Concert Review: OU Gospel Choir

After deciding that I wanted to attend OU’s Gospel Choir performance on the February 25th, I established a set of expectations that stemmed from some of my own preconceived notions of the atmosphere surrounding gospel choirs. Having grown up going to a contemporary Christian church on the weekends with my family, I had never been fully exposed to gospel music performed by a largely African and African-American choir. The music that I was exposed to as a child was more aligned with modern-day Christian rock music performed in my church’s massive auditorium that held a few thousand worshippers at a time. Even though one would think that such a large church audience would produce a much louder, more involved crowd that interacts with the music (either through singing or dancing), the opposite was true. The vast majority of the audience stood silently or quietly sang along to the lyrics of songs being performed, with a small handful of individuals near the front of the auditorium actively participating in dance and song. Overall, the large audience caused a loss in intimacy that smaller worship groups can exhibit.

Taking my past experiences into account, I went to the OU Gospel Choir performance with an idea of what to expect based on the name of the performance and my stereotypical idea of what a gospel choir is: that a church choir would be performing hymns and more traditional church music to a large audience that sang along or silently lipped the words. This idea was quickly thrown out the window when entering the Molly Shi Boren Ballroom in which the OU Gospel Choir performance was to take place.

The Ballroom, which often hosts musical events or other performances for those who attend OU as well as anyone from the community. I immediately noticed the stage that was set up against one wall of the room, backed by a red curtain and standing roughly 4 feet above the ground. Several rows of chairs were aligned facing the stage, broken into two main groups (one on the left and one of the right). Upon seeing these chairs, I was immediately reminded of church pews facing the front of a church. I arrived slightly late to this performance, so most of the audience members were already seated. I took my seat near the back and looked around at the audience, trying to get an idea of who decided to come to this performance. A majority of the audience members that I saw appeared African American in descent, though there was a sprinkling of various other ethnicities represented.

At the time of me entering, they were in between performances and most of the audience’s focus was on the stage, so I could not get a clear look at their faces. However, the audience appeared to be largely adults, with a large variety in dress ranging from formal suits and dresses (what I would call their Sunday Best), to a much more casual attire including sweatpants and sweaters.

All of the aspects of the audience and the setting of this performance lent to a much more intimate and personal setting than I was expecting. I think this is largely due again to my upbringing going to church sermons and sitting in an audience of thousands. This intimate setting also lent some idea as to the performers and who they were catering their performances to. The mix of different ethnicities, genders, and attire gave the impression that the music being performed was not aimed at any specific group, but to all that would listen and join in worship.

Throughout the performances put on that night, the audience’s behaviors gradually changed from one of silent enjoyment (something that I was used to from my past experiences going to church), to being much more involved in the end when the OU Gospel Choir came out. By the end of the overall performance, nearly everyone in the audience was standing and singing along, clapping and swaying to the beat of the music, and whooping and hollering when the music reached an emotional high point. I found an interesting parallel between this audience’s interactions near the end with the music, and the interaction of “audiences” in the West African music we study in class. In most West African performances, an audience that doesn’t interact with the music being performed would stand out like a sore thumb. Nearly everyone in said audiences either sing along, clap or beat to the rhythm, and dance in some way, much like the interactions seen in the audience of the OU Gospel Choir performance.

Overall, the various musical performances throughout the night focused largely on vocals, with the instrumental music serving as a backdrop to support said focus. The OU Gospel Choir performances were couched by what sounded like a grand piano with drum accompaniment. The melodic patterns presented were short and repeated several times in parallel with the lyrics being sung. These short patterns were reminiscent of the facets of West African music we studied in class. The timbre of the instruments was mostly low and rumbling of piano chords played in a lower register, with the occasional bright tang sound of the cymbals from the drum and the deep thump of the other drums from the drum set.

The vocals of all performances were centralized around the theme of God, with most revolving around the ideas of worship to said God and themes along a similar vein. These vocals were not just lyrics of a song, but a combination of lyrics and what I would describe as conversation points directed at the audience. Several of the individual performers throughout the night spoke directly to the audience, directing their words to everyone who was listening. Most of these audience-directed lyrics are rhetorical sayings that are somewhat informative, letting the audience know that God loves them and is always there for them. Even though they are rhetorical in nature, oftentimes the directed lyrics would result in holler, whoops, vocal agreements, and nodding heads by the audience. I immediately saw a clear connection between our in-class studies into part counterpart and the performer/audience interaction I was seeing at the OU Gospel Choir performance.

One piece that stood out to me in particular was the first piece that the OU Gospel Choir performed. One of the main reasons this song stood out so much to me was that as soon as the song started, almost everyone in the audience stood up in unison, causing a shift in the atmosphere of the room from one of calm enjoyment and observation to one of high energy and active involvement. Another major difference between this performance and the performances from earlier in the night was the size of the performance group. Up until this point most of the performances had consisted of small groups of 3-4 or individuals. This performance consisted of a large group of what I would estimate as roughly 20-25 choir members.

Upon starting their performance, I noticed that this piece was much louder in volume than the previous. The performers were also much more active as well, dancing clapping along with the beat as they sang, which was mimicked by those in the audience (again, we see here an example of part counterpart). The timbre of this performance was much more varied, with the piano and drums in the background providing a low, rumbling sound upon which the vocals of the choir members sat on top. These vocals were almost buzzy in sound, contrasting sharply with the somewhat muted sound of the piano chords. The performance grew in intensity as it went on, eventually rising to a climax of sound and applause from the audience.

Overwhelmingly, the combination of music, lyrics, audience interaction, and dance that occurred throughout the night created an emotionally and spiritually charged atmosphere that encouraged anyone listening to get involved, stand up, and clap along to the music. Having only ever experienced “gospel” music in a drastically different setting than that which I experienced when attending this performance, my ideas of what a gospel music performance can be have expanded greatly. I found the performance overall very enlightening and enjoyable and would definitely attend similar performances in the future.