

any advance. The book may reveal to a first-time reader the wealth of traditional instruments in the early 20th century, but by default it also shows up the on-going impoverishment of the present-day instrumentarium. The wry question comes up every time I browse Kirby's breadth of description: by my estimate fewer than half the instruments described still exist and are played, particularly the smaller, personal ones are gone. If anything has taken their place at all it is Western instruments and the media. Today's musicians may console themselves, nevertheless, if they ever need to do so in the middle of their headlong creativity, that much South African music retains certain qualities which echo the sounds and preferences of their fathers, as they were discovered and expressed on these expired instruments. Root elements such as love of the harmonic series and alternation between two fundamentals for instance were first described and presented by Kirby in this and his other works.

The new Foreword by Michael Nixon, curator of the Kirby instrument collection at the University of Cape Town, is political in tone, focussing less on the content than on the assessment of the man and the tainted 'historical and intellectual discourses' current when he wrote. Do we need to be reminded that writing from *any* period must be seen in the light of contemporary knowledge and habits of thought? Just as the music of nearby African language groups is often in my experience the most disliked, so in 2014 we are still close enough to the 1930s to be afraid of what those political thought patterns led to within a few years. Nevertheless revisionism is tiresome; of course Kirby was a man of his time; what else could he possibly have been. Let us simply take the advice of the US Dragnet detective whose motto was "Just give me the facts, man...the facts!", and accept the information packed into the book as valuable and still usable today. The revisionist approach to writers of the colonial period can easily vitiate their value in the mind of the reader. My father too, Hugh Tracey, whom one can reasonably call the "other" great South African musicologist, a little younger than Kirby, is regularly diminished for this reason by the politically correct.

Nixon suggests, and I agree, that the best way to read the book is in conjunction with the instruments themselves at the S.A. College of Music, though not everyone will be so lucky. I would just add: make and play your own, and discover both their essential simplicity and the emotional and technical artistry they are made for.

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A Language of Song: Journeys in the Musical World of the African Diaspora. Samuel Charters. 2009. London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 59 photos, index, 368pp.

Although the book is limiting in its selective approach to the trans-Atlantic diaspora of black Africans, it nonetheless holds a certain kind of appeal that future and present scholars of music will find hard to match or attain. The style of writing is superb, it

avoids academic jargon yet at the same time Charters' style is erudite and presented in a manner where much is learnt. *A Language of Song* reads like a gripping novel that is hard to put down. In the general course of the book, however, one would have expected to see lengthy discussions rather than brief comments on perceptions of the diaspora, given that diaspora studies had become so important in music studies. On the other hand, Charters broaches the fallacious subject of music as language, but in the greater scheme of things this is a minor infraction if any. The book could easily have been overbearing in terms of a form of didacticism but one is introduced and made familiar with various music styles in a fairly convivial manner. The many styles covered are perhaps one reason for its easy to read presentation. Charters is successful in providing riveting tales about music and musicians, and his presence in these tales, as researcher, producer, and observer, adds to the charm of the book. Charters situates his discussions on music in the political economies, histories, and ethnic complexities of each location but he also teases out the contradictory views of participants, as in the chapter on the Bahamas, where differences of opinion carry the interest in the music.

The book has fourteen chapters. The chapters cover a range of music styles from music of the Canary Islands off the coast of West Africa through Calypso in Trinidad to Zydeco in Louisiana. Much of this information is not new, and the book reinforces the notion of a black Atlantic, which marginalises the African diaspora around other oceans even more. Some of the music styles he describes, such as reggae and calypso, are well known, mass mediated and occupy the crossover status between world and commercial musics. In Charters' selection of music styles, one is brought into the musical, social and political realities of many music styles, and in this light the music of the Canary Islands was particularly revealing. Charters proposes, for instance, that the performance of *canario* from the Canary Islands in Spain, in the sixteenth century, already marked the beginnings of blackface, as European dancers donned the costumes of Africans in the Canary Islands, painted their faces black and spoke in a language that mimicked African languages. In the book, Charters recalls his encounters with musicians in the various locations, since the 1950s up to the 2000s, and relates this to the music and musicians he found in each location. In his presentation of these various music styles, Charters combines a range of methods, from first person narratives, to extremely well researched historiographies of music, to presentation, description, and analysis of musical styles. There are no transcriptions to drive home his points but the descriptions are fully adequate for the purpose of analysis. While his descriptions draw one into understanding the rich tapestries of individual styles, Charters uses this technique to emplace himself in the day to day unfolding of musical performances.

In closing, this book comes highly recommended. Some might not be impressed with the idea that so many different styles are covered in one book, nor with the fact that the book is somewhat biographical, but there is a great deal of information that is new and fascinating to the average music student and scholar. The book also presents a model of writing that is worth studying for one's own purposes.

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