Sound Expertise – Season 2, Episode 2 – The Gospel Imagination with Braxton D. Shelley

TRANSCRIPT

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Braxton Shelley, Will Robin

Braxton Shelley 00:00
This belief in sound as a conduit of holy power means that the regulation of musical sound can acquire an unusual kind of force. So that when we're talking about a modulation, we're not just talking modulation, we're talking about literal elevation.

00:26
[Music]

Will Robin 00:48
Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research and why it matters. The phrase "musical analysis" conjures a certain kind of image, a lone scholar with their score and pencil identifying chords in a Bach Prelude or tone rows in a Webern miniature. The academic work itself is fairly abstract. In trying to understand the inner workings of some great masterpiece, music becomes a kind of puzzle, a riddle to be solved. But the richness of much music lies not in such cerebral exercises, but in the visceral impact it makes in live performance. This is particularly the case with sacred music, in which what is played and heard in a place of worship is designed to provide some immediate, even divine impact on its participants, and draw a community together in song. Analyzing religious music requires a different set of tools then, to understand how it moves not just the mind, but also the spirit and the body. That is the aim of my guest today, Braxton Shelley, an Assistant Professor of Music at Harvard, whose fascinating scholarship focuses on gospel music, and specifically what he calls the "gospel imagination," how the inner workings of gospel songs, the vamps and chords heard in a church service, facilitate moments of profound religious experience. Professor Shelley is a minister and musician as well as a musicologist. And his work is increasingly recognized as vital to the field today. In the week before we spoke his 2019 article analyzing gospel won major prizes from both the American Musicological Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology, and his book will be out soon with Oxford University Press. I hope you learn as much from this conversation as I did.

02:51
[Music]

Will Robin 02:51
Let's start maybe with -- I've been reading a lot of your work and an important component of the gospel tradition that's a subject of some of your analyses, which is this idea of "tuning up" that you write about,

this moment of transition from speech to song. Can you talk a little bit about like what "tuning up" is as both a musical process and also as a religious process?

Braxton Shelley 03:16
Sure, well, the idea of "tuning up" that comes out of practice is this moment of inflection, where one moves from one dimension of musicality, from one level of -- sort of -- the sermon or song to another, and this transition is always emphatic. It's not... so the point is for it to arrest attention, foment movement, between ... really between the material world and what people call a spiritual realm. And so both as sort of formal, technical device, a kind of discernible musical fact, if you will -- but also, I think it's evidence of our conception of what the world is, or what worlds are, how things are connected, which is to say that you need something to occasion movement between the material world and the spiritual realm, if you believe that those... that both planes are available for experience. And so that's how you get this aesthetic, where you can't separate the expression from the belief that sort of sustains it, that ends up being also sustained by the practice and yeah. So you see it across the traditional sermons, songs, prayers, this moment of switching, moment of going in, and there are lots of names, you know…in particular cooping, or closing, or you know, all these gerunds to sort of indicate the ongoingness. But you also notice it in the gospel song, especially the gospel choir repertory, this really striking moment where everything before it is transcended. And that's what I try to show in various pieces of writing, I think that the forthcoming book makes that even more clear. There's a whole chapter on tuning up, that is then sort of woven through the following chapters. How tuning up reveals a belief about time, how tuning up transforms text, how tuning up, you know, of being understood in terms of an analytic for the music. Yeah. So then, I don't know, maybe in a representative tuning up moment, or at least some of the moments that you've written about, what is happening musically, with, you know, the singers, with the choir, what's happening? Yeah, just tell me a little bit more about what we might hear in that kind of moment, and how you analyze that too. Got it. Well, my favorite song, I think, in the Gospel Choir repertory is by Brenda Joyce Mars, entitled Perfect Praise. Some folks call it "How Excellent" because that's the most often repeated word. And the song has three units -- ABC sections, and at the end of the B section's second iteration, like the closing tonic, the closing I is transformed into a secondary dominant, right, V4/2 of IV, it's really easy to do, just take the bass down a whole step, E flat to D flat, and all of a sudden, the emblem of musical repose, musical stability gets remade into this extraordinarily unstable sonority that's got to move, it's got to go somewhere. And so it becomes the first section in the song we start anywhere but I. And at the same time, you have this ... in the choir part, the hook is interrupted. There's normally a measure between the end of the hook and the start of the next section or the repetition of the same section. But here, the tenors come in a half measure early, and then instead of starting on the downbeat, they start on the added three, with this really sort of emphatic line; and the texture changes. In the song you've had unison, you've homophony, but this is like one note where you get a kind of polyphonic thing happening, but the vamp is completely polyphonic. And the vamp is formed through textural accumulation. So the first time through the vamp only tenors sing, so you've got all these concomitant turns happening: the I becomes V4/2 of I, the tenors come in a half beat early, they come in all the syncopated thing -- all of a sudden there are no altos, no sopranos, just the tenors belting. And the combined effect of that, I think it makes a shift occur.

08:25

[Music]

Braxton Shelley 09:12
Another one is Walter Hawkins's Marvelous. And at the end -- I love to talk about this example because the end of that song's basic ... they turn the sort of title lyric "What a Marvelous thing" in such a way that you could think that this is going to be the vamp, just the repetition of that; but all of a sudden, when they decide to cadence, instead of going from II to V back to II to IV, when they decide to go to I the choir is silent. And the choir's abrupt silence speaks loudly, right? And at the same time, the soloist, the composer, Bishop Walter Hawkins he ... Instead of singing, he hums, so he reaches for another linguistic register. And again, you get this movement in the bass to flat seven, so I becomes V4/2 of IV. So, again, this sort of combined effect makes for a really forceful movement.

10:48
[Music]

Will Robin 10:48
yeah, I mean, one of the things that I find really striking in the way that you construct your analyses is that you're constantly moving between the kind of musical detail that you were just talking about, and emphasizing the embodied experience and participatory components and that it's something is happening to the people participating. Can you talk a little bit about how you analyze that ... those and how you feel those moments as both something to analyze musically, but also something to analyze spiritually.

Braxton Shelley 11:23
Sure, I think one of the most important books I read in grad school was Harry Berger's _Stance: Ideas for the Study of Expressive Culture_, I think that's the post-colonic title. And so it gave me a useful language just for talking about the intensity and specificity with which gospel congregants attend to gospel sound. For me, the most important word in the book is not stance but is grapple -- he does this magisterial, and really, I think lucid and really clear movement through Husserl and other phenomenologists to give you a sense of musical experience, the degree to which it can be focused, shaped, sort of, could become kind of habit. But the word grapple, I remember reading it and thinking, this is exactly what I want to talk about -- this grappling, this approach to sound as a vehicle, not simply audited, but sound embodied, and embodied in an inter worldly way.

Will Robin 13:07
Inter worldly as in, like, between the divine and the everyday. Interesting,

Braxton Shelley 13:13
Right, the world of ordinary sense, and the world that, though invisible, is not immaterial. So actually, I think... it's not so much moving from analysis to that, I think I start with the question of what the music is doing, and who it's doing it for. And that actually helps me to know what to notice. To know what's important to know. Among all the observations I can make, what's worth pointing out,

Will Robin 13:56

And then to figure out how that's working, basically. It's kind of, I guess the nitty gritty. It's interesting,

Braxton Shelley 14:03
right.

Will Robin 14:04
Yeah, I mean, if I think about, I don't know, like generic analysis of a Beethoven symphony, I suppose that's what people are doing. They're listening to their favorite moments and trying to figure out why they're their favorite. But it's also ... the embodied component of what you're doing is just so tied... You can't. Yeah, I mean, you can't really separate one from the other. Can talk about tuning up as the sonic manifestation of what you call the gospel imagination. I was constantly underlining things that I wanted to ask you about. Can you talk a little bit about this idea of how you see this phrase, the gospel imagination, and how music relates to it, or the analysis you're doing relates to it?

Braxton Shelley 14:49
Sure. I mean, if somebody asked the signal phrase for the book, the idea... for a long time, I thought I was writing about contemporary gospel music, which is like the phrase people use to talk about gospel music written after 1969. This is like using Walter Hawkins's is "Oh, happy day" as a kind of Tristan chord for gospel. Yeah, you know, a literal pivot. But I realized what I was really interested in was contemporary gospel music's preoccupation with the various pasts and possible futures. And still... that's one level, the other is, I just started to think about the way that the songs occasion this traffic. And a gospel song, you can be in 2020, and, you know, AD 33, and a century before the Common Era, all at the same time, you could be in 1980s Detroit, and, you know, ancient Palestine, and so forth, all right at the same time. So for me, it seems a bit contradictory to engage a phenomenon for which wanted movement, across space and time, is the most important thing, using sort of traditional dash from 1969 to the present. Something like that was not the point. So, if I'm not going to call it contemporary gospel performance, what am I going to call it, what am I talking about? And how can I accent the essentially theological thing happening? How can I accent the deep interconnection between composition, performance, and reception? And how can I link this sort of particular expression to the gospel tradition, which, for my money, is much older than a thing called gospel? So in the book, I trace the idea of the gospel imagination back into the some of the earliest historical discussions of Black American music making, often derogatory. And for me, the gospel imagination is this: belief that musical sound can turn spiritual power into a physical reality.

Will Robin 17:49
That's a great definition. Yeah. I want to come back to that and think more about that. But it might be helpful ... I mean, I'm also curious about how you got to where you are as a scholar. I know that you're also a musician and a minister -- how did you get in... How did you... What were your kind of early important experiences with gospel that got you on the path towards ministry and then also later, I guess, on the path towards academia, in the music-academia context?

Braxton Shelley 18:26
Well, I was a church kid, so I was always around. And I was always banging on stuff. You know, from the time I was three, I was banging on things. I think it I got my first keyboard at 5, started piano

lessons at 7, started playing in church at 9, I was playing every Sunday at 10. I was music director at 15.

Will Robin 18:51
Where was... was this in North Carolina?

Braxton Shelley 18:53
Yeah, northeastern North Carolina. A city called Rocky Mount located half in Edgecombe, half in Nash County. And so I cut my teeth doing that. I trained my ear doing that. I remember, you know, I was in... I remember when I learned what secondary dominant chords, you know, were -- I was like, Oh, so that's how you go to D in "Give Me a Clean Heart. Before you know, what you do is D9 before you go to... Okay, right. I learned tonal harmony in devotional service, it's one of the things that cue it. You know, there was a choir, they prepared songs, they'd be ready to go -- but the services start with devotion. I grew up Baptist and that's sort of a ... it's not just Baptists, but the idea of devotion and service as two key components, it's been a Baptist practice historically; it's sort of falling out of favor in recent decades. But people would get up in devotional service testimony and tell a testimony, and they would start singing a song, they would sing some random song in B major, you have to pick it up, you know. So I learned to play by ear. And in order to make it through, you've got to develop a deep sense of almost a kind of embodied taxonomy of -- Oh, this is that kind of stuff, this is that kind of thing, we're going to I here then we're going to IV here, we're going to V/V, I call it the II to V, whatever, whatever, you know. This is I, then we go to VI, and come back up by chromatics, you know, back up to I. So it made me think in serious terms about syntax, basically. And then, of course, just, you know, being at services, listening to older musicians, great people come through and go up afterwards -- Can you show me that chord or that kind of thing? I sort of grew up with this fascination with keyboard harmony. And so, so yeah, so that's the best part of it. And then... and in many ways that is kind of an uninterrupted trajectory. Because for me, the biggest insights for my book come out of practice; like the vamp's role as the sort of articulation of tuning up, the vamp's close relationship to the shout -- all those things became clear to me in concerts or in things I was preaching. So there's a kind of emic sort of orientation, that I would spend years trying to figure out what it meant, but like that moment, the flash of insight, feeling, Ah, this is important, take note, don't forget... those come out of practice. So they really are mutually, you know, nourishing streams, both scholarship and practice for me.

Will Robin 22:17
I want to come back to vamping because it's obviously so important to what you talk about. But I imagine that there are a lot of musicians who have similar training to you and knowledge to you and wouldn't necessarily consider doing a PhD in music analysis. Because you have all the tools kind of available to you to make the music in a certain way, right? Like, what was that about? Like, going to... Do you consider yourself --- this is kind of a stupid question -- a theorist or a musicologist? Because I was a little bit ambiguous, and I was wondering if you care whether you're either...

Braxton Shelley 22:53
Yeah, so I really... I kind of use lowercase musicologist. And I think I have equal interest in all three of the sub disciplines. I'm also a composer,

Will Robin 23:08
Well, and you just won an ethnomusicology prize...

Braxton Shelley 23:11
Yeah, so for what it's worth... Yeah, I think interdisciplinarity really is the bread and butter of my work, both in music and beyond. I'm working on a talk now, got to give it in a couple of weeks, going to dry run it this afternoon in my grad seminar. And I mean, I'm reading theology, media theory, homiletics, you know, straight up philosophy. You know, trying to put it all together. And that's just how I think.

Will Robin 23:47
But yeah, to get back to ...

Braxton Shelley 23:49
The why grad school question. I guess. I just am a nerd, you know. I mean, that's part of it.

Will Robin 23:55
Did you say you're a nerd?

Braxton Shelley 23:57
Yeah. [laughs] In case you didn't know.

Will Robin 24:00
The answer for everyone, why apply to grad school, right...

Braxton Shelley 24:03
Right. But I think it was... I mean, just sitting in undergraduate music theory courses at Duke, thinking, hmm, this is cool. But if I look in the library, I can't really find much on gospel. And I think having a burgeoning sense of an enduring scholarly lacuna.... And I, you know, having supportive professors, you can write your paper on this, you can work on that, and so sort of gradually came into view. Then my second year I applied for and I got a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship, which is an amazing program designed, funded by the Mellon Foundation to diversify the professoriate. And the resources that they offer are really astounding, conferences and mentoring, you do summer research projects from the summer after your sophomore year of college, through..., you write an honors thesis, they support you with that ... conference papers. I mean, if you look at the ranks of Black, but also other underrepresented minority faculty under 40 across the country, I think you'd be shocked at the percentage of them that are Mellon Mays fellows across disciplines, especially the humanities and social sciences. So I got sort of recruited into that, and that was really quite wonderful in terms of shaping and mentoring. I had great mentors at Duke -- Anthony Kelley, Philip Rupprecht, Brian Gilliam... and so I was very well supported, and they sort of pushed me forward to apply to grad school. Yeah. And I was dumb. I did it all straight through. I even did an MDiv while I was in grad school to boot. So I don't recommend that, but I did that as well.

Will Robin 26:22

You talked a little bit a minute ago about the kind of lacuna around gospel in some of music scholarship and you cite a lot of the important existing gospel scholarship. Like how did you kind of conceptualize what was missing and how your work could help fill those gaps in musicology, music theory?

Braxton Shelley 26:46
Right, well, this comes back to the biographical question. My personal statement for grad school apps, started off with a quote from -- I think it was a composition concert or something like that in undergrad, and one of my friends, he made it and he had a quote for every person beside their piece, you know, in the order that the music was going to be performed. And for me, the quote was, Braxton D. Shelley really likes that chord. [Both laugh] Because in class, I would say, Oh, yeah, I like that chord. That's cool. You know, that kind of thing. And so I actually started my grad personal statement with that phrase, sort of worked out from it to talk about how that idea entered my vocabulary as a young gospel musician trying to learn chops, and animates my application to these grad programs. And my desire to contribute to a fuller consideration of gospel. In some ways it's really simple. To sum it up, there's just been very little analytical attention to the details of sound organization in gospel, and it's really important because of gospel's really extraordinarily productive, generative role for a whole host of American popular music traditions. So, the fact that what gospel is, that's understudied, that contributed to, I think, an underappreciation of gospel's primary place in the American expressive lexicon. But I also think that, you know, I have an MDiv, and I am a practitioner, and so I think that in many ways my scholarship goes deeper into syntax, and deeper into culture. Because I'm not just saying, there's a relationship between Black preaching and gospel music, I read the homiletics books. I say, you know, I'm making an argument about this public musicality, I can make an argument about, you know, sort of incarnational theology time. But also, yeah, this, minor 6/4 chord functions as a rhetorical hook. Jesus's body lifted on a cross, like the 6 and the 4 suspended over the dominant, so, that's how I think about it. And, you know, I think that in some ways, the prizes of late are in recognition of the lacuna being populated, you know.

Will Robin 29:40
Let's talk a little bit more about some of the analytic analytical tools and the vamps specifically. Can you talk a little bit about what is the gospel vamp versus just any old vamp and how you see it functioning in the context of the gospel imagination?

Braxton Shelley 30:00
Right, well, vamps can show up anywhere. I mean, it's about a certain iterative quality. You know about spending a lot of time doing something that has a kind of musical economy. What makes the gospel vamp different is its primacy and its importance. In gospel, you have anything but "vamp til ready"? You know, gospel is anything but a background for some other more important musical event. In the gospel song, the vamp is the main event. The vamp, and so that's the signal distinction, the vamp is the thing that song is trying to get to...

Will Robin 30:53
That just clicked in my head.

Braxton Shelley 30:55

... as opposed to an interstitial space surrounded by more significant musical moments. And the vamp is important because what it does, it allows for this transformation I talked about, for musical sound to turn spiritual power into physical reality. This is one of the big things I write about the third chapter of my book, when I'm talking about words, and I'm sort of dealing with affect, or meaning, you know, and they've been talked about in opposing ways. Some folks say well affect is non discursive, as immediate, as corporeal. And I think that, you know, you can't talk about gospel songs without talking about power, without talking about transformation of the text over time. But also, it means what it says, this is one of the reasons that it matters, this is texted music, gospel has the same kind of unwieldy sonic force that you find in lots of traditions. But it's more immediate, in part because it's more specific. We're arguing that this song is about healing. This song is about….[garbled recording]…. up by half steps five times, you know, you can't say that nothing has changed in that performance. So you can't call that non-affective. You also can't say that the meanings cease to matter. And so when I talk about is the experience of power, is to say that power is held together by a dialectic of effect and meaning,

Will Robin 32:45
Musically, you have this kind of escalation happening, you talk about with escalating music, and then kind of escalating responses. Can you talk through some of the textural shifts in a typical vamping moment, and how that affects all of this?

Braxton Shelley 33:02
Yeah well, one thing that might happen is a textual accumulative vamp where instead of being in unison, or in sort of ordinary homophonic, choral harmony, the vamp will become polyphonic and the vamp that will be built slowly, like a jigsaw puzzle, the parts will gradually come into focus, harmony will gradually become clearer. That's one example. Another treasured technique is called inversion where you just revoice the things. Voice the choral parts higher. So the sopranos take the previous tenor part at a higher octave, the altos take the previous soprano part, tenors take the previous alto part, we do it multiple times, like, whatever the process is, in the vamp, both the process and the material need to be repeated. Like you wouldn't just modulate in a vamp by semitone just one time. You might modulate in a bridge or verse one time, but if this is going to be a modulating vamp, then it needs to be repeatedly modulated, repeatedly inverted. So that you get this really powerful amplification of repetition of process times repetition of material.

Will Robin 34:31
The way that you talk about the effects of this music -- I don't even know if the effects of this music is the right word because it's just like happening and everyone is involved in it. And there is something happening that is spiritual and divine that seemingly the people who are engaged in this music all feel, I guess, communally. That's something that I think that a lot of scholars maybe either don't feel comfortable grappling with, or don't even deal with, because they don't -- sacred music is not even necessarily a topic that's engaged in I think all of that kind of embodied quality. Like the example that I'm thinking of is, which we're kind of talking about too, you quote a woman who talks to you in one of your articles about a Holy Ghost chord. And the idea that a chord can be synonymous -- this is, I'm paraphrasing you like, a chord is synonymous with some kind of divine power, like, how do you grapple with... How do you find the tools to grapple with that idea? And how do you feel it fits or doesn't fit within

how we analyze... how scholars generally analyze music? Sorry, that's like a meandering question, but...

Braxton Shelley 35:53
Yeah, well this... In some ways, a bigger question is, is it an odd fit? Am I trying to demystify this music by showing how it works? Have I robbed it of something if I show that it works in this way, because of these musical procedures? To me, that's the bigger question. And so I'm clear -- I'm not saying there's no there there, saying there's no magic. I think all objects have a certain magic, that there's something undeniably unworldly about sound. And that we have to leave room, you know, for the space between our explanatory value and music's effects. That's it. This belief in sound as a conduit of holy power means that the manipulation of musical sound can acquire an unusual kind of force. So that when we're talking about a modulation, we're not just talking modulation, we're talking about literal elevation for a lot of people. So in a way, the seriousness with which people approach sound makes musical analysis more important, more valid, more revelatory.

Will Robin 37:53
Because its effects are so immediate and profound.

Braxton Shelley 37:58
Exactly.

Will Robin 37:59
Who do you see as the key audiences for this contribution? I mean, it's obviously a contribution to music scholarship; do you hope that it also brings something to gospel congregations, gospel musicians... sorry, black congregations, gospel musicians?

Braxton Shelley 38:26
I do. I do. And I hope that it speaks also to folks in different segments of Religious Studies, African American Studies, American Studies, and so forth and so on. Now there is a tension here that I had to really think about a lot, which is that -- if my contribution is adding music detail to it, am I limiting the readership? And so I think what I've decided is I'll just write different kinds of things. Not everything is going to have 96 musical examples, like my book does, you know, not everything is going to have Roman numerals and every, you know, ... the ratio of analytical detail will be variable. Over the course of a career, you can have lots of conversations with lots of people.

Will Robin 39:26
Kind of related, as you've been... or do you still regularly perform church services?

Braxton Shelley 39:32
Yeah, except during the pandemic.

Will Robin 39:36
Well, pandemic aside, as you've uncovered these ideas, and discovered them, I guess, for yourself, do you think about them in the context... how has your musicianship in the context of the church changed

since grad school? How do you incorporate or do you shy away from incorporating all of these new intellectualized ways of approaching this into your musicianship?

Braxton Shelley 40:04
That's a good question. I think I just become a better musician, and a better preacher, the more I understand it.

Will Robin 40:13
Those are actually all my questions. Thank you so much. This was ... I learned a lot. Yeah.

Braxton Shelley 40:19
Wow. Yeah. Well, thanks for reading my stuff. And, you know, for having me on.

40:26
[Music]

Will Robin 40:32
I'm very grateful to Braxton Shelley, who is the Stanley A Marks and William H Marks Assistant Professor of Music at the Radcliffe Institute, and Assistant Professor of Music in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences, for that great conversation. You can check out links to more of his work over at our website, soundexpertise.org and keep an eye out for his book _Healing for the Soul: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination_, which is out this month with Oxford University Press. Many thanks to my great producer D Edward Davis. If you like his theme music, which I personally believe does truly slap, you can check out more of his work on Soundcloud @warmsilence. Tweet at me about today's episode or anything else that's on your mind @seatedovation and check out my new book at http://www.williamrobin.com/industry . Next week we're going to be talking about diversifying music theory with Ellie Hisama. See you then!

41:26
[Music]