

THE NEED FOR RESEARCH IN AFRICAN MUSIC *

by

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Two years ago, through the generosity of the Rockefeller Foundation, I was given the opportunity of touring East, Central, South and West Africa, and the Congo, to discover who is doing what in the practice and study of traditional African music. I was joined in West Africa by Henry Owuor, who has himself done a considerable amount of work on the folk music of the Luo people.

The original idea behind the tour was the conviction that whereas there are many people who are involved one way or another in the practice and study of African music, there has so far been very little contact between the parties concerned. It was felt, therefore, that a review of musical activity throughout Africa was long overdue, so that some kind of overall picture might be obtained, however incomplete. Such a review might serve many a useful purpose. Up to the present time, the very isolation in which some musicians have been working has led them to think that they have been practically on their own in this field, an assumption which is now so demonstrably untrue.

It has to be admitted also, that in certain cases, scholars not only believed that they were ploughing a lonely furrow, but they liked it that way! Any such luxury of isolation must surely now be abandoned, and information as to who is doing what can help to dispel this. There is so much to be done by few, that the closest possible co-ordination and co-operation is called for. Furthermore a knowledge of what is already going on is a valuable guide in sorting out priorities in furthering the cause of African music.

I want to concentrate on that aspect of my tour which was concerned with the serious study of African music, a study made for musical reasons and with musical objectives. I am absolutely convinced that it is only in this way that a discovery will be made of the very heart of African music and an appreciation of its artistic integrity. Only in this way, by the mastery of its idiom, will it be possible to find ways of creating new music deeply rooted in the old and developing quite naturally from it. Professor Nketia, the Professor of Music at the University of Ghana, has pointed out that this approach to the study of African music is not as common as one might hope. He had this to say to the First International Congress of Africans held in Ghana in December, 1962:

"The study of this heritage has been inspired by different aims and interests. There are musicologists who look at it from a limited historical point of view, and who study it somewhat cursorily for data on man's early music or for clues that it may supposedly give to historical problems outside Africa. There are those who study it as something of exotic interest. But those who have made the greatest contribution to our knowledge and appreciation of this heritage, are those who consider African Music worth studying in its own right and in its own terms as an aspect of African culture."

It may be claimed by some that the traditional music of Africa did not depend for its very life in the past on academic study, and it is not likely to depend upon it in the future, but on the contrary will continue to flourish in its traditional setting. In answer to such a point of view, I should like to quote again from Professor Nketia's lecture. He said:

"For us in Africa, the contemporary situation makes the study of this music a matter of practical necessity, as much for musicologists as for creative musicians, educators and persons interested in the development of theatre arts in contemporary Africa. In the past, the knowledge of this music was acquired largely through

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processes of enculturation . . . In the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, we cannot afford to rely on social experience, on exposure of the individual to musical situations since these situations are, in some areas, rapidly diminishing or changing . . . Musicology has therefore an important function — one would say an important mission in the African field, for it must build up a body of knowledge on which musicians can draw, while contributing in its own way to our understanding of African culture.”

This professed aim of the study of African music as “building up a body of knowledge on which musicians can draw” is certainly the one conscious goal in all my own work in this field, both for myself and those with whom I work.

I should like now to give a brief sketch of what is being done throughout Africa, and outside it, to tackle this immense task of understanding African music and seeking ways of authentic development. I fear that it will not be possible to mention all those that deserve to be mentioned since it will no doubt serve our purpose better to select for consideration the work of the principal actors in this particular stage.

Professor Nketia has shown great imagination in planning the work of his own School of Music in Ghana. There are three carefully graded courses leading to (a) A Certificate in the Rudiments of Music, (b) a General Diploma and (c) a Diploma in African music. Professor Nketia says that “The emphasis in all these courses is on general musicianship and the development of ‘bi-musicality’ — the ability to appreciate African and non-African musical traditions in their own terms.” I am sure this is a sound principle on which to work but our special interest at the moment is to see how the specific study of African music is approached. Even at the humble level of the Certificate course the syllabus is orientated to include “analysis of the rhythmic and melodic structure of simple African tunes” and the study of form in the traditional African idiom.

One of the tests in the practical examination for this Certificate is a performance on an instrument “such instruments to include traditional African instruments.” In the work for the General Diploma the study of African music is heightened and this is found in the sections on theory, form, history and in the practical work. There is also a special paper at this level on African music.

Before starting on the work for the Diploma in African Music, students must possess, either the General Diploma or a Diploma of an approved institution and this ensures a thorough grasp of the structure of music generally without which it is impossible to undertake serious study of African music in particular. The detailed programme of work to be followed in this course for the Diploma in African music would make any musician’s mouth water.

At the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, there are two people involved in music academically. Anthony King has been lecturer in music for several years and has been active in field research in Yoruba music. He has contributed articles to the *African Music Journal* and in 1961 the Ibadan University Press published his work on “Yoruba Sacred Music” in which half the space is valuably occupied in transcriptions of the music itself.

Fela Sowande is now on the staff of Ibadan in the Institute of Education. He is a composer of international reputation and is surely the exponent par excellence of the art of using Western techniques and instrumental resources to develop new forms in which traditional African music can be used. It is interesting to note the reactions of both a European and an African to the “Folk Symphony” which he was commissioned to write on the occasion of Nigerian Independence. The premiere performance was given in England and the comment of a music critic was that:

“Not often nowadays does an audience which has just heard the first concert performance of a new symphony disperse humming tunes from it, as did last night’s Winter Garden audience, not often is such a work received with cheers, as was a

Folk Symphony by the Nigerian composer Fela Sowande after the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra had played it. This remarkable reception stamped Mr. Sowande at once as having a capacity to communicate directly to his audience which few modern composers possess."

The Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast a recording of this work which brought the following comment from a Nigerian listener:

"Fela Sowande took simple popular tunes . . . and made beautiful symphony music out of them . . . I hope that other musicians will follow up this experiment already started by Mr. Fela Sowande. In a sense, these 'African Symphonies' interpret some of our melodies to the wider world."

Fela Sowande has until recently spent his life very fruitfully as a performer and creative musician. It is my fervent hope that now he is at Ibadan he will be able to pass on to a younger generation something of the skills he himself has acquired with such success in this pioneer field of composition.

In East Africa, a start has been made at Makerere with the inclusion of some music within the Institute of Education. Mr. Mbabi-Katana was appointed there in 1961. Besides his formal teaching he has toured East Africa and collected a considerable number of songs for publication for use in the schools of this part of Africa.

In the days of Professor Kirby at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, African Music was taken seriously in the Music Department. At the moment little or no attention is given to this subject within the formal music programme but there is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology who is keenly interested in African music — John Blacking. He first came to Africa to work with the International Library of African music. He contributed a number of articles to the *Journal of African Music* and when I saw him in November, 1962, there was a book of his in the press on "Vende Childrens' Songs" from the Northern Transvaal.

There are Universities outside Africa where a study is being made of African music. This subject has been accepted as a responsibility of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London for a considerable time. A veteran in this field, the Rev. A. M. Jones is in charge of the work. Before he went to London University he had spent many years in Zambia and it was there that his interest in African music was aroused, and his research began. His major work on the subject is his "Studies in African Music" which the Oxford University Press published in 1956. There have been legitimate criticisms of this work, but most people involved in this field of study would probably agree with one reviewer that "The publication of these carefully prepared and beautifully printed volumes represents a most important advance in the study of African music" . . . and so would I.

Universities in the United States of America have Departments which are interested in African music. Perhaps the most imaginative of these is that of the Department of Ethnomusicology at the University of California under the general direction of Dr. Mantle Hood. Dr. Wachsman is in fact in charge of the African music section. At one time he was in East Africa and it is to him that Uganda is indebted for the splendid collection of musical instruments in the Uganda Museum. The fascination of this collection is that they are not simply "museum pieces" because musicians are there to play them. One of the best things about the work done in the University of California is that it is related to actual music-making in the idiom of the particular field of study. This is wholly admirable.

Dr. Henry Weman of the Faculty of Music in the University of Upsala in Sweden has done excellent work in one important branch of study in African music. As the result of two comparatively short visits to Africa he produced a remarkable book called "African Music and the Church in Africa". The first half of the book is devoted to a general discussion about African music, its tonality, rhythm, and place in society. The rest is a detailed statement as to how the traditional music of Africa can be caught up

into the music of the Church in Africa. It is astonishing to discover the insights into African music which Dr. Weman displays after such brief contact with it.

There is probably no aspect of the development of African music in which there has been such sustained and widespread interest and activity than in this reorientation of the music of the Church in Africa to the local musical idiom. For nearly twenty years the subject has been debated in the literature of the African Music Society and a few years ago the Methodist Church in America regarded the matter of sufficient importance to appoint Robert Kauffman to devote his whole time to the question, based in Rhodesia.

There is one aspect of the study of African music about which I am frankly, deeply disturbed. It is the place of the Anthropologist in this field. I can probably best illustrate my fears on the subject by quoting from a lecture given at Antioch College, Ohio, by Dr. Allan Merriam, of Indiana University. He said:

"If we look at the sound of music itself, then we are looking at a product of human behaviour. The level out of which this product arises is the behaviour itself. But the deepest level is the conceptualization by the people of the way which their behaviour should be formed . . . I fear that you will see in this approach to the study of music a distinct bias toward the side of the social sciences . . . My goal is the study of music as an aspect of human behaviour. I do not see that this goal can be confidently or fruitfully pursued through the study of musical sounds alone."

The results of such an approach can be seen in the findings of Dr. Merriam concerning the music of the Bashi people, after a year's field research in the Congo, Ruanda and Burundi. Summing up his work he said that three major musical problems seemed to emerge:

1. The almost complete absence of drums and drumming;
2. The frustrations currently being suffered by the Bashi people, as evidenced by the song texts;
3. The apparent close association of the "mulizi" (a flute) with the cattle complex.

Is there anything at all in these findings which tells us what we should like to know about the music of the Bashi people? It may be claimed that it is of musical interest to know that there is an absence of drumming in this tradition, but still there is no information about what is there.

Now it is obviously proper for the Anthropologist to make a study of any branch of human activity in which he is interested. I am certain however that it is important for him and everyone else to recognize quite clearly that he does so as an Anthropologist, and not as a musician, and that as a general rule his interest will not be in the music itself, and therefore his academic contribution will not be a musical one. Meanwhile musicians will be side-tracked into the anthropological field at their very peril.

When in Johannesburg I called at the Headquarters of the International Library of African music and the African Music Society. Both these organisations owe their origin and their very life to the indefatigable Hugh Tracey. He deserves great credit for the contribution he has made to the cause of African music. He was one of the first in the field and his interest has never once wavered. The major undertaking in which Hugh Tracey has been involved for many years is the recording of African music in many parts of Africa, and in making these recordings available to the public. There is another project for which Hugh Tracey is responsible. In 1948, he began to publish a Newsletter of the African Music Society and this was so well received that in 1954 it developed into the much more elaborate *Journal of African Music*. This Journal still provides the only regular means of disseminating information about what is going on in the field of African music.

Generally speaking, it is the various broadcasting organisations in Africa which have the best facilities for making recordings of African music which are of really good quality. When they are seriously interested in the study of African music they can therefore make a valuable contribution. Most of the Broadcasting Corporations in

Africa do something about this question, and the range of activity varies from planned programmes of research to a mere dabbling in third rate recordings.

By far the most useful work being done is that one carried out by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. The programme which they have established, stems, I understand from the time when Fela Sowande was Musical Director of the Corporation. He set up a system whereby there is a Music Research Assistant in each of the three Regions. His work is to collect as much local material as possible, by touring the region, particularly at the times of the various traditional festivals, high days and holidays. He also brings to the studio instrumentalists and singers who live within easy reach, since recording facilities are obviously much better in the studio than they can ever be on location. The Research Assistant also edits his material for presentation in broadcast programmes thus keeping listeners in touch with the traditional music of the country.

If it is borne in mind that this review of "who is doing what" in the study of African music omits the mention of much valuable work it will be recognised that in fact a great deal is being done by a great many people. Much more could be done particularly at the University level in Africa itself.

It is pertinent to ask in what ways all this academic study of the traditional music of Africa can make a contribution towards the creation of new music yet growing out of the old. No creative artist starts his work "in vacuo". There is bound to be some artistic background in which he has been nurtured. He may modify its idiom or even reject it outright but he will have learnt the basic disciplines from those who have gone before. The same is true of the creative musician in Africa. He must know and understand what it is about African music that gives it its distinctive character, what it is about it that stamps any particular song or instrumental performance as authentic. This can be learnt from the "body of knowledge" of which Professor Nketia spoke, which is now being built up all over Africa and in other parts of the world.

This is another thing too. There is an incredibly large number of African musical instruments to be found throughout Africa. The skilled musicians that play them — sometimes very skilled — embody some of the richest elements in the musical heritage of Africa and yet their skills are for the most part locked away in an almost esoteric oral tradition. This kind of situation carries with it the grave risk that when the present exponents die, some of the instruments will disappear without trace.

On the other hand when students in the School of Music at the University of Ghana, or at the University of California for that matter, learn to play these instruments and bring to bear on them the whole weight of musical training, they can then record in a permanent form all that needs to be known about the instrument and its music. New music can be written for such instruments and unimagined delights can be realised through the combination of instruments, stringed, wind and percussion.

Here, then, I am sure, is the heart of the matter. Here is that "important mission in the African field" of the study of music for musical reasons and with musical objectives.