South African gospel choir brings 'healing' post-apartheid message to Orchestra Hall

Touring the Midwest this summer, the 29:11 choir found an unlikely partner in Minnesota Orchestra.

By Jenna Ross  Star Tribune

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Lauren Hertzenberg and members of the South African gospel choir 29:11 sang at a private home in

Inside a St. Paul church, five vocalists stood at the sanctuary’s front and, with rich voices and raised hands, sang the South African national anthem.

Their national anthem.
“In our country, people were jailed and crucified for singing this song in public,” Brendon Adams told the crowd, explaining how “Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika,” or “God Bless Africa,” served as an act of protest during apartheid. After, the old hymn became a part of the new national anthem and a symbol of reconciliation.

Adams, 44, and his South African gospel group 29:11 have sung this song — and told this story — week after week, in church after church.

On this Sunday, three months after many of the group’s musicians arrived in Minnesota, their voices and instruments filled the historic, gothic Hamline Church United Methodist in St. Paul. But they’ve performed in Catholic and Baptist sanctuaries, too. They’ve sung at colleges and elementary schools. In living rooms and backyards. One afternoon, they performed for Christian motorcyclists in the back room of a Pizza Ranch.

Their biggest stage comes this weekend, when they’ll sing at Orchestra Hall — over and over again.

29:11’s Mario Julie sang a solo.

On Friday, the South Africans will join the Minnesota Chorale and members of Twin Cities church choirs onstage for “Celebrating Mandela at 100,” a concert honoring the centenary of anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela with speeches and song. On Saturday afternoon, they’ll perform as part of the “International Day of Music” and, that night, they’ll be part of the massive 160-person chorus belting the fourth and final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. That wasn’t always the plan. But Adams and his gospel group were coaching the choirs on the African songs — unfamiliar pronunciations, click consonants — and one thing led to another. “Then we were forming this mass choir and I thought, ‘Well, duh, why doesn’t your group sing in
that choir? ’ said Beth Kellar-Long, the orchestra’s vice president of orchestra administration. “I’m so glad we came to that realization, because I think it’s made the collaboration all the richer.”

The 29:11 folks know the South African songs, she continued. The singers from African-American churches, including Shiloh Temple International Ministries Church Choir, know the gospel numbers. And the Minnesota Chorale has mastered Beethoven’s Ninth, which they’re singing in German.

“So each segment of this mass choir has their area of expertise,” Kellar-Long said, “and they’re kind of stretching their comfort zones in other areas.”

‘There’s healing happening’

The orchestra first turned to 29:11 partly because of the cultural crisscrossing of its founders, Adams and his wife, Gaylene, who met in South Africa and live in Minnesota. Growing up in Elsies River, a tough mixed-race township just west of Cape Town, Adams’ childhood was marked by poverty and violence. “I’ve seen one of my friends getting killed right in front of me by the hand of the police just because we were a different color skin,” he said.

But when bad things happened, his mother would comfort him with scripture, including Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 11: ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ”

“Instead of getting angry,” Adams said, “my mother would give me that verse.”

He clung to that promise. In the late 1990s, Adams met Gaylene, a Minnesota native who was working with children in a nearby township. The pair fell in love, married and formed New Hope International, organizing exchanges to and from those townships. The 29:11 gospel group grew out of that work. They do performances, workshops. They talk about the history of South Africa, the power of reconciliation.

Their music and message translates across very different types of churches and stages, said Joseph Garnier, director of worship and creative arts at Sanctuary Covenant Church in north Minneapolis. “They work well in our context, as well as at the Basilica.”

At Sanctuary Covenant, 29:11 led a workshop with staff members, a Sunday worship service and free concert featuring gospel star Robert Robinson. “It was powerful to hear about struggles with race relations from a non-United States perspective,” Garnier said, pointing out his own African-American, urban context. Though the structures are different, the struggles are the same, he continued. “It was refreshing how they talked about the need to forgive even though you’ve been wronged ...”

“They’re saying we can overcome some of the issues through forgiveness.”
Although they live in post-apartheid South Africa, the young people who trekked to Minnesota this summer are still experiencing its ripples.

They shared stories around a table in the Hamline church basement: The keyboardist, Clarenzo Grootboom, described how music saved him from a life of gangsterism. Bass player Renaldo Hendricks spoke about forgiving someone who abused him — and the freedom that followed. Adams, too, talked about facing and forgiving his own abuser.

“We don’t exclude ourselves, saying, ‘Oh, look at us. We’re bringing reconciliation to the world.’ No,” Adams said. “We are actually reconciling ourselves on a daily basis. There’s healing happening within this group.

“There’s forgiveness happening within this group.”

**Tackling Beethoven**

The pre-rehearsal workshop was optional, but by 6 p.m., members of the mass choir had taken every seat at the tables. A dozen singers sat on the floor.

They started with the tough one: “Ruri,” by South African composer Michael Mosoeu Moerane. Sitting in the front of the room, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Adams led them through, line by line. Syllable by syllable. Section leaders asked questions, scribbling on their score.

“Kway-cha,” a soprano penciled above “Koe-tsa.”

Halfway through, Adams paused. “There are 11 official languages,” he reminded the group. “What we’re trying to do for you guys is do the right ones, because they’re very close to each other. So it’s hard for us, too.”

Harder, though, is Beethoven. “For the first time, we’re doing Beethoven’s Ninth — and it’s in German,” Adams said later, raising his eyebrow. “We are being stretched, musically. But it’s so awesome, because that music speaks to us.

“It’s good to be out of your comfort zone,” he continued. “That’s what reconciliation is about.”

Beethoven’s Ninth, too, carries that message. “The first symphony to include the human voice, it offers a romantic vision of the brotherhood of all mankind,” according to the orchestra’s program. That human voice sings lyrics largely taken from Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” for a theme used across the world in moments of protest and triumph. Minnesota Orchestra will perform the piece during the second half of its South Africa tour, with 50 members of the Minnesota Chorale and Johannesburg’s Gauteng Choristers.

Singing it in Minneapolis later that evening, the tables were turned. The choir members were split into sections. In a small chapel, after warm-ups, the tenors opened up their scores. “What we’re going to do tonight is reinforce some of the hard parts of this,” accompanist Barbara
Brooks said. “Let me first ask: How are our friends doing? Our non-Chorale folks, how do you think this is going?”

The group was quiet. A pair of 29:11 vocalists nodded. One gave a thumbs-up.

“Pretty good? I mean we’re trying to figure out how to do clicks,” she said. “We’re all learning each other’s styles and languages.”

They began on measure 237, on that familiar theme. “Freude! Freude!” they sang, or “Joy! Joy!” They ran it once, twice. Then Brooks told the two sides of the chapel to turn toward one another. They continued singing in German, in perfect unison, lyrics that translated mean:

“All men shall become brothers, wherever your gentle wings hover.”

Where to hear 29:11
Celebrating Mandela at 100: 8 p.m. Fri., pay what you can (starting at $5)
Free concert: 3 p.m. Sat.
Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony: 8 p.m. Sat., $29 to $96
Where: Orchestra Hall, 1111 Nicolet Mall, Mpls.
More information: minnesotaorchestra.org
jross@startribune.com 612-673-7168 By Jenna