

THE DILEMMA OF BANTU CHURCH MUSIC

by

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In his very competent account of "The State of Folk Music in Bantu Africa", Mr. Hugh Tracey wrote: "*Sinner and saint go hand in hand to destroy a continent's taste in music, and the victim heartily enjoys them both, adding unexpected little quirks of his own: a brand of stark realism to his new love songs and a shuffling of the feet in the hymns not written in the original text. He surprises and alarms his mentors who indeed have started something which neither has the power to curb.*"¹

There, in a nutshell, lies the dilemma within which we all are intricately locked and struggling, *sinner and saint* with the *victim*.

The writer quoted was speaking of Bantu music generally, of "*music in decay*" as he pointedly labelled it, but his words apply in a very particular sense to church music, and the majority of the readers of this Journal will agree with me, I believe, when I add that the *saint*, notwithstanding the best of intentions, originally shares the greater part of responsibility for most of the evils that presently befall the *victim*.

As a corollary, I submit that returning to the field of religious music with the right procedure, this time, might be one of the shortest ways toward reconstruction as it has been the shortest way in creating the mess into which Bantu music now despairingly writhes. The Africans have to be taken at their face value: they are *religious*. Unless we believe in the supremacy of matter over spirit, of evil over good, we know that Christianity is here to stay. Even if we limit "*the outward pattern of Christianity*" to "*hymn-singing, prayers, sermons, and the recitation of a creed*,"² the pattern is so congenial to the cravings of the African soul that it would be a fallacy to expect there will ever be a return "en bloc" to the pagan gods. Let the Africans congregate into a *national Church*, if you wish, it shall ever be a *Church* with an outward pattern very similar to those already established, a pattern with which the basically religious soul of the African shall always be associated even to the simplest event of his life. Again, the majority of my readers, I think, need no schooling on this point.

In saying this, I do not mean to belittle the aims and endeavours of the International Folk Music Council, or of the African Music Society, or of the International Library of Music; still less to imply that their efforts are preposterous. On the contrary: these timely organisations are filling a wide gap in saving of the past what is worthwhile; a thing the African is unable to do himself and the importance of which he cannot see at present. Nevertheless, though much can be learnt from the past that may be assimilated and transformed into modern expressions of genuine Bantu art, saving from the past is not yet building for the present; nor is it probable that church music could find, in the infinitesimal contribution of religious folk music, a valuable source of inspiration.

It is true that adaptations of old, and not so old, folk tunes to hymns are often put forward as a possible solution to restore African church music. But I agree with Canon E. E. Lury and Father K. Carroll³ who show that the general attitude of Africans towards their own music in Church is negative. Several writers in this *Journal* and elsewhere also expressed convergent views: old and young are adamant on this point. The old, beside their ingrained conservatism, deeper still in the African at large, shall howl *their* chant as long as they live, on the strength of "*the virtue that is given it by usage*

¹Hugh Tracey, *Journal of the African Music Society*, 1954, p. 10.

²Dr. L. S. B. Leakey, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³*Op. cit.*, 1956, pp. 34 and 45.

and association."⁴ Appreciated from a Christian point of view, this attitude is to be respected, for the pitfall is not far away: native folklore does not lend itself for a long time to musical adaptations to church service, and if one is not informed, one might invite the faithful to pray to-day on the themes which only yesterday called them to dance. The younger generation, though it is eager to get out of the cangue of the past, is also opposed to its own music in church, but for a motive of its own. "*Inferior music*," says of his own the young sophisticated African. "*Savage music!*" does he label his neighbour's.

One may point at several successful attempts to adaptations by missionaries of various creeds,⁵ but these attempts are hardly more than the exceptions which confirm the rule: a problem of linguistics, well known to the readers of this *Journal*, bars almost automatically any foreigner from entering the field of adaptations with any hope of success. The skills of the linguist, of the poet and of the musician seldom nest under the same hat. If there is an occasional collusion of the linguist and the poet, it is usually at the expense of the musician. Even if we ask the African to add words to our musical effort, somehow there is always a part of the cart before the bull, and the pitfalls are still the same.

It is also suggested that we introduce African instruments in church, since, for example, "*the use of drums to accompany church music has already been tried with great success. . .*"⁶ If the instrument is of a distracting or of a boisterous nature, its use could never become a trend in church, except in passing, as a variety under special circumstances. Moreover, prayer and the Catholic liturgy have requirements that cannot easily accommodate themselves to any kind and form of music without restrictions. For example, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, for all its stupendous beauty as music is out of place in a Catholic church function. One might remark that he heard it in a big church and I would not be scandalized, knowing that one may possibly find in a big church more concessions and adjuncts to snobism than to devotion. I also concord with Pope Pius XII who is reported to have said, "*We are so fond of traditions that we do not hesitate to make new ones*," but can it be said that a number of noisy instruments will add to the solemnity of the Holy Sacrifice and, day in and day out, to the devotion of the faithful? The supersensitive African does not need that much excitement to pray and serve God "*in spirit and in truth*," nor does he want it either, and his attitude, generally, is the same here as stated above toward his own music.

As for Gregorian Chant, Father K. Carroll's excellent article in the 1956 issue of this *Journal* is conclusive. I believe a parallel similar to his between Yoruba chant and the Latin chant⁷ may be established with African chant anywhere. The fact is that Africans can sing plainchant very well. To mention but one instance: the major seminarists of St. Augustine Seminary, in Basutoland, could stand the comparison with many a trained choral group of Europe and America; but they also are trained, and it makes all the difference, as it does anywhere. Gregorian Chant being part and parcel of the Catholic heritage, much could be achieved through it. But, as is often the case and for obvious reasons, if there is no trained musician to conduct the singers; if the whole congregation is not sufficiently trained; if only a small group can sing it; if, once established in a mission the movement cannot be continued; if any of these conditions occurs,

⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵Cf. *Journal of the African Music Society*, 1954-55-56; also Frere Basile, "*Aux rythmes des tambours*," pp. 151, 165 *et seq.*

⁶Hugh Tracey, *Journal of the African Society*, 1956, p. 36. Several other instances could be noted from elsewhere. Fr. Giorgetti's *Kundi sa Natale* ("*Christmas Guita*," Editrice Nigrizia, Bologna, Italia) originally sung after Midnight Mass was also adapted for the procession of Corpus Christi. Note that it is used outdoors.

⁷*Journal of the African Music Society*, 1956, pp. pp. 46-47. Cf. also, Frere Basile, *op. cit.* pp. 51-56, 152, 157-58.

then let us speak of a substitute for plainchant, or of make-shifts. Left to themselves, our African congregations soon return to the established rut of indiscriminate *part singing* locked in the fundamental chords.

In our discussions on Bantu music, it seems to me that we too often dismiss the straightforward contribution of the African himself, the key to our dilemma. It cannot be emphasized enough that redemption or salvation of African music has to come from the African himself; we can guide him or lead him to it, but we cannot achieve it for him, because we cannot but be twice foreign to it. Speaking of African contributions to the work of the International Folk Music Council, Mr. Hugh Tracey has words that should be printed in flaming letters for our own benefit first and foremost: . . . "*until Africans have made their choice between the gay creative personality of their own music and the drab proletarian grey in imitation of others, there will be little chance of Africans themselves making any serious contributions. . .*"⁸ How true are those words when applied to the dire needs of Bantu religious music! But are we not deluding ourselves a great deal if we sit down and assume that the innate musical attitudes of the African are a warrant *per se* of valuable contributions by the score, or that they can brace him against, and save him from, the flood of trash that is engulfing him from all quarters? Is he going to produce, to write with sense by instinct only and before having learned the elements of writing? For brevity's sake, I may ask leave to quote myself and repeat a plea I made elsewhere, some years ago, a plea several reviewers have echoed, a plea I make again here in the hope that some readers of this Journal might be instrumental in its becoming a reality: "If we sincerely want the African to find his soul again; if we want him to pray to the same God as ourselves in his tongue and in his heart, that he may serve Him "in spirit and in truth"; if we want him to increase in himself the life of the spirit before the life of the senses; if, in other words, we want African music to return to the true expression of his soul, of his mind, of his personality, to a purified, regenerated but living expression, creative and capable of surviving to itself; if we want all that and want it sincerely, then let us establish a School of Music for him." A School of Music for the African that will not aim at Europeanising him, that will not aim at making him *white*. A School where the white notes may vibrate freely together with the black notes of the African keyboard, but a School that will safeguard the freedom of African expression. A School of Music that will aim at giving a complete musical training, but functionally African in scope.

"It should be kept in mind that the essential is not so much teaching him European music and making him appreciate what is appreciable in it as teaching him how to transpose his knowledge to the service of his own people; teaching him how to express lofty or elevating *ideas*, but in the language of his own *people*."⁹

Now, I am well aware of the difficulties such a project implies. To mention but a few; the financial aspect, the choice of adequate staff, syllabus and students; and how many other obstacles are certain to arise! But the *disease* is severe, deeply seated: nothing short of a bold move on our part can attack it at its root. A chronic state of half-measures, palliatives, patchworks and aleatory moves will never correct the evil, but a School of Music may do it.

I wish to mention here that some excellent ground work has been done to bring the African to a freer expression of self. "*Ngoma*", *An Introduction to Music for Southern Africans*, by Hugh Tracey, has great merits which would be immensely greater if only the proper mentor could be found close-by to help the pupil use the tool effectively; but I am afraid very few Africans are aware even of its existence: the books that are found in an African home were *bought* during school days; besides that. . . . Then, the "*Experi-*

⁸*Journal of the African Music Society*, 1954, p. 11.

⁹Frere Basile, *op. cit.*, pp. 153 *et seq.*

ments in Indigenous Church Music Among the Batetela" as related by Jaqueline Shaffer¹⁰ are another approach towards a solution of the problem, a fair indication that similar experiments carried elsewhere could clear a good stretch in the jungle around "music in decay", specially if similar efforts could be somewhat co-ordinated—as, for instance, an annual contest on high school level, and sponsored by one of our African Music Organisations. I also have in mind private tutoring of a more gifted subject, bursaries for advanced musical studies overseas; and the like.

Yet, so commendable as these and similar endeavours may be, they cannot but lose much of their impetus for their being of necessity to scattered in time and place. A *brain trust*, a creative action-centre, a School of Music to call it by its name, is needed from which would emanate a constant flow of new, regenerating blood. Of course, we shall have to bear the weight and face the drudgery of a long process of reconstruction starting almost from scratch. But if ever we have any right to keep on playing the role of mentors we have assumed, it is in that direction: it is to help prepare congenial mentors and give them adequate tools to save the victim.

¹⁰ *Journal of the African Music Society*, 1956, pp. 39 *et seq.* (Dr. The Reverend) Brother Basil St. Theresa's Seminary, Roma, Basutoland.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The African Music Society and the ILAM are sometimes represented as salvaging musical items from the past. This is not strictly accurate, as no one can collect the past music of Africa unless it had been recorded phonographically at the time. This means that no African music performed before the turn of the century has ever been collected in the sense that it could now be reproduced again satisfactorily. A few transcriptions in notation prior to that date, however praiseworthy, give us little indication of the actual sound of the music as performed at the time, nor tell us how to recreate it effectively to-day.

The I.L.A.M. is not recording music of the *past*; it can only record music as it is being performed by living persons in the *present*, or, more specifically, at the exact moment of recording. We know that, with folk musics, the manner of performance changes continuously, and our experience is amply borne out by recordings of the same item made by the same performers at different times after a lapse of years.

The fact of the matter is more subtle. All recordings now made of musical performances by living African peoples, reflect either the continuity of their indigenous styles of music; or the lack of continuity and the break with traditional styles for musical or non-musical reasons (e.g. Foreign secular or religious influence.) By careful study of the innate musical tendencies, both aesthetic and physical, demonstrated by various African tribal musicians whose compositions have not been affected by non-African pressures, it should be possible to detect and assess those qualities in African performances of non-continuity or foreign composed musics which can be attributed to indigenous musical sensibilities and those which are of foreign origin.

The sharpening or flattening of certain intervals, the ease or difficulty in mastering certain characteristics of foreign music on the part of African students would thus become comprehensible. Wise teachers would then know what to encourage and what to avoid in any musical innovation for maximum success with their African pupils. We do not consider that the Western tempered scale, for example, has universal *virtue*, but only a relatively wide *convenience*.