

From Doctrine to Devotion

Sunmisola Agbebi as the Voice of African Prophetic Worship

35 Minutes Soaking Worship Concert



Who Is Sunmisola?

Worship has long moved to the pulse of restraint, mediated through temperance and symmetry, often utilizing formal constraints to reinforce theological orthodoxy in composition. From the *Baroque–Classical era (1600–1820)*, composers like Johann Sebastian Bach composed pieces like *St. Matthew’s Passion* under the comprehension of God as a cosmic architect. Their worship was, therefore, bound by liturgical function and constructed within the architecture of strict meter — dogmatic rather than contemplative, structured as opposed to spontaneous. Contrastingly, Sunmisola Agbebi embodies a theology of presence, often rebelling against structure in what feels like a symbolic act of subservience to the ‘Spirit’.

Born and raised in Nigeria, she grew up singing in the church choir and won several singing competitions, including the *2017 Ikorodu Radio Music Challenge*. Sonically, her voice is characterized by a natural vibrato set within the warm, rich range of a mezzo-soprano. Her tone is ethereal, often positioned within a portamento style, sliding gracefully between pitches, transforming transitions into acts of ascension. Thus, she does not merely perform; she invites her audience to journey with her into heavenly realms.

It becomes clear that the architecture of Sunmisola’s sound is not built on dogma, but designed as a medium for divine encounter, acting as a liminal space suspended between earth and Spirit. The distinction between her craft and that of previous epochs highlights her idiosyncrasy within the gospel genre. Her departure from Eurocentric temperance is not merely a stylistic shift, it illustrates and prognosticates the excavation and emancipation of the African worship voice from the theological and cultural subordination imposed by colonial influence.

The Casual “Upper Room”

The Concert begins *in media res*, reflecting the intended intimacy of the soaking worship experience. The stage is set plainly, with a piano at the back, and both performers dressed casually in jeans and t-shirts. Unlike most concerts that involve elaborate stage design or gospel performances accompanied by choirs and multiple instruments, this space omits spectacle. The absence of extravagance resembles an “upper room” theological space, where an ordinary enclosure is transposed into holy territory, consecrated for divine adulation. The result is a sonic environment that compels the audience to focus on the vocals rather than on an extensively designed set.



Figure 1 Sunmisola and Yinka Mid-Flow in a 35-minute Worship Session

Nonetheless, the worship experience is far from solitary!

Sunmisola often sings alongside her husband, whose presence complements the unfolding narrative. Their vocal congruence creates

an atmosphere of spiritual safety and deepens the intention of surrender. In the absence of a full band, their voices function as instruments. Sunmisola’s voice, in particular, carries a tonal distortion that mimics instrumentation. Most notably, when she growls at the phrase “*Gashina ya na na*”, her tone resembles the raw texture of a guitar. It’s a moment where her vocal texture blurs the lines between voice and instrumentation.

Experimental Pneumatology

In the absence of formal set transitions, there is a feeling of timelessness to the concert, a sense of being suspended in an eternal loop of sound. The lack of metronomic timekeeping further enhances this effect, as the piano, often playing with soft pads and layered chords, follows the performers' improvisation. This creates a diaphanous atmosphere where the listener is invited to lose themselves in the words, rather than remain anchored to accompaniment or rigid form.

The performance incorporates interjections of Pentecostal eschatology most notably through the extempore protrusions of prophetic tongues that slip between lyrics and act as signifiers for transitions between songs. These moments serve a distinctly pneumatological function: worship is no longer rooted in the Renaissance tradition of melismatic embellishment, where a single syllable like "amen" might be elongated across multiple notes for aesthetic emphasis. Instead, what emerges here is a novel liturgical language whereby communion is found not in doctrinal clarity but in the personal interpretation of an untranslated divine utterance.

Still, Sunmisola doesn't abandon melisma entirely. She stretches vowels during moments of intense intercession, yet her approach is modally ambiguous. Unlike the precision and harmonic finality characteristic of classical melismatic phrasing, her delivery welcomes accidentals and tonal deviation. Harmonies are not pre-constructed but discovered in real time thus resulting in a displacement of tradition and rather an advocacy of sonic surrender.



Figure 2 Bach, Johann Sebastian. St. Matthew Passion, BWV 244.



Figure 3 Unidentified Christian Worship Under Colonial Rule

Rapturing the Colonial Meter?

Stylistically, the performance oscillates between conjunct motion—movement in small, connected intervals—and phrasing that resists balance or clear resolution. There's not much of a traditional call-and-response on an individual level; however, there's a subtle complementarity that emerges between the two voices. When she sings, "*If I ever needed You*," he does not complete the phrase with a formal answer but instead echoes it, "*If I ever needed You... Aya*."

Within the larger Gospel narrative, a closer inspection suggests a cultural *carte blanche*, as this modulation becomes more than a musical choice, it stands as a quiet reversal of the cultural erasure that once shadowed gospel music. For decades, praise was often confined to a British *habitus*, shaped by hymns rooted in the rigid dichotomy of major and minor tonal systems, frameworks that effectively supplanted the fluid, semantic pitch contours embedded in Yoruba worship. But here, Sunmisola's sound ruptures the colonial meter. She reclaims the right to unbounded worship, her voice moving beyond form and into freedom. When she cries out, "*You rescued me so I can shout and sing?*", it lands not just as a moment of personal testimony, but as a sonic defiance, a call to arms inviting the entire gospel tradition to follow her into this new territory?

All of this unfolds within a digital platform, extending the worship space into the collective imagination. Listeners across the globe share their interpretations of the song that are surprisingly asymmetrical to the original phrasing, thus revealing how the performance serves not to reinforce Christ through dogma but to usher others into a personalized, intimate encounter with Christ. Comments range from "*I'm a 19-year-old teenager...*" to deeply personal confessions like, "*I lost my beloved husband of 27 years to pancreatic cancer. My soul shattered when he passed.*" There is an axiomatic return to Afrocentric communal worship, where praise is shaped not just by melody but by confession and impression. Can more than just the gospel genre draw from this movement?

Perhaps the question is not *if*, but *when*!