

Ndlovu Youth Choir

Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide



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About the Ndlovu Youth Choir (pronounced ind-LO-vo)

“When we’re sad we sing, when we’re happy we sing. We just love singing. We’re like brothers and sisters now. We uplift each other... When you come from a rural area, it’s hard for people to take you seriously, so you have to work twice as hard to get recognition.”

– Members of the Ndlovu Youth Choir in an [interview](#) for America’s Got Talent



The girls of the Choir!

program as part of the Ndlovu Care Group, with the aim of bringing “the benefits of... a world-class music education to young people in a rural community.”

In 2018 the choir – whose members range from 14 to 25 years old – turned professional, in order to ensure that the young people in the choir were able to generate their own income through the sharing of their music and talents. They posted [a cover of Ed Sheeran’s Shape of You](#) on YouTube in isiZulu (the language of the Zulu people, an indigenous South African ethnic group.



The Ndlovu Youth Choir performing on America's Got Talent

The Ndlovu Youth Choir has its origins in a small town in Limpopo, the northernmost province in the country of South Africa. In 1994, the Ndlovu Care Group was founded by a Dutch doctor named Hugo Tempelman, with the mission of providing innovative healthcare, childcare, education, and community development to vulnerable populations.

In 2009, composer and conductor Ralf Schmitt started a children’s music

program as part of the Ndlovu Care Group, with the aim of bringing “the benefits of... a world-class music education to young people in a rural community.”

The language is also referred to as Zulu). The video quickly became a viral sensation, which helped them land an audition for the 14th season of America’s Got Talent (AGT).

They were the first choir in the history of AGT to reach the final round, and they were the first African act to reach the final round. The judge Simon Cowell (who is widely known for being a harsh critic!) called their final performance, “The best final I have ever sat on in my life.” Even though they did not win AGT, Simon Cowell’s

record company signed the choir and they released their first album in 2019 with Sony Music, which debuted at number one on iTunes.

Since then, they've made three albums and have performed to audiences of all ages in sold-out performances across the globe. The choir is composed of more than 40 members, and includes a job creation program for older singers as well as an educational program.



... And the boys of the Choir!

Musical Influences

The choir sings in all eleven languages spoken in South Africa: English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana, Sepedi, Swazi, Southern Sotho, Ndebele, Tsonga, and Venda. (Watch [this short video](#) to hear each of these languages pronounced – and learn how to say hello, too! And for more info on pronouncing the dental click common in Xhosa, check out [this short video!](#))

The songs they create and perform range from inspirational gospel to tribal chants to contemporary Afro-Pop and jazz by renowned South African artists to original compositions calling for African unity.

Their musical style includes South African vocal traditions such as **isicathamiya** (isi-CA-ta-me-ya, with the “CA” made with a dental click), a choral singing and dancing style that focuses on a harmonious blend of voices and choreographed movement and originated from the Zulus, an indigenous South African ethnic group. In the late 1800s, British troops invaded Zulu land in South Africa, displacing people from their ancestral homelands and placing them



A traditional isicathamiya choir performing in a competition

under brutal colonial rule. After years of war as well as a series of natural disasters, the Zulus were impoverished and forced to look outside of their homelands for employment. Music has always been an important part of Zulu culture, and when Zulu migrant workers came to work in the mines of Johannesburg in the early 1900s, the isicathamiya style began to develop. Many of

the original isicathamiya songs were about nostalgia and the feelings these men had about being separated from their homes and loved ones.

The style combines traditional Zulu music as well as the foreign influences of hymns from Christian missionaries and vaudeville troupes from the United States that toured South Africa in the 1860s. The songs are often performed in a call-and-response style and feature stylized and synchronized dance moves.

There is a competitive aspect to isicathamiya – since its beginnings, groups would perform in front of a judge, and though the prizes were small, the competitions helped people build community and foster a sense of pride. As stated in [a short documentary](#) on the isicathamiya tradition, “These competitive performances provide a sense of dignity for the individual artists in their otherwise culturally dispossessed urban environment.”



Ladysmith Black Mambazo is still performing today. This photo is from 2020!

One of the most famous isicathamiya groups is Ladysmith Black Mambazo who, in 1968, gained international recognition for their collaboration with Paul Simon on his album Graceland. In the beginning of one of the songs from the album, “[Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes](#),” you can hear Ladysmith Black Mambazo and watch them perform some signature isicathamiya dance moves!

In the words of choir director Ralf Schmitt, the choir’s musical vision is “To present South African music in a way that is youthful, fresh and new, but still pay tribute to our rich vocal traditions... Our big thing is to inspire people and be a proudly South African group while creating this youthful sound.”

In the words of choir director Ralf Schmitt, the choir’s musical

The Choir’s Mission

In addition to supporting education and employment opportunities for the members of the choir, the choir uses their platform to spread messages of love, hope, and togetherness. In 2019 they performed a concert in which all proceeds went to support Operation Healing Hands, a charity initiative whose aim is to provide life-changing surgeries to patients in need while fulfilling the ethical responsibility of the private healthcare sector in closing the socioeconomic gap of patients in need of surgery.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, they released a song titled “[We’ve Got This](#)” which offers advice in both English and isiZulu about how to stay safe in the midst of the pandemic. Lwandile Felicia Shabalala, a member of the choir, says that the group wanted to make the video to “help those who don’t have the right information know what to do in order to

prevent the virus from spreading.” The song was shared by the World Health Organization and the United Nations.



An image from the Choir's educational song about the pandemic, "We've Got This"

They also collaborated virtually during the pandemic with musical artist P!nk to perform a new version of the song “[A Million Dreams](#)” from the film *The Greatest Showman*, to raise money and support for UNICEF.

Reflection Questions

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about a choir, what comes to mind?
- What do you know about South Africa’s history or cultures?

After the Show:

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of a choir performance?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- What was your favorite song in the show?

Resources

- South Africa History: Zulu Community
<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/zulu-community>
- Brief History of the Isicathamiya style:
<https://uark.pressbooks.pub/musicinworldcultures/chapter/south-african-isicathamiya/>
- Short documentary on Isicathamiya style:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWkIsSKWhWc>
- “Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes” (Paul Simon with Ladysmith Black Mambazo)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I_T3XvzPaM

- Ndlovu Youth Choir performing “We’ve Got This”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN94pZqP1Rc&t=4s>
- Ndlovu Youth Choir – “Our Story”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLHRIUTTSMw&t=4s>
- Ndlovu Youth Choir’s cover of “Shape of You” by Ed Sheeran
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjV36ub5ybl>
- Interview on America’s Got Talent:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTtgD-h8XrI>
- Educational study guide for Dance Africa (Brooklyn Academy of Music):
<https://www.bam.org/education/2018/study-guide/danceafrica2018/repertoire>
- How to Greet in 11 Official South African Languages
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snVTKXcGvuY>
- How to Pronounce the X Click
https://youtu.be/Trq_gIe1v04