

# The Use of Chest Voice in African-American Religious Singing

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That's just how we sing (chest voice). If you were to walk into any African-American church where the congregation is predominantly African-American and try to sing a song in your head voice, they would say that you're just trying to be cute. People would say that you're playing with the Lord by not singing the song right. (Karen)

The statement above is an excerpt of a statement made by one of the informants from my research. Karen, which is the name that I used, is a music leader in an African-American Baptist Church in an urban area. The excerpt from our interview seemed to convey her feelings about acceptable vocal production in her church.

Chest resonance is used during singing events in most African-American churches. Actually, it is the way of singing for most folk singing. I remember the presentation by a Russian professor demonstrating the folk singing of his country during a graduate seminar. The singers used their chest voices while singing folk songs from their country. Also, many tribes of West and South Africa continue to sing using their chest voices. For example, Roderic Knight (1984) described the use of chest voice by the female singers of the Manding people in West Africa. He stated that the singers used a vocal technique involving the tightening of the pharyngeal muscles at the back of the tongue, which restricts the upward motion of the larynx (Knight, 1984; p 74).

Authors of studies on music in African-American churches also found the use of chest resonance extensively in their settings. Maultsby (1981) asserted that this was due to the heritage of the music found in African-American churches. She and other authors (Amos, 1987; Boyer, 1973; Raichelson, 1975) contended that there were actually two musical traditions in African-American churches. One tradition is rooted in West African traditions, and one tradition has evolved into a more Western-European tradition. The musical tradition that I am speaking of has roots in the former—the West African tradition.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the singing technique used in African-American religious singing. The study involved qualitative observations of rehearsals and performances in an African-American Baptist Church in Illinois. Rehearsals and performances, or Sunday services, were audio taped for a period of four months. In addition, open-ended interviews were conducted with the

music leaders, one of the spiritual leaders, and choir members in both the youth and adult choirs. These interviews were also audio recorded. Field notes were taken during the observational period and a reflective journal was kept to record my personal thoughts. A collaborator was also a part of the study. This collaborator attended rehearsals with me once a month and recorded his observations. After each observational session, the two of us met to discuss our individual thoughts on what we thought had occurred during the session. All of the sources (taped rehearsals, performances, interviews, conversations with the collaborator, field notes, and journal notes) served as data for the study.

## Discussion

During all of the singing events which transpired at the church setting, the chest resonance was used. This was evident whether the participants were singing hymns, spirituals, or Black gospels. The church used standard Protestant hymns and other songs found in their Baptist Hymnal. This hymnal was published by one of the Black Baptist Boards found in America. Consequently, the book also included spirituals and early Black gospels published from about 1920 through 1950. However, Black gospel music was the main genre of music used during the singing events.

Musical literature sung at the African-American church setting included traditional spirituals, hymns, Black gospels, and praise songs. However, these songs were sung in the Black gospel style. This style incorporated singing in very close 3-part harmony, accompanied by instruments, hand clapping and rocking or swaying. Burnim (1983) stated that this was a part of the Black aesthetic. Her argument was that these previously described elements are characteristics which are prevalent in Black gospel. These characteristics are also a part of many West African traditions. The music consists of a preference for thick textures and a sound in which some ethnomusicologists describe as a "buzz" sound or distortion.

The same can also be said about the preferred singing technique used by the participants while singing in the Black gospel style. Participants of the study revealed that the preferred technique of singing involved the use of the chest resonance. Although this was a fact in the setting that I investigated, the collaborator was concerned for the members' vocal health. As a collaborator, trained in the Western-European tradition, he had some strong convictions about the use of chest voice while singing. His academic training warned him that using the chest resonance while singing was the incorrect way to sing. I questioned him as to whether this was true since so many people of many cultures — particularly folksong cultures — continue to sing in this manner for many years. He admitted that this was something he had not thought about.

The collaborator, whom I called John, compared singing in chest voice to belting singing which is often found in musical theater and popular singing. He described a time when he observed a voice student learning to belt for a Broadway musical audition. Richard J. Colla (1989) described Broadway belting as "a specialized tone color used by pop and Broadway singers which is distinguished by exaggerated use of the forward or nasal resonators of the singer combined with less emphasis on a lift in the soft palate" (p. 56). John felt that this was what he

heard from the choirs during his visits to the church setting. His conclusions about using chest voice are as follows.

I think that when everybody's singing chest voice, there are more overtones to the voice; there's more points of agreement among people's voices. It's a darker voice. I think the blend is better with darker voices. It's when you have several light voices that blend is very hard to achieve. (John)

The statement made by John compared blending voices with blend using the string voices of a chamber orchestra. He argued that one may only need six celli, but 18 violins to blend because the violin has a lighter or thinner sound when compared with the sound of the cello. This may also apply to human voices. More voices may be needed to blend when singing using the head resonance because it produces a lighter, thinner sound when compared with the sound produced using the chest voice.

This was something that I had not thought about—the timbral advantages of using chest voice. For me, this was just the way that African-American religious music was done. As Burnim (1983) reported, there is a particular aesthetic for music found in African-American churches rooted in West African traditions. One part of this aesthetic is that it must be loud enough to be heard in order to be good. Even the children in the setting that I was observing knew this. Two of the children alluded to this and expressed their feelings of a successful singing presentation. Their comments were as follows.

We were rocking on beat and we were singing loud enough where they (the audience) could still hear us. (Juanita)

If I know I'm doing bad, sometimes people will say louder or something like that. (Alexis)

They were certain that a successful performance meant that the choir members were singing loud enough where the audience could hear them and did not tell the children to sing louder.

Based on the comments made above by the children and Karen (the music leader), loud singing was an important element at their church. This is because it was important to be heard. Using the chest resonance while singing aided in achieving this goal in that church. The children knew this because they were encouraged by their leaders and influenced by what they heard the adults do when they were singing.

This element of loudness is something that does not stand alone but is related to other issues. One is the fact that singers in African-American church settings are expected to give their all because they are singing for God. This is a philosophy that is taught in most African-American churches and is normally translated as singing loud and with energy. Garretson (1993) stated that one should sing at 75 % of the vocal effort (p. 220). This would not be accepted in an African-American church setting. In these church settings, singers are expected to give 100 % of their effort because it is an act of praising God. Full effort is expected during rehearsals as well as during performances. Most directors would advocate that singers save some of their vocal effort until the performance, whereas music

leaders in African-American churches with strong West African traditions would not.

## Conclusions

It was very important that choir members in African-American churches sing using their chest resonance. This was to aid in achieving the required volume. It was an important feature to describe the singing style. Also, the congregation as a whole accepted chest voice as a means for producing vocal sound. To sing in one's head resonance would not be accepted as an adequate example of singing praises to God.

Choral teachers could teach students to use their chest voices properly. This often occurs when teaching Broadway belting techniques, as the collaborator John noted during our conversation. In addition, many opera singers, particularly low male voices, sing using their chest resonances. Dropping the keys to comfortable levels and using microphones would also aid in achieving the preferred vocal production for African-American church singing. In addition, using brighter, forward vowel sounds further authenticates performances of this genre.

Using the chest voice is the preferred vocal production technique in African-American churches. It is a feature of many other folk singing cultures as well as the African-American church culture. While some music educators disagree with the exclusive use of this type of singing, students may be taught correct vocal technique and the skill of singing using their chest resonance in a healthy manner. This is done when teaching theatrical singing techniques. Most importantly, it is the way of singing African-American church literature. The use of chest resonance while singing this genre of music will further authenticate the performance.

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