicologist and former music missionary to Kenya and Zimbabwe) can involve adding volume, changing text, adding clapping, increasing the intensity of the movement, etc., at the beginning of each new cycle.

Heating up is also encouraged by a lead singer who sings above the group and exhorts those assembled. Though not included in the written score, these solo improvisations would often take place at the end of phrases (every four written measures).

Soloists like to tie together phrases that end in longer notes, carrying the energy of one phrase to the next. In most cases the soloist reinforces the primary text. However, a soloist can signal a change of text at the end of the 16-pulse cycle, e.g., “We are singing,”

“We are dancing,” “We are living,” etc. The group would pick up the new text as the next cycle begins.

General performance practice ideas for African music can be found in the introduction of *Halle, Halle: We Sing the World Round* (CGC41 Choristers Guild, 1999). Some are provided here:

#### *Steady beat*

Maintain a steady rhythm (no *ritardandi* or *tenuti*). Do not drop beats between repetitions or successive stanzas.

#### *Repetition*

Repeat the music, adding more vocal parts, instrumental sounds, movement, volume, and intensity until the song “heats up.” Nathan Corbitt says, “African singing is not beautiful in the Western sense, but hot. You don’t really start singing right until you begin to sweat!”

#### *Unaccompanied*

Avoid using the organ, if possible. In most cases unaccompanied vocal music, except for the use of percussion, is preferable.

#### *Dance*

Using movement is not optional. Stomping may be part of the dance. Dancing may be nothing more than swaying or walking in place.

#### *Articulation*

Generally, consonants should be crisp and clear (a part of the percussion).

#### *Oral Tradition*

Teach as much of the music as possible to the choir orally/aurally first and then use the written notation as a reminder of sounds you already have learned. This changes the quality of their engagement with the music, creating an experience dominated by hearing and moving rather than reading the musical score.

#### *Bright tone*

Brighten the vocal sound (open throat). There are no diphthongs in African languages. Use a straighter tone.

#### *Improvisation*

Harmonize by ear. The written page is only one

way to do it.

### *Call and Response*

Be aware of leader vs. ensemble effects. Call-response patterns may not be indicated in all written scores and will have to be added by the leader.

### *Everyone participates*

Break down the barrier between the congregation and the choir. Encourage the congregation to participate, not just watch. Again, Nathan Corbitt says, “A common phrase used by folks in Africa is that Western music is something you listen to; African music is something you do.”

### **LITURGICAL USE**

Essential to the use of “Siyahamba” is an understanding of what a freedom song or song of liberation is. I propose the following definition:

Briefly stated, liberation hymnody draws upon the indigenous sounds, metaphors, and movements of those who are oppressed by unjust political and economic systems as a way of creating community and expressing hope. Songs of liberation may be incorporated into a formal liturgy, serving both the musical needs of worship and expressing solidarity in the midst of political struggle. They may also be taken out of the context of liturgy and sung in the streets where the music serves as an announcement of hope, a vehicle for community, and a solidifying force in the face of direct opposition.

Should we sing liberation songs from other parts of the world? *Yes!* We should sing them for the sake of those who continue to struggle for political, economic, and social freedom, i.e., in solidarity for the oppressed. We should also sing them for ourselves as a way of identifying with those things that keep us from being whole persons, totally free in Christ.

Addictions, racism, prejudice, wealth, and social status are among those things that keep us from being free. There is also the reality that many in our own society do not enjoy economic security and other freedoms that accompany others. We all need to sing songs of liberation.

Textual changes make it possible to use “Siyahamba” at a variety of points throughout the service. I believe that cyclical forms are most effective when sung as an accompaniment to ritual action—a processional, recessional, bringing forward the communion

elements, singing as the congregation comes forward for communion, procession of the Gospel, etc.

It is a song that does not need a hymn book and can be sung easily as people move. Some simple textual adaptations have been suggested earlier. Encourage your children and young people to come up with others. I close with an adaptation that comes from my congregation and can be sung as a doxology as the offering is brought forward:

*Praise to God from whom all miracles flow;  
Praise to God from all creation below.  
Praise to God you heavenly hosts from above;  
Praise Creator, Son and Spirit of love.  
We are praising, praising; we are praising, praising;  
Praise Creator, Son and Spirit of love.  
We are praising, praising; we are praising, praising;  
Praise Creator, Son and Spirit of love.*

— Thomas Ken, *Adpt. by John Thornburg*

### **SOURCES**

Since its publication in the United States, several songs from *Freedom Is Coming* appear in recent hymnals published in the United States and Canada.

*United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), “Thuma Mina” (497)

*Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992), “Thuma Mina” (434)

*Chalice Hymnal* (1995), “Siyahamba” (442), “Thuma Mina” (447)

*Covenant Hymnal* (1996), “Siyahamba” (424), “Hallelujah! Pelo Tso Rona” (499), “Thuma Mina” (626)

*Voices United* (1996), “Thuma Mina” (572), “Siyahamba” (646)

*The New Century Hymnal* (1995), “Siyahamba” (626), “Thuma Mina” (360), “We Shall Not Give Up the Fight” (437)

*The Book of Praise* (1997), “Thuma Mina” (777), “Siyahamba” (639), “Freedom Is Coming” (725)

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