

RECORDING AFRICAN MUSIC IN THE FIELD

by

HUGH TRACEY

With the steady increase in the number of persons in Africa who own and operate small recording machines the technique of recording *African* music, as opposed to any other kind, is coming under discussion.

It is rare that any African recordings are made under ideal conditions, and even the best equipped studio is not necessarily the right place for recording items which may sound best only in the background.

There are so many facets to the art of recording in Africa that I would like to draw attention to a few of them which my own organisation has encountered in its field work, in order to encourage further discussion and ideas.

To many professional broadcasters and others who have had daily experience of this work, what I have to write will be all too familiar and simple, and I hope that those who have developed techniques of their own will contribute their ideas to this Journal, giving the benefit of their experience to others who are either just beginning or wanting to improve their results.

There are so many brands of recording equipment on the market these days that it would be invidious to single out any one make for African use. It is now generally agreed that magnetic tape recordings are the most effective for African conditions. The speed at which such recorders operate will in part determine the quality of the recording, and although slow speeds may be adequate for general research work and for speech, only the higher speeds are entirely satisfactory when it is intended to make permanent pressings of a piece of music. 15 inches per second is now the standard speed for music recordings, and most professional equipments are issued with this speed and drive. Fairly satisfactory recordings have been made at $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches per second, but minor faults, in particular any slight variation of speed which gives rise to a 'wow' or rise and fall in pitch is exaggerated progressively with lack of speed. Tone quality is also adversely affected with slow speed. Consequently it may be safely assumed that as a general rule the higher the speed the higher the possibility of satisfactory recordings.

Technical excellence is always a matter of opinion and of careful measurement, and it is not intended here to discuss that aspect. One must obtain the best apparatus one can in the given circumstances. "Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy."

Weight and portability are always major considerations for country work, and this includes the source of power, either batteries or generator. The British Broadcasting Corporation, for example, has perfected a very small portable recorder using 15 inches per second magnetic tape motivated by torch batteries. It is intended primarily for recording interviews and for background music. It is excellent for its purpose, particularly on account of the fact that it is operated by standard torch batteries which are easily obtained and the exhausted ones can be thrown away. Its limitations under African conditions are obvious, and there are no play-back facilities.

Generally speaking any facilities beyond the absolute minimum mean extra weight and each individual recorder must choose his own limit.

For most recording purposes in Africa, a loud-speaker playback system is essential or the performers will feel disappointed. Hearing themselves on a loudspeaker is such patent pleasure that the performers are not only delighted, but will frequently volunteer excellent material which would otherwise never have been brought to light.

Most recordings in Africa are still done with portable generators giving 220 volt, 50 cycle, A.C. current, or alternatively with a bank of batteries with a convertor. Both

have their drawbacks; the battery method has the advantage of being quickly available, but of not very long duration. A generator-operated recorder is slower to start, but can be kept on continuously for long sessions without causing concern about saving current, especially at night when light must also be provided for recordings. Modern, fully equipped recording units use both methods, often recharging batteries by means of a second generator mounted on the owner's vehicle to operate off the motor car engine.

The question of suitable microphones and microphone characteristics must be left to individual taste and pocket.

In brief, the recording apparatus for work in the African countryside should be as perfect in all respects as possible, technically and economically. It is more than merely disappointing to come home after a strenuous tour in which rare material was experienced to find that the results are not up to standard. Anyone who has recorded African music will realise that the more primitive the music the more it requires high fidelity equipment to register the nuances of tone which often create the whole atmosphere of the occasion, the timbre of the blow on a drum head, for example, or the high-pitched warbling cries of the women in contrast to the deep notes of the horns or drums.

To proceed with the question of the actual recordings, taking for granted that a satisfactory high fidelity equipment is on the spot with a loudspeaker system available for playback to the musicians, we now come to the most difficult part of recording, and one which requires the closest attention and the exercise of personal taste.

When you are presented with a musical situation which has to be recorded you must first face the fact that any sound recording is only a partial statement of the whole event. The apparatus is mono-aural, and therefore can give only one sense of direction, nearness and farness, spatial but not lateral. The microphone, therefore, must be 'focussed' like a camera to select the salient features of the music and to present them in such a way as to suggest a complete representation of the occasion. In other words, recording is an art form operating within the limitations of a frame which demands its own set of rules. The very success of a good recording is perhaps inclined to hide the fact that it is an art which conceals art. A recording, however good, is never the real thing, but a *representation* of the original. The problem, therefore, is how to make good recordings which will do justice to the original music, and, in some cases, do more than justice, by bringing out nuances which in the ordinary way might not be noticed by the audience.

The first essential is simple and personal . . . a high degree of sensitivity towards the music, a rapport with the performers and an artistic discrimination which will bring out the essential characteristics of the music within the limitations of time and space dictated by the medium.

African folk musicians and singers cannot be expected to learn the tricks of the trade which any successful recording artist must employ instinctively or under the direction of a professional producer. Consequently, the person who attempts to make recordings of African musicians must so employ his apparatus that he contributes the necessary finesse at the microphone of which his simple performers will be hardly aware, and quite unable to provide.

It has been argued that in order to obtain a scientifically exact account of the music for anthropological purposes no control of the performers, either in time or space, should be allowed. However much one may sympathise with this point of view it would be the equivalent of demanding that every photograph taken for ethnological research should be a complete panorama. In the case of long recitations of legends where the word value is of primary importance the recording of the complete legend is a simple matter and is usually but a preliminary to committing the words to paper. Expense alone would effectively limit the extent of one's recordings, quite apart from secondary considerations of the use to be made of a recording, and its manner of proces-

sing for reproduction. For all normal recordings a time limit is necessary and indeed desirable.

With an eye on the possible issue of a recording on pressed discs, it would be well to remember that a normal 78 rpm record takes from 2m.30 seconds to 3 minutes per side. The African market at present is concerned almost exclusively with this size of record which can be played on portable gramophones. Long playing records offer a more generous time limit, but if the intention is to make the item available to Africans on their standard equipment, then the 78 rpm time limit must be accepted. Many fine little tunes do not justify a full three minute side to themselves, and in this case two related items of rather less than half this time are equally acceptable.

Anyone who has intimate experience of African musicians soon discovers that to most of them time is no object. A musician under uncritical conditions may take a minute or so to introduce his main subject or to start a song. At this rate of progress it may be time to end the recording after a single verse. This is where the recorder must quickly make up his mind on the relative significance and importance of the repetitions of a phrase. I have heard many otherwise excellent recordings ruined by a dilatory performer who got himself into a rut and employed endless repetitions of a dull phrase while he slowly recovered his wits to change to another variation or to introduce a new verse. How to keep a musician's mind on his job of recording actively without sinking back into an easy doze of repetitions has always been a problem without issuing spoken instructions which would spoil the recording. Over many years I have evolved a few signs and signals which often help, and with the more active and aware musicians achieve instant response. Slow thinking musicians, however, are often good players, but within the frame of a record's time limit cannot do themselves justice unless prodded into activity. To prevent over-long intervals in between verses of a song making a sign by plucking at your own lips has the right effect. To one who is singing too much so that his accompaniment cannot be appreciated holding one's hands across one's mouth is generally enough, or a sign to concentrate on the instrument may help. Turning the outstretched hand over may help to bring on another variation in a tune which is stuck in a rut. The recorder will soon find a number of miming gestures which will suit his performers who need this kind of friendly direction.

Starting and stopping requires special care. The beginning of a recording can make or mar the whole performance. The habit of allowing the performers to get into their stride first then fading in the recording has nothing to recommend it, and the same applies to endings which are faded out. It leaves an incomplete picture, a raw end which produces a sense of frustration in a keen listener. Starting cleanly and firmly, straight into the item at the correct tempo and with the right attack is not easy. I personally make a code announcement before each recording in order to identify the item with certainty afterwards. Eager performers often beat the pistol unless such announcements are carefully worded in a non-committal voice, and to prevent this I usually hold one hand high. An exaggerated sweep downwards of the hand after a two or three second pause will then get the performers under way with a feeling of confidence that they are really being recorded. Helpful friends standing around often tell them loudly to get going and have to be asked to desist.

During the course of an item I find it essential to glance constantly at the stop watch, not only to note the passage of time, but to measure the exact duration of a verse or stanza. In this way one can gauge the number of verses which will fit into the allotted time limit and so prepare the performers for a proper ending. This I do by raising one arm to shoulder level with the hand in front of the face. Then, as the last verse is ending I make a wide slow sweep of the arm outwards and downwards, at the same time bending the knees. This bending of the knees is a universal African gesture and never fails to indicate the ending. It almost always evokes the correct musical ending to close the recording.

Timing and simple gesturing of this kind may seem unnecessary to a trained "choir" in our sense of the word, but they make all the difference to a village group which has never recorded before, but who soon act with complete confidence in the man at the microphone who makes himself clear especially if he shows delight and appreciation at the end of an item, in spite of no words of their language in common except the fundamental oh's and ah's of applause.

"The man at the microphone" . . . in this phrase lies the major secret of good African recordings. It argues, of course, two persons in a recording team, the one at the microphone in personal touch with the performers, and the other operating the controls, watching for peak points and avoiding over-modulation.

There are few opportunities of producing a 'studio' balance out in the villages under African conditions, although I have seen it attempted. Technicians are often horrified at unorthodox methods. They like their conditions to approximate to text book ideals. If the faint-hearted are allowed to dictate the circumstances under which an African recording shall be made it is better far for him to remain in the towns and record only in the familiar fuf of a studio. The bold will conjure up their own 'studio' on the spot. There are, of course, many drawbacks to be overcome in the open air of an African village. Wind across the face of the microphone may well make a good recording impossible, and so will inclement weather. Extremes apart, it is surprising what effective use can be made of huts and verandahs, sheds and the open air to achieve reasonable results.

It will be remembered that the question of 'balance', that is the perspective between the various sounds produced by the performers, tempered by their surroundings, will largely determine the success or failure of a recording. Thus a recording of an outdoor working song in a hall with high reverberation, out of its normal context, is usually unsatisfactory. On the other hand, hymns sung in the open air by few voices with no appreciable assistance from reverberation may sound out of place on the finished recording. The degree of reverberation which creates the background out of which the item emerges is most important. A subtle balance between direct and indirect sound has to be considered, that is, the proportion of sound which arrives at the microphone directly from the voice or instrument and that which arrives by a longer route by reflection off walls, the ground or other bodies. The distance at which the microphone is held or placed from the source of the sound must be carefully assessed. Some items require no help at all from reflected sound. For them the open air is the best studio possible. Others may need it, in which case a plain wall, or a sheltered verandah makes an almost perfect studio in which one can alter the degree of reverberation at will by placing the performers nearer or further away from the surface of the wall, or even facing the wall, or alternatively facing outwards, away from its surface.

The artistic sensitivity of the recorder or his 'sixth sense' will determine the atmosphere which he wishes to create in the recording.

Now for the performers themselves. We have found few African musicians and singers who would not attempt willingly to co-operate to the best of their ability in making a recording, in spite of the unfamiliar restrictions which are sometimes necessary to keep them within range of the microphone which tend to cramp their style. This is where the man at the microphone is of primary importance. He can keep in touch with the development of the item and by holding the microphone in his hand maintain a balance between the various parts, voices and instruments, create variation in the recording by focussing attention upon different aspects of the performance while at the same time controlling the duration and balance. It sounds complicated, and at times indeed it is. You are on your own and there is no text book to help. Here is the place where African records are made or marred.

There are, of course, occasions where matters are far more simple and more orthodox

methods are effective. If there is any doubt about one's ability to plunge for unusual methods, then by all means be cautious and content one self with controlling the musicians in such a way that their performance does not overrun the limit.

Most performers will expect to be recorded in their normal positions for the event which is to be taken. Dancers will line up at a distance from the singers or drummers. The smallest instrument will be content to waste its sweetness on the general blare and never reach the magnetic tape in any shape or form. These nuances demand common sense control. The player whose small mite receives a few seconds of recognition in the playback will die happy after the recording. "That's me" he will squeak in wide-eyed surprise as he recognises his contribution. Smart Alocs will spot the cause of this brief promotion and on the next recording dash up at the most unexpected moment from behind your back and shout a few illchosen words. Stopping the recording and solemnly starting again usually cures that gambit.

Choirs are often so well drilled in party manners, ladies first, that it may take quite a while to persuade them to unbend enough to allow the gentlemen to get close enough to the microphone to register at all. In village groups there is no false modesty. The leader is the leader and the rest help to shove the song along as it suits each man best; so, clearly, the leader should be nearer the microphone. He is the man who has to do the thinking about the next verse and what comes next.

I suppose some of our most enjoyable moments in a fairly long recording experience have been those seconds of unexpected delight when a born artist has added a brilliant touch to his performance, a variation, a cross rhythm or sudden break which spells mastery over his medium, and in addition your microphone was at the right spot at the right moment to do it justice.

On the other hand sudden shouts, yodels and ululations can shake you with dismay, as over-modulation on the tape is inevitable. African dancers have a mean habit of producing a tin whistle out of thin air like a conjuror and blasting all one's hopes of a good recording. Whistlers have a strange belief that full blown signals on their infernal pipes are more than half the battle. They look like whipped spaniels when they are asked to blow discreetly, and I always hate asking them. One day a recording machine will be invented to cope with whistles at any distance, but that day has not yet arrived.

It is often worthwhile, I find, to record the activity which normally goes with a particular song or tune. If it is a dance, then I like to hold aside some of the dancers to do the singing while the others dance, in order to make sure the item does not flag for lack of active movement.

Women who sing pounding songs, and there are many such who do so every day of their lives, sing better if a pestle and mortar are on the spot and the clank of the pestle added to a voice a little short of breath makes a far better recording than the same song divorced from its occupation.

The pleasure of a visit to an out-of-the-way village by a recording team may bring out only the most noisy and rumbustious songs, sung fortissimo the whole way through. It may not occur to the village that the quiet songs of the genuine musicians who play small soft-toned instruments could be worth hearing. I make a point of taking a stroll among the folk at the back of the crowd during a playback so as to be on the look-out for those shy creatures who hold some treasured instrument under their arm or behind their back, too timid to push themselves forward. Such a discovery has often been rewarded with the highlight of the whole day's recording.

Perhaps the most exacting task in the course of a recording session is that of writing down the detail of each and every item on a card or in a book kept specially for this purpose. It may well be said that one cannot write enough, and said with equal truth that one never does. Time, place, date; name of item, of singer; his language, dialect

and origin; the type of song, of instrument; its local name, its tuning, structure and its social function. And then when it comes to a translation of the words, as likely as not the singer will look perplexed, and as good as say "Bless me . . . what *did* I sing?" Meanwhile everyone else is champing to get going with the next item, and you simply must take a quick photograph of this most interesting instrument!

This is where the anthropologist comes into the picture. If a good anthropologist can go ahead of the recording team and note down the persons who are normally considered to have talent, hours and days of unnecessary waiting can be avoided. But, one asks, in how many places in Africa is there a musically sensitive anthropologist? I have been lucky enough to find only three or four in twice as many years. In the end, the serious recording of African music must be left to local units who have both the time to spare and the enthusiastic confidence of the local people. The educated African interpreter who is mature enough in character to share in the search for real talent is still one of Africa's rarities.

To add to one's troubles censorship rears its smirking face. It becomes clear all too soon to the most inexperienced recorder that you can shout and sing from the rooftops certain expressions of fact and opinion in one society which would be indiscreet and slanderous in another. A good check, we have found, on the exuberance of tactless young persons or hardened sinners is the presence of a few elders of the local community, men and women together, whom you have taken into your confidence. If they shake their heads and click their teeth in a certain manner, then you know your recording will be fit for scientific circles only.

This is only the fringe of the subject, and with the importunate intrusions of the West into all Africa affairs, recordings of worth-while musical items become more and more important, not only for the enjoyment of the music itself, but to feed that Moloch called Radio, which in places is showing signs of indigestion for lack of a balanced ration of genuinely African recordings with which to offset those few items which on account of their 'popularity' in style and subject matter are preferred by commercial houses to fill their catalogues.

Anything which will add to the quantity and quality of African recordings will help to serve the immediate needs of many social services and give recognition to the talents of proficient African musicians throughout the continent.
