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**CULTURAL GENOCIDE \****by*

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In order to be able to define the place that the music of Africa can and should occupy in international musical life, we must first rid ourselves of a number of conceptions which tend to distort the approach that foreigners, like the Africans themselves, can have towards the history, the nature and the values of African music.

Africa is not an isolated continent. It is not a remote island where prehistoric cultures have miraculously survived which musical archaeologists can study and classify as one studies and classifies different kinds of chipped flint tools. The great cultural currents that affected other parts of the world have also made themselves felt throughout the African continent. This applies equally to the most ancient currents such as that which links the Pygmies with the Munda cultures of India and the Malayo-Indochinese peninsula, and which has also left traces in Europe, to the ancient culture of the Mediterranean world to which belong North Africa and, to a large extent, Ethiopia, but which spread much further, to Islamic culture, of which great centres existed as far away as West Africa, and to Indian culture, of which Madagascar and East Africa were important centres, not to mention more recent influences. Similarly we find influences of musical forms peculiar to Africa in all countries at different periods.

The problems of African music today do not differ from those of other continents. The enormous musical machine that developed at the same time as the industrial revolution in Europe and was considered, for a time, to be the very expression of man's material and cultural progress, culminating in the Wagnerian orchestra, has been the source of a destructive action against the forms of musical art that did not employ the piano and the large orchestra as means of expression. Little by little we have had to rediscover Bach, then Monteverdi, then Guillaume de Machaut, but the same conception of the superiority of tempered polyphonic music, written and orchestrated, continues to form the basis of a systematic destruction of all the forms of musical language that survive in Europe, as also on the other continents, accompanied by a sometimes astonishing lack of appreciation of the values of art and musical linguistics. These conceptions, projected into the African world with all the force of a colonialism with convictions as strong as its interests, have, naturally enough, completely disorientated the sense of values and disorganized the centres of musical life. Music as it has developed during the past three or four centuries in Europe is considered as necessarily representing the culmination of human genius, and this conception is imposed with extraordinary arrogance on the rest of the world. Anything that is not symphonic can only be a mumbling, or folklore, produced by a kind of spontaneous generation from the least evolved strata of the human race. This is an outworn romantic idea that no fact can justify.

Although today colonialism has abandoned, in Africa as in the other countries of the 'Third World', its most brutal forms of genocide and slavery, the concepts of cultural and racial superiority by which it justified itself have not been honestly revised. The appearances and above all the methods have changed, but the fundamental attitude not in the slightest. A cultural colonialism that conditions economic aid has today become a more subtle arm of domination. The importation of a foreign culture into small population groups, in exchange for special privileges and a semi-assimilation to the West, permits the formation of a false élite made up of elements that are entirely dependent on

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external connections and are the perfect mediators of cultural domination. On the musical as well as other levels the consequences are catastrophic. The initiatives taken or encouraged by the West are almost inevitably based on a false evaluation of realities furnished by elements of the population whose sole chance of survival and of maintaining their privileges depends on foreign support. It follows that, in spite of the best intentions, the initiatives towards cultural aid end almost unavoidably in results that are contrary to those that were desired.

Because of their facility in linguistic relations and their habit of looking at matters in western terms, the small westernized minorities remain the chief contacts and submitters of requests in the cultural programmes of international organizations. We should not therefore be surprised if the efforts made, for instance by UNESCO, tend rather to create miserable provincial orchestras or schools of western music of the lowest order instead of concerning themselves with the great traditions of African musical art, since the informants and the advisers in the countries concerned present the "indigenous" musical culture as outdated folklore, at best of interest to musical archaeologists who explore traces of an embryonic culture long since antiquated. The western powers, the great international institutions and organizations thus contribute, potently and unconsciously, to the destruction of a large part of the musical art of Africa with perfect good faith since the Africans themselves, or at least those who speak in their name, ask for the benefits of the musical art of the West and its methods of musical education.

The recent efforts made by western specialists and their African pupils to study African music during the past decades were often based on grave errors in conception, in particular on a confusion between racial and cultural questions. The idea that a form of expression in sound is associated with a particular species may be valid for the different genera of birds, but not for man. There is no doubt that race affects certain features of sensibility, that, for instance, a Finn will tend to create musical forms different from those of a Spaniard. But culture, by its very nature, oversteps such boundaries, and if we can expect a certain colouring in an artistic expression due to racial characteristics, the bases themselves of culture are on no continent connected with race. The division of Africa into "ethnic groups" completely falsifies values from the general point of view of culture and art. It is no more valid for Africa than for Europe. The very term ethnomusicology, employed for the study of African music, already implies a standpoint that is scientifically and culturally unacceptable.

Musical ethnology searches in Africa above all for the "primitive". We should realize, however, to what extent the notion "primitive" is misleading. The appearance of man on the earth does not date from yesterday. We know that, even among populations that today live in conditions of extreme simplicity, there exists no spoken language that does not represent a very long evolution and a complex elaboration permitting the expression of the most abstract ideas. It is difficult to see why there should be any difference in the case of musical language. What one studies as if it were primitive is most often only a vestige, a simplified and degenerated survival that has nothing to do with so-called archaic art. This is clearly evident in the very foundations of the structures of folk music idioms. What is recorded as primitive folklore is in most cases merely a threadbare form of an antiquated song that has lost its real musical context. There is a programme of the ORTF (French Radio and Television Organization) that telephones each morning the post office workers, typists, butchers in the provinces and asks them to sing a song. The result is usually a song of Gilbert Bécaud or Sylvie Vartan indifferently mangled that in fact corresponds, in comparison with the original, to what ethnologists and folklorists too often reverently collect in the villages. Moreover, one wishes to include under the heading of folklore everything that differs from the western classical idiom, even when it is on the highest professional level and in the first rank as an artistic creation. The fundamental lack of understanding of values leads to the

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absurd treatments to which the great musical traditions that still survive in Africa have been submitted, and which are arranged to produce false folklore, tourist folklore and other errors of taste that also prevail elsewhere. One pretends to notate forms whose system of reference one does not know, and then pretentiously teaches vague melodic outlines, as erroneous as they are mediocre, all the while imagining that one is "saving the national folklore."

Instead of directing research towards what might be called "research into non-culture", one should attempt, in collaboration with the cultural organizations of African countries, to make a systematic evaluation of the great cultural currents that have contributed to the development of the musical forms that exist on the African continent, and a serious study of the forms of musical language and communication that survive in Africa, as well as of the original artistic realizations which are their expression. For this we must undertake a complete study of the African continent, independent of state frontiers and ethnic and linguistic divisions, in order to investigate, after the cultural crisis caused by the colonial period, the survivals on the highest artistic and technical level of the musical forms peculiar to Africa, and to give them back the place they deserve in the musical creation of our time. Today we are witnessing the gradual disappearance, before the influx of musical conceptions exported by the West—usually already outdated in Europe—of musical forms of universal value but which are considered and treated in their own country as "folkloristic" survivals, good at the most to be "arranged" according to the taste of the day. This in fact leads to a destruction of their entire value as works of art and as original means of communication, hence also of their universal interest.