

# Notes from clinic on May 18th with Michele Thomas: Discussion on Gospel Music Style

## YouTube Playlist:

### B3 Hammond Organ in Gospel music and Omar Thomas's "Come Sunday" - A Musical Analysis:

[https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL04NpHFmk7hyNb4Bykjmp6ef\\_a6-e2dN5](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL04NpHFmk7hyNb4Bykjmp6ef_a6-e2dN5)

## MUSIC LANGUAGE AND LITERACY AS IT RELATES TO BLACK MUSICAL GENRES/STYLES

- **Style goes deeper than we think; it is rooted in culture, function and purpose.** Style from a strictly rhythmic or dynamic treatment of a musical genre is cursory and does not fully appreciate the depth of what makes the musical style authentic. Understanding the context, origins and history of the style create a fuller experience for the musician and audience.
- **“Call and response” in black gospel music is multi-layered, fluid and often simultaneous** as it happens between vocalists, choirs, instrumentalists, congregations and even preachers as they give a sermon. (See video examples). Even when musicians are performing solos there is an ongoing interaction between the congregation (audience) and themselves which represents a version of call and response. Know that most everything you’re hearing in an authentic gospel music experience is about this interaction that is improvisational in nature and central to the style.
- **To create a better rhythmic feel in gospel music styles (and really any \*black folk-based music styles) move away from the “implicated accent of 1”.** Most western European classical music traditions center the first beat of the measure as having the strongest pulse and therefore where we anchor ourselves as a reference point for how we “feel” the remaining beats in the measure. In addition, the concept of syncopation is often defined as the “offbeat” or the “weaker” beats in a measure. But in almost all other global musics, particularly those coming out of African and Latin traditions, the implicated accent of 1 does not exist as every beat is treated equally with accents being potentially felt on any given beat in a measure. To challenge your rhythmic sensibilities further, try practicing any piece of music to an electronic metronome, but program the metronome to accent a beat other than “1” as you play. Observe how you respond in your playing.

- **There is a much needed paradigm shift around language and literacy in music.** In order to give full appreciation and respect to all types of music there must be an acknowledgement of musicianship that exists beyond the paradigm of Western European Classical-based music and pedagogy. Understanding that American-based musical styles are predominantly rooted in black and African folk-based music is first key. But then also understanding that the roots of American (black and African) \*folk-based music stem primarily out of improvisational practices versus the practice of through-composed classical music. The implications of through-composed music becoming centralized as the marker of musical literacy (when historically the rest of the globe has learned and performs music beyond notation on the page) points towards a classism and cultural hegemony that has resulted in a regressed modernization in music education with regards to training holistic musicianship.
  
- **What does it mean to make music intuitively?** Consider the fluidity of musical language that allows for literacy and execution in many forms (i.e. the oral/aural + intuitive musical education of most musicians in black folk-based American musical styles). Consider what ways you can learn from actively listening to and watching musicians in black genre/styles to observe melodic/rhythmic/dynamic patterns. Go and listen with greater depth to more music in a particular genre/style in order to participate in oral/aural learning.
  
- **“Soul”** or what is considered soulfulness tends to be perceived as something inherent to \*black folk-based musical genres and styles. However it is critical to note that the unique essence of black music has very simply come out of the traumatic and complex experiences of black people in a systemically racist and oppressive society. Therefore soulfulness is a result of vulnerability in the face of one’s pain; the need to express the full spectrum of one’s humanity from the darkest of grief to the fullness of joy all at once. “Soul” or soulfulness can then be seen as the practice of authentic self-expression that is exclusive to one’s own human experience.
  
- ...that being said the concern for cultural appropriation and tokenism is real and can (and should) be addressed through more inclusive and equitable music education. **A high respect for all musical styles is key** and the teaching of various styles must be introduced and and taught consistently in order to be learned effectively. If say, gospel music is outside of your culture, don’t be afraid to explore, go to trusted sources and ask questions. There is no magic pill that makes one suddenly play in any one particular style. It is only in the respect for the study of the style that we make better choices about what to play, if we play it, and how to play it authentically.

*\*"Black folk-based music" is a term that has been coined by vocal instructor and researcher, Trineice Robinson-Martin which describes the story-telling, expressive, vulnerable and communal nature of black music that is at the essence of all the musical styles and genres that have evolved from the the African diaspora in America.*