

# SPIRITUALS: MUSIC AND MEANING

## Lesson 5: Musical Attributes

1. **Call and Response:** A hallmark of spirituals, this structure involves a leader improvising a line of text and a chorus responding with a repeated phrase or melody.



Call-and-response can be thought of as a musical conversation between multiple participants. The caller or leader acts as a guide for the musicians, starting the song and facilitating its development. The caller sets the tone throughout the performance, pushing and pulling on the energy of the participants. The responders follow the leader with set lyrics. This form allows for maximum participation, emphasizing inclusivity and community.

When used in worship in the African-American spiritual tradition, the caller is usually a preacher or other community leader while the congregation acts as the responders.

2. **Emotive Vocal Styles:** Spirituals are known for their expressive and heartfelt delivery, often incorporating shouts, moans, and other vocalizations to convey a range of emotions.

3. **Rhythmic Complexity:** Spirituals often feature syncopation and other rhythmic variations, reflecting African musical influences.

## 4. **Melodic and Harmonic Characteristics:**

*Pentatonic Scale:*

Many spirituals utilize the pentatonic scale, which is common in African music.

### *Melismatic Singing:*

Singers often embellish melodies with multiple notes on a single syllable, creating a flowing, ornamented vocal line.

### *Minor Keys:*

While some spirituals are joyful and uplifting, many are rooted in minor keys, reflecting the hardships faced by enslaved people. Minor keys in music are characterized by a "sad" or melancholic sound, stemming from a specific pattern of whole and half steps that differs from major keys.

5. **Repetition:** Both melodic and textual repetition are common features, helping to create a sense of unity and facilitating memorization.

6. **Influence of African Music:** Spirituals draw heavily from African musical traditions, including call-and-response, percussive elements, and vocal styles.

7. **Transition to Concert Spirituals:** As spirituals evolved, they were adapted for choral performance, often incorporating European musical elements like four-part harmony while retaining some of the original features of the folk spirituals.

8. **Coded Messages:** Many spirituals contain hidden messages and symbolism, used to communicate with other enslaved people and plan escapes.

9. **Oral Tradition:** Spirituals were largely passed down through oral tradition, meaning that many were not written down until later in the 19th and 20th centuries.

### ***O When the Saints Go Marchin' In***

1 O when the saints go marching in,  
O when the saints go marching in,  
O Lord, I want to be in that number  
when the saints go marching in.

2 O when the sun refused to shine,  
O when the sun refused to shine...

3 O when they crown him Lord of all,  
O when they crown him Lord of all...