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Hymn Lining: A Black Church Tradition with Roots in Europe

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge my Professor Dr. Anthony Dumas from the College at Brockport, State University of New York, and thank him for his tireless help and direction on this effort. I would also like to thank Deacon Charles Lowry, Sr. of the Aenon Missionary Baptist Church and Rev. Douglas Smith of the Emmanuel Missionary Baptist Church, both in Rochester, NY for their knowledgeable contributions to this project.

Hymn Lining: A Black Church Tradition with Roots in Europe

Introduction

Hymn-lining - also called lining-out, raising a hymn or precenting a line - is unaccompanied sacred singing in which a leader chants a line and the congregation sings that line in response. Growing up with this tradition, I thought this was unique to the Black church. In fact, I didn't appreciate it much as a child growing up. The sound was sad, the tune didn't match the music in the hymn book on the back of the pew, and if I could get away with it, I would usually try to avoid this part of the service. It wasn't until I heard a white church sing this way as a part of their worship services, that I started to look at this old way of singing differently. I wanted to know who taught *them* to sing like *us*.

Through ethnographic fieldwork with church leaders in the Rochester, NY area, participant observation at my church, Aeon Baptist Church in Rochester, NY along with my recollections as a child, and review of scholarly literature, I will examine the history of hymn-lining, its origin and explore reasons for the decline of this practice.

Singing Traditions in My Church Experience

Growing up in Louisville, Kentucky and attending a Baptist church, I heard various forms of sacred music sung during the worship service on any given Sunday. Hymns would be sung, virtually unchanged from the hymnal and accompanied by music. Anthems, usually sung by the Senior Choir, were choral renditions with words taken from the Bible. Spirituals (made globally popular by groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers) expressed, in the dialect of the enslaved Africans, the anguish they felt in their present condition and the hope they had for a

better day with the help of God. Many of these spirituals held encoded messages of escape or feelings towards the slave master that would not be otherwise spoken. They would sing songs like *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Wade in the Water and Steal Away* in the fields to signal a planned escape. There would also be gospel singing which, depending on the decade, would take the form of quartet singing or later including songs written by Thomas Dorsey, Edwin Hawkins, and countless others whose songs spoke of the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus.

However, before any service, there would be the devotional period when the deacons would read a scripture, pray, and lead the congregation in an uplifting song to prepare us for the service to come. But often, right before the final prayer, a deacon would “raise a hymn.” This would be done usually one of two ways: 1) the deacon would chant each line and the congregation would repeat that line; before the congregation would finish the first line, the deacon would start the second line in time for the congregation to start that second line and so on until the song was completed; or 2) the deacon would say the words to the whole song to be sung and then start the tune; the congregation would then join in with the deacon. The deacon would be responsible for “raising the hymn” in a particular tune. However the congregation would know the tune, because this is how the song would always be sung. No matter the song or words sung, there seemed to be only a few “tunes.” The song would always end with the congregation moaning (or humming) the melody as the deacon would begin to pray. It was after this that the service, under the leadership of the church’s pastor, could begin.

This scenario would play out in any Black Baptist church and even in some Black Methodist churches in the south from small towns to large cities - handed down by previous generations. We all, with a sense of longing to be connected to a homeland lost, assumed that

this way of singing came from Africa herself discounting any syncretism between the descendents of Africans and the Europeans that enslaved them.

Background

The origin of the music of the Black church has always been assumed to be only from Africa. In his book *The Souls of Black Folks*, W. E. B. Dubois states that “Three things characterized this religion of the slave, - the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy” (135). He further goes on to explain that despite how it has been defiled in stereotypical minstrel shows of the time, it “remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil” (135). Dubois noted that the music is:

that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences ... sprung from the African forests where its counterpart can still be heard, ... adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope (135-34).

This has been understood to be the origins of the music of the Black church: music that took its form from the music and rhythms of Africa combined with the sorrows sung by slaves as they worked. This music would ultimately include spirituals, gospel, and what would give rise to blues, jazz and many other forms of American music we hear today.

The music would also include singing hymns - not just straight-from-the-hymnal singing - but hymn-lining, a minor dirge that would come to characterize the songs of the deacons in many Black Baptist churches of the south. As slavery ended, these Black Christians would move north in search of better lives and take their Southern traditions with them. But did this type of

singing actually have its roots in some home country in Africa? Why did I hear that *white church* sing *our songs* in *our way*? And why is this type of singing falling out of favor in many Black churches today?

What is Hymn Lining?

“Hymn lining” is distinct from the “call and response” type of singing that characterizes much of the music sung in the Black church. In call-and-response, the leader sings a phrase and the congregation or choir respond with a different, complementary or answering phrase. This style of singing is characteristic of West African music. The response phrases tend to be short and there is often a lot of improvisation. Most songs in the call-and-response style would be accompanied by instrumental music - piano, organ, and now guitar, bass, and percussion.

Hymn lining, on the other hand, is unaccompanied or a cappella singing in which a leader says or chants the words of the hymn to be sung and the congregation repeats singing the exact words chanted by the song leader. Other names for this type of singing include “Dr. Watts,” “lining out,” “raise a hymn,” “Old One-hundreds,” and the “old way of singing.” (Dargan 26)

While the words to these “Dr. Watts” hymns come from hymnals with musical notation, these songs are sung with a limited number of tunes that have been remembered and passed down from one generation to the next. It has always been assumed that these tunes originally came from Africa. But in reality, as Joyce Cauthen’s research shows, this musical form was

... derived from the earliest experience of African American Christianity, a complex blending of African musical practice and the “old way” of English psalm singing brought to New England in the seventeenth century (Cauthen 8)

In the liner notes to the CD entitled *The Gospel Ship*, Alan Lomax describes the lyrics as complex, the rhythm as free and that the ornamentation varies from singer to singer. He finds that this singing style to be a “survival of the mannerisms of Eastern ritual in British and American folk music” (3). Lomax says that in hymn-lining:

the texts are unchanged and the melodies are stable - but, because the singers pull away and constantly return to the central melodic current in deeply felt ornamental variations, great emotional tension is created, like that of a surging crows pouring down a narrow street or of an angelic throng, in some old canvas, mounting toward heaven. (3)

Hymn-lining, which was a solution to the problem of congregants not being able to read or not having song books, is often thought of as the earliest form of singing in the black church. But it is clear to me now that it was a synthesis of European Protestant evangelistic methods infused with African styles and ornamentation - creating a “Black” sound from a practical Protestant sacred music form.

How Did Enslaved Africans get Exposed to Christianity?

Historian Charles Joyner provided a vivid description of the religious life of enslaved Africans in the South Carolina town of All Saints Parish in his book *Down by the Riverside*. He obtained earlier ethnographic work that captured the remembrances from ex-slaves and from memoirs from the Plantation owners of the era. A newly ordained Episcopalian Englishman, Alexander Glennie, began a mission to the slaves in 1832. Joyner described how Parson Glennie came every two weeks to the community and preached the gospel. This “gospel” was favored by the slave masters in that they hoped it would make the slaves more docile and least likely to run

away or rebel. Parson Glennie, who also preached to the white slave owners, modified his delivery of his message to the black congregants to respond to the West African retained modality of the slaves (Joyner).

A religious service was not a relationship between a performer and an audience, but a mutual performance. Just as songs were characterized by the strong call-and-response antiphony of West African Music, so prayers and sermons were punctuated by congregational responses (162).

Pastor Glennie taught his congregants the hymns of the church. Some of the congregants could read, but since all could not, he “lined out hymns for his black congregants ... he would read two lines of a hymn & then they would all sing” (162). The singing would continue in this manner.

While Joyner’s book shows one example of how hymn-lining was introduced, it is clear from his writing that this was brought to the newly formed black church from European missionaries that were allowed to evangelize the slaves. Additionally, Joyner states that the grammar of the “slaves’ religion did not make a sharp distinction between the sacred and secular worlds” (167). This grammar led to mixing of work song lyrics and tunes with those sung at church. This would account for how hymn-lining could be thought of as descending from an African musical form.

While some plantation owners allowed their enslaved Africans to worship under their watchful eye, many owners also built praise houses for the Africans so that they could worship on their own plantations rather than going to another plantation to worship. In some cases, they would allow them to worship outdoors in what were termed “hush arbors.” These places of worship - both the praise houses and the hush arbors - akin to shines in Yoruba (West African,)

allowed a place and space for the enslaved Africans to worship in their own ways. This is where one would see the singing and dancing that characterized the “private” worship service. This is where “ring shouts” were practiced and was the beginnings of what we now call the Black Church (Clark 180-184).

The practice of the ring shout, which was brought from Africa, is still seen in several aspects of Black worship music - including hymn lining. Walter Pitts describes in *Old Ship of Zion*, the ring shout was a “North American form of African-derived ritual that was a common form of black worship on the southern plantation” (92). This worship practice was done separate from the worship practiced with the slave master. As the worshipers shuffled their feet in a counterclockwise motion, the leader would call out the words of the song; the participants would join in by repeating the words (93). This practice is very similar to hymn lining as taught by the missionaries, but would include hand clapping and foot stomping that was much more characteristic of West and Central African musical styles. However the songs were more jubilant than the typical minor, sad sound of the lined hymn.

Since little is known about music in African societies at the time that Africans were enslaved, it is difficult to determine what styles Africans brought to America. As documented in his book, *Folk Music in the United States*, Bruno Nettl, a noted ethnomusicologist and professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, states “our knowledge about traditions familiar to the slaves is limited to the basic musical features, shared by most African societies, and which probably have undergone minimal change” (90). Colonial influences over the past four hundred years shaped African music on the continent as well as the African Diaspora. Because European and West African music shared similar features, it is more likely that the music of the two cultures “syncretized” (91).

I interviewed Deacon Charles Lowry, Sr. who is a deacon at the Aenon Missionary Baptist Church in Rochester, NY and Rev. Douglas Smith who is the pastor of the Emmanuel Missionary Baptist Church, also in Rochester. Both are well known in the Rochester area for “raising hymns.” They both learned the singing style while living in the south before coming to Rochester. Deacon Lowry was originally from Louisville, Georgia. He attended church regularly with his family - his father was a minister. Rev. Smith was originally from Bainbridge, Georgia. His grandfather was a minister and he taught him to sing in this style when he was very young.

During my interview with Deacon Charles Lowry, while he stated there is a distinction between the jazz/blues songs versus church songs, he acknowledged the tunes have their basis in the same form and structure. They both came from the feelings that the singer was trying to express in the music.

Deacon Lowry: Well I'll tell you and it might shock you, but you might know it too. If you sit down and listen to a jazz musician and a church tune, it is built on the same phrase. They come off the same phrase. ... Jazz and a church tune arrange on the same notes, but the church songs have a different meaning. You know when you are singing [the blues] - it doesn't belong in the church. ... The blues song is telling you something about devastation ... it's just a different way to raise that tune to let the people see what you feel. When I was on the farm I had to plow, if you weren't singing those blues songs, then you were singing the hymns.

From Deacon Lowry's perspective, there is a tight relationship between work songs, blues, (later) jazz, and sacred songs. It is very difficult to tell which style influences the other because there was such intermixing of style types in the lives of African Americans.

Rev. Douglas Smith of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Rochester, NY has been a pastor in the Rochester area for the past fifty-seven years. He elaborated on how many of the songs became code among the slaves to conceal their activities or feelings from the slave master.

Rev. Smith: During slavery times, there was a lot of things that people could not say in words, but at the same time could sing it. And everybody in the field understood what the person was saying but the boss-master didn't. [It was] just singing to him. They weren't talking to him, but they were talking to God ... "I must tell Jesus." or "There's gonna be a better day." These songs became very relevant in the church at the time. ... There has always been a connection to the church and the world when it comes to music.

Both Deacon Lowry, of Louisville, Georgia and Rev. Smith, from Bainbridge, Georgia indicate they learned hymn-lining from their fathers and other older family and church members.

Rev. Smith: I grew up in the church from a kid. Singing was a part of my life... [T]hey used to put me on a little stool so people could see me...sing. My grandfather ... taught us. Now when it came to the hymn part, he taught us. Every Wednesday night was prayer meeting night. And you had to be at prayer meeting. And at prayer meeting, they raised those old, you know, they called them "Dr. Watts" hymns and we learned how to raise hymns.

Deacon Lowry: I ... was nine or ten years old. My father was a minister and so we had to go to church. And being down south, these hymns are all you more or less gonna hear coming out of church They all have different tones or how you bring out your hymn notes. When we used to go to church, sometimes I loved to be kinda late because the hymns sound so much better when you just trying to get to church. ... I loved all those hymns that they had. ... “A Charge to Keep I Have” is a Dr. Watts hymn. Now you got a common meter, ... and there is “I Love the Lord He Heard My Cry.” You can’t sing it [in] the same way [as “A Charge to Keep I Have”]. Dr. Watt’s Hymns is “Amazing Grace,” “Come ye that love the lord,” “I was a wondering sheep.” ... These are Watts hymns that are the old hymns that you don’t hear now ...

Deacon Lowry, ninety-two years old, learned these songs over eighty years ago. So who taught his father and the other older men in his community? Rev. Smith came to Rochester as an adult over fifty years ago. It is now clear this style of singing originated in Europe, but the tunes seem to be distinct from the versions sung by their white counterparts.

These conversations raised more questions than they answered. Who taught Rev. Smith’s grandfather and other people in the community those tunes; and who taught them? Who is Dr. Watts? How did songs written by others become attributed to Dr. Watts?

Writers of the Hymns being Sung

Of all the hymns in the New National Baptist Hymnal, 21st Century Edition (Triad Publications), there are only a few that I hear consistently “lined.” According to Deacon Lowry,

his favorite hymn is *A Charge to Keep I Have*. Rev. Smith likes that one also, but he also likes *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* as well as *Father, I Stretch My Hand to Thee*. *Amazing Grace* is another song that is sung heterophonically in a slower tempo and “decorated” with melismas. *Amazing Grace* and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* are almost always “lined” by the deacon saying the whole song before the congregation joins in to sing, rather than being lined a phrase at a time.

Both Rev. Smith and Deacon Lowry attribute this singing style and these hymns to “Dr. Watts.” However, *Amazing Grace* was written in 1779 by John Newton (1725-1807); *What A Friend We Have in Jesus* was written in 1865 by Joseph Scriven (1819 - 1886); Charles Wesley (1707 - 1788) wrote *A Charge to Keep I Have* in 1762. Wesley originally wrote a hymn titled *A Prayer of Faith* in 1741; it was renamed in subsequent hymnals to *Father, I Stretch My Hands to Thee* (Triad Publications).

So who is Dr. Watt’s and why are these songs ascribed to him? Why are the “lined-out” tunes radically different from how the songs, if sung directly from the hymnal, would sound? These “Dr. Watts” tunes are sung in a minor, pentatonic scale, in a slow, dirge-like way. Some of the songs are sung with the same tune. With very few exceptions, they are sung a cappella - with only the tap of the foot as an accompaniment.

“Dr. Watts” was born Isaac Watts in Southhampton, England in 1674 - the first of nine children. His father was a part of the Reformation movement against the Church of England. During young Isaac’s early years, his father was jailed twice for being a Nonconformist. Isaac began studying Latin at the age of seven and, because of his high intellect, it was thought that he would become a physician, but, instead, he went to London at age sixteen to study at the

Nonconformist Academy of Rev. Thomas Rowe, an independent minister. In 1702, he became a pastor of an independent church in Mark Lane. He wrote his first hymn in 1707 called “Behold the Glories of the Lamb.” He was considered one of the greatest hymn writers having published more than eight hundred hymns and psalms. “His degree of D.D. was bestowed on him in 1728, unsolicited, by the University of Edinburgh.” He died in 1748 after a long illness. He never came to the new colonies in the Americas. (Julian 1236-37)

Charles Wesley was born in Epworth England in 1707. Charles, along with his brother John, born in Epworth in 1703, was missionaries to the colonies - specifically to Georgia. Charles Wesley was considered the greatest hymn writer of all times - writing some sixty-five hundred hymns. Six hundred and thirty of the 770 hymns in the “Wesleyan Hymn Book” were written by Charles. John also wrote hymns and preached as Charles, but he is mostly credited with the task of translating hymns from German to English. Charles in 1788 and John died in 1791 (Julian 1257-58).

It is still not clear how Dr. Watt’s got associated with this type of singing. He is credited with arranging some of the Psalms into meters that could be easily sung, which is a practice that still goes on today in Scotland (Julian; Back Church, Isle of Lewis).

Psalm Singing in Scotland

The Reformation of the sixteenth century brought Protestantism to Scotland, and with it came a change in the focus of the preached word as primary to the worship service. While most Bibles were being published in English, the Gaelic-speaking Scots were being aided in their understanding of the Bible by using songs in the worship services. The *Book of Common Order* -

which established the liturgical order of worship in Protestant churches - was the first Gaelic book ever printed in Scotland appeared in 1567. (Gribben 76)

The Scottish tradition of metrical psalmody - the singing of verses of the Psalms to repeated regular melodies - was well established, when, in 1561, Mary Queen of Scots' noted that her subjects "unskillfully sang the Psalms, yet with much passion" on her arrival from France (Tavener 43).

The practice of "lining out" in worship services, by a precentor, was started to help illiterate congregants. This precentor - who was always male (MacDonald 72) - would "set the pitch and identify the tune by singing each line before the congregation" (Tavener 45). When this practice was adopted by the Gaelic-speaking communities, the music changed from the diatonic-based, simple singing brought to them by the Reformers to one that was pentatonic based. But what was most distinctive was the addition of the Celtic tradition of "ornamentation with the grace notes and fluid, improvised decorative figures common in traditional music" became common. This was made even more distinctive by being sung in the Gaelic language (Ibid, 45).

In their article *Gaelic singing and oral tradition*, Mark Sheridan et al. cites John Purser's book *Scotland's Music*. In it, he states that the "Celtic chants were preserved in the 13th century Inchcolm Antiphoner as evidence of this tradition of adoption and adaption (Sheridan, MacDonald and Byrne). While it is not clear from the research how the lined-hymns sounded coming from the English missionaries, it is clear that once the practiced met the Gaelic speaking Scots, their traditional singing called keening, which literally means wail in grief for a dead person. This traditionally singing was coined "sean nós" in 1904 during a competition. Its sound

is a highly ornamented, unaccompanied singing that sounds very much like the hymn-lining practiced in the churches today (Eidhin).

Controversy over Origins

It was the 2013 National Public Radio report, *Before Churches Had Songbooks, There Was 'Lined-Out' Gospel* (Burnett) that got my attention. Here was a Regular Baptist church (“we” call “white” Baptist) in Kentucky singing as *we* sing our lined hymns, in that mournful way - only a little differently. There in Appalachia, they continue the hymn-lining singing tradition that was brought to America by the British. It was reported that this was “the oldest English-language religious music passed down orally in America.” One of the interviewees reported that his “grandfather was born 100 years before [he] was” and he sang that way. (Burnett)

It was Jazz musician Willie Ruff, of Yale University, that initiated the conversation and sparked the controversy among ethnomusicologists when he stated, in 2002, that the hymn-lining tradition that he had known as a Black Baptist tradition was also sung in a Black Presbyterian church. He found out from them that the only white Presbyterians practicing hymn lining could be found in the Protestant, Gaelic-speaking islands of Scotland’s Hebrides. Ruff then concluded that African American gospel music has its roots from this Gaelic speaking tradition. He also concluded that all African American music has its roots in this style (Ruff).

Of course this led to a lot of chatter in the ethnomusicology community. Namely Terry Miller, Professor of Ethnomusicology (Emeritus) at Kent State University (Miller). Miller concludes that there is no Gaelic origin for black gospel music as Ruff asserts. So that I don’t get lumped into that category of “would be scholars who might be tempted to jump to conclusions

based on incomplete knowledge, fragmentary evidence, ... and dubious reasoning” (244), I will say that Gaelic Psalm singing (Back Church, Isle of Lewis) sounds exactly like hymns raised in the Black church (Moderator C. P. Preston) and like the hymns line-out in the Regular Baptist churches (Indian Bottom Association). However, it is a leap to say that it was the progenitor of all gospel music - which would also tie in blues and jazz.

Musical Analysis of Hymns

The lyricists wrote the hymns to fit one of a few different poetic meters. This made it easier for existing music to be applied to the poem or for a composer to write a song in a style similar to an existing song.

Meter Name	Hymn Meter (# syllables per line)	Example
Common Meter	8-6-8-6 or 86.86 (iambic: weak-strong)	Amazing grace , how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me . I once was lost but now I'm found Twas blind but now I see .
	8-7-8-7 or 87.87 (trochaic: strong-weak)	What a friend we have in Jesus ! All my sins and griefs to bear . What a priv- i -lege to carry Eve-ry-thing to God in prayer .
Long Meter	8-8-8-8 or 88.88	Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below! Praise Him above ye heav'n-ly host; Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!
Short Meter	6-6-8-6 or 66.86	A charge to keep I have A God to glorify A never dying soul to save And fit it for the sky

There is no line to show who or how the song transformed, but the following show the differences in the melodies between what is *What A Friend We Have in Jesus*. Other songs that are lined follow a similar transformation - from major to minor.

What A Friend We Have in Jesus

Joseph Scriven Charles C. Converse

♩ = 120

1 2 3 4 5 6
What a friend we have in Je - sus! All our sins and griefs to bear. What a priv-i-lege to car-ry

7 8 9 10 11 12
Ev - 'ry thing to God in prayer! O what peace we oft-en for-feit, O what need less pain we bear,

13 14 15 16
All be-cause we do not car - ry Ev - 'ry thing to God in prayer!

Figure 1 - Song as written by original lyricist and composer (The New National Baptist Hymnal 21st Century Edition)

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

"Dr. Watts" style (8-7-8-7)

Joseph Scriven Charles C. Converse

♩ = 70

1 2 3 4
What a friend_ we have in Je - sus! All our sins and griefs to_ bear.

5 6 7 8
What a priv-(i)-lege is to car_ ry ev - ry thing_ to God_ in prayer.

Figure 2 - Song as sung in "Dr. Watts" Style

What's happening to this style in the Black Church?

Music in the Black church is going through a transformation as churches, wanting to increase the size of their membership, seek to do so by catering to music, and preaching styles that attract more people. The traditions of the church that not only included hymn lining, but also

anthems, and hymns - often associated more with English and Anglo-American worship styles are being forsaken for styles that appeal to younger people. The deacon-led devotional is being replaced by praise and worship teams. Trained musicians are being replaced by younger contemporary musicians with little or no musical training (Abbingdon).

While Rev. Smith keeps the traditional singing hymns alive in his church, he sees that the practice is diminishing in other churches.

Rev. Smith: It's what the pastor of the church sets. Depending on what the younger people gravitates from. ... So if you've got a pastor and he's not into hymns in the church, then ... if your deacons are not hymnists, and the program doesn't provide and the pastor does not ... insist that it should be. ... Now they have the praise team. Some of them [the deacons] don't do anything. They may read the scripture or pray, but they don't do any hymns anymore. The praise team sings or leads a congregational song. They sing behind the gospel singers and that is what comes into the church.

Conclusion

The hymn-lining style of singing is a tradition in churches brought to the colonies by English missionaries and immigrants. This style was taught to slaves. This tradition continues among a few congregations of Baptist Churches (Missionary, Regular, and Primitive.) The Scots-Irish were taught this style by English speaking missionaries and has been retained by a few Gaelic Speaking Scots in the Northern Hebrides. This style was incorporated in their churches during the Reformation as they were applying tunes to the Psalms they were adjusting to use as music during worship services. This a cappella style can still be heard today in places

like the Back Free Church on the Isle of Lewis, and Regular and Primitive Baptist Churches in the United States. Many Black Baptist churches continue this practice in their deacon-led devotions.

Some of these Scottish and English immigrants were slave owners and in some areas of the south, they allowed or insisted that their slaves become Christians and worship with them. They would have practiced this form of singing in their worship.

However, differences are noticed in the singing between the white churches and the black churches who continue to sing this style. These differences may be attributed to some African retentions in the music. Because I have no examples of the sound of the English lined-out melodies, I cannot say that what we hear today in the churches in the United States resembles that, but we can say that there seems to be a musical connection between the sound of the lined-out hymns of the Regular Baptist Churches as well as the Black churches to the sound of the Gaelic traditional singing of sean nós. It is also very curious that “sean nós” means “old way” which is another term for hymn-lining!

Black Americans have a musical tradition that included the sacred and secular. These styles blended together to form what we hear today in gospel, R&B, blues, jazz, and even Rock and Hip-Hop music. Yet, hymn-lining remains distinctly separate as a musical form. The influences of music forms retained from Africa as well as music derived from the slave experience melded with hymn-lining to give it its distinct sound in the Black church.

While the question of the origination of hymn lining in this country has been answered, direct influences on other African American musical culture to African are not so straight forward. This research has focused on the impact of syncretism between Europeans and Africans

as they came to be in the United States and how Christianity was a catalyst for the transmission of this style from one culture to another. Future questions to address would be to look at other musical forms that may have had a similar transmission from one culture to another. It is clear that Scottish immigrants came to this country and many were slave owners. It is also clear that the traditional Gaelic singing has musical similarities to hymn-lining as sung in the Black church. But my research done to date does not include any specific documented instance of an interaction between the Scottish and the enslaved Africans that would lead to the transmission of this singing style. This would be a topic for additional study.

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