

“Tuning up and the Gospel Imagination” abstract

Dr. Braxton D. Shelley

Assistant Professor, Yale University Institute for Sacred Music

October, 2021

This talk theorizes the interrelation of characteristically black preaching and gospel music, using what has been called “the musicality of black preaching” to understand the centrality of the repetitive musical cycles known as “vamps” to gospel singing. I will suggest that the culminating, and, indeed, cumulative, turn toward musicality, which I will refer to as “tuning up,” is more than just a homiletical strategy: rather, it functions as the formal logic, the organizing principle, for the network of belief, performance, and reception, that I shall call “the gospel imagination.”

After engaging the pertinent literature on black preaching and gospel vamps, we will spend time with five canonical gospel selections, Richard Smallwood’s “Healing,” Brenda Moore’s “Perfect Praise,” Walter Hawkins’s “Marvelous,” Judith Macalister’s “High Praise,” and Thomas Whitfield’s “I Shall Wear A Crown,” to see how “tuning up” works in the context of gospel song.

To put it briefly, I argue that the communally-oriented sonic transformations performed near the end of gospel sermons and at the onset of gospel vamps catalyzes movement between worlds. The gospel imagination is, in part, the belief that sound occasions motion between material and spiritual realms. And the practice of “tuning up” in sermons and in songs sonifies the interpenetration of temporality and transcendence in gospel liturgies. Tuning up, then, is evidence of a collective desire to be taken higher.