The Techniques of Gospel

“Gospel is a communal ecstatic experience, an experience of collective joy! And the techniques of gospel are techniques of communal ecstasy through song.”

- Sharon Alexander

I have made it my goal to describe simply, step by step, the many powerful techniques used in gospel music to bring the congregation to this ecstatic experience, so that we may begin using these techniques to bring our services to life and so that we Jews may directly experience God in the context of our worship services.

1) **Rhythm** is key. Says Troy Bell, gospel choir conductor, “Gospel music is defined by the message delivered and by the delivery through the whole body (Bell, 2006).” All African music is polyrhythmic; meaning that there will actually be at least two different underlying rhythms going on against each other. The more complex the rhythm, the more of the body must be involved in the music. If you find yourself doing a stomp/clap and swaying your body side to side or in a figure 8, you must be singing gospel! **Gospel’s contrapuntal rhythmic structure naturally involves the body in the performance.** In other words, gospel uses the whole body to sing to God. There is a steady, rhythmic syncopation to gospel music, sometimes referred to as a “swing”. This is achieved by several elements:

2) **“Singing in harmony, gospel choirs and ensembles most commonly utilize only three parts (soprano, alto, tenor) which all move in parallel motion”** (Burnim, 2006, pp. 71-72). The piano or other backing instrument (or, in some cases, the basses--the low men) would carry the rhythmic counterpoint or bottom anchor line. This anchor line holds the piece together, both melodically and rhythmically. It is the ground that anchors the choir so that the three higher voices can freely fly up to God. The soprano melody line is built on top of the anchor and filled in with the alto and tenor harmony, usually on the 3rd and 5th of the scale. This four-part harmonic background allows additionally for a lead singer.
3) Unlike some ethnic forms of music in Jewish music, where the clap is on the
downbeat of the measure, in folk and gospel, it is on the upbeat or the 2 and 4 beats
(such as: step, clap, step, clap), and when songs are double-time, you pat the foot on
the downbeat and **clap on the offbeat or upbeat** (one-clap-two-clap). The “hand
clops on beats two and four and movement of the body on beats one and three in
duple meter” (Burnim, 2006, p. 71). This is by design. Unlike Chassidic music,
which drives you up and down, grounding you, or Indian Kirtan, which sends you in
spirals, gospel music will sway you left and right (or in an infinity figure, if you will).

4) Though written in 4/4 time, gospel is given a **swing rhythm**, sometimes called
the gospel shuffle--turning a pair of 8\(^\text{th}\) notes into a quarter and an 8\(^\text{th}\), thus creating, in
effect, 12/8 time. Try: “This little light of mine”. Think: ‘boom chicka boom chick,
or ba-boom chick.’ Not only does the music sway, but it sometimes has a driving,
forward-propelled, locomotion--like a train. Chugga-lugga, chugga-lugga. The music
is going somewhere. It is going to God!

5) The words are **simple, spoken speech, heartfelt** and **personal**, using action
verbs; directed to the creator and sustainer, as a personal, loving, mighty presence.
Psalm wording is changed to everyday speech. The language should be
understandable by a child; for that is the language the heart can understand. Typically,
the words are intimately sung in I/Thou form, from first-person singular (“me”) to 2\(^{nd}\)
person singular (“you”). Singing is emotive with swelling within phrases and slurring
of note progressions. The best gospel is an **earworm**; a catchy melody. You wake up
in the morning, singing it.

6) Gospel is an **affirmation**; a committed statement of ”Yes, God!! There must
be **total commitment** and engagement of body and spirit to the performance of the
song; you must believe in what you are doing. The **focused intention** is to praise the
Lord through song.

7) Use of gospel’s melodic mode:

a) Unlike the typically minor Jewish modes, gospel uses the
**sacred African major pentatonic scale**: Do, Re, Mi, SO, LA, DO.
A good example is the song: “Oh When the Saints.”

b) There may also be a flatted 7th on the descending scale, a scale characteristic of the blues style.

c) **Chord progressions are usually I, IV, V, I.**

d) **Harmonies are based on overtones.** There is typically a high harmony a third above the melody line and a lower harmony a fourth below the melody. Intensity can be raised by having each voice of the choir raise their part to the next higher inversion of the chord: eg. GCE $\rightarrow$ CEG.

8) The performance of a gospel piece is often **prefaced by a solo** in the form of a **chanted narrative**, after which the choir comes in with highly rhythmic response.

**Talking the song:** In addition, the soloist may begin the piece by speaking the song in, similar to the practice of preaching over music. The musicians customarily wait to begin their accompaniment until the singer is “talking” the song.

9) **The soloist is allowed to sing freely and passionately with “fully embodied timbres”, while backed by the choir, which sticks to the rhythm and melody.** He or she takes great **improvisational liberties** with rhythm, text and notes, abbreviating and elongating rhythmic values, varying the melody slightly with each verse, singing melismatically (i.e. several pitches to a single syllable) slurred ornamental notes all around the melody, using falsetto, swells, “growls,” and power vocal techniques (including those of “edge” and “overdrive”), “worrying” notes, and generally adlibbing between the chorus’s sung lines. The soloist leads the choir on and communicates what is coming next, cuing the choir each line by singing key words just before the choir comes in, and/or sings the story with the choir responding repetitively.

10) **The soloist is enthusiastically verbally encouraged by fellow choir members,** and the congregation, in spontaneous artistic and spiritual expression; “You say it now”, “Yes, sister”, “All right”, “Praise the Lord”, “Well, now”, etc. Not to
encourage or respond to the singer or speaker is considered rude in African culture. Shouts and screams are acceptable.

11) **Use of call and response** is ubiquitous. The leader or soloist sings a line and the choir or congregation answers, either with a repetition of the first line or an answering line or even a shouted “Amen”. A famous example is:

   Call: Michael rowed the boat ashore  
   Response: Halleluyah.

12) The structure of the song typically includes not only solo and refrain, but an additional **chorus section** as well. This chorus offers opportunities for being playfully manipulated rhythmically later in the song’s performance as the conductor builds the energy in the room.

13) **Repetition** is employed systematically. The congregational response, which is always a simple phrase, is repeated throughout the song. Intensity may build with each repetition. This builds the resonance of the intention, strengthening the power of the singing to open the heart. Use of such repetition allows maximum congregational involvement and promotes a group trance state.

14) The song **melody is kept simple**. But syncopation and other **rhythmic irregularities** are used to arouse and hold the attention of the listeners. Typically each instrument is playing its own separate rhythm, and all these rhythms differ from that of the choir. **Contrapuntal rhythm** engages the body and is know to be trance-inducing.

15) Compositions **leave gaps and spaces** in sung lines, which singers and accompanists are to fill in with melodic embellishment and rhythmic improvisation.

16) The tempos are guided by the **themes of praise, thankfulness, worship, and lamentation**. Often a praise piece begins with one rhythmic speed, and then **increases in tempo** one or more times until singers achieve a highly excited state.
17) Unlike the older spiritual form, gospel is typically composed by one person, in three or four singing parts, and backed by instrumentation in its performance. However, as is traditional in the African-American song culture, the song is taught orally and learned aurally, without sheet music. Such a mode of teaching is better suited to rhythmically complex but melodically simple songs. They are learned through the body. There is a tendency to use rhyming long vowels, which carry the harmonics and convey maximum power in the sound: “This little light of mine…I’m…shine,” “Amazing grace,” “Michael rowed the boat ashore.”

18) Accompanists add rhythm and texture to the music. Typically playing different rhythms from the choir, thus creating a polyrhythmic foundation, accompanists are free to deviate from the printed notes, to improvise, and to make wild progressions over the entire keyboard. Drums are critically important, setting and shifting energy levels. Accompanists, both instruments and drums, may take a turn at soloing, increasing the expectation and raising the excitement. Tambourines are commonly used as well.

19) Gospel is a performer’s art. The job of the singer is to be a vessel. Singers free their mouths to allow the voice to be taken over by the power of the Spirit. For instance, swoops, alteration of vowel sounds, and vocal slurs are widely utilized; including, “moaning” (which is really a hum of deep spiritual satisfaction)--- something like “oh, wo-u, wo.”

20) The spontaneous raising of the arms, with the open hands directed upwards or forwards, is common. This increases the flow of energy through the heart meridian, helping to open the heart and direct the energy to God.

21) Singers follow the conductor’s lead implicitly; in a way, giving over authority totally to the leader, making of themselves instruments, so that the conductor is free to “work” the energy. This is an example of surrendering to a higher power.

22) The rhythmic complexity is increased in the performed arrangement to increase the suspense and anticipation of both audience and choir, exciting and inciting the energy in the room. Techniques include:
a) Use of staccato rhythms,
b) Modulating the key (change in key, usually moving a 4th up),
c) Using delayed time signatures, and even,
d) Stopped time (when the instruments drop out),
e) Stopping the singing and just having everyone clap,
f) A sure way to thrill the audience is to have each individual part of the choir alternate taking a solo line or phrase—either having each part repeat the same, or having one part take each line. It is quite entertaining when the conductor plays the choir like an instrument, rhythmically cuing part entrances, and
lastly,
g) Ending the piece, allowing the applause to begin, and then coming back in--in accurate time--to repeat the last phrase for an ‘over-the-top’ finish; dramatically holding out the final syllables.

23) One of the most exciting ways to build energy is called “vamping,” also known as “the drive section.” Vamping is taking a phrase and rhythmically repeating it over and over, mantra-like, with entrancing effect. This technique is often used for the ending of a song. During a ‘vamp’, the soloist may engage in call and response or freely improvise over the choir background, creating an increasingly frenzied atmosphere. Subsequently taking an even smaller phrase to vamp double-time is called “overdrive”. Here the speed of the clap/stomp rhythm may be so fast as to border on the edge of human capability. This usually results in pandemonium in the church with outbursts and spontaneous exhibitions of ecstatic “holy dancing,” even amongst the choir.

24) Endings of songs typically slow down (“milk”) the last phrase of the song, and especially the last words of the last phrase, thus making a “grand finale” and allowing gradual recovery from the excited state that has been evoked.

For an auditory example of many of the techniques of gospel singing, please listen to The Circle, performed by Rhiannon.
Additional note for soloists:

Expressive tools of the soloist—runs, chops, change the rhythm, add or subtract words, extra notes around melody. Try to build up your solo crescendo, save some stuff for the end. Avoid the same pattern for every song. Practice, listen to recordings and other soloists and imitate. Find your own unique style, e.g. speaking the text, daring to be quiet sometimes. There is not much difference between a soloist and a preacher. Don’t use your gifts carelessly.