

---

## IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICAN CHURCH MUSIC

by

ROBERT A. KAUFFMAN

The "winds of change" have swept across Africa bringing in their wake new nations, new loyalties, in some cases chaos, but in most cases new hopes for the future. The church has been influenced by the change, and in some cases has even initiated their change. Sometimes the church appears more interested in political and social changes than in change within its own household, but there are evidences that the well worn phrase "the indigenisation of the church" is beginning to mean more than just a mere turning over of church leadership to African personnel. Because it is possible that the church can eventually be controlled by Africans and still basically a European church. Therefore, to see and hear more and more genuinely African hymns and masses is an encouraging sign that the church is becoming rooted in the soil of Africa and is making itself relevant to the great wave of nationalism that is sweeping the continent.

On a recent trip I made through 13 African countries to collect recordings of indigenous church music for the library of the School of Sacred Music, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, I discovered some wonderful examples of church music that can be classed with the finest music being produced anywhere in the world. In some cases the music had been composed and showed the influence of western music. In other cases the music was purely traditional and spontaneous. It seems to me that we should not harshly judge either type so long as there are generally-accepted standards of design, form, balance, and beauty in the music. Traditional music usually has these qualities present. That is why many people seem to prefer that type of music in the church. There is also a quality about traditional music that makes it acceptable to a large cross-section of people. Simple, illiterate folk as well as university graduates can grasp the meaning of a folk song, since it expresses the basic emotions of human existence.

But European influences are inevitable in the twentieth century, and as long as the Europeaness does not destroy the basic integrity of the music, we should not be overly critical, particularly in places where European culture has influenced so much of life. Unfortunately, however, European music can destroy the integrity of the African music, either because it is poor European music, or because its influence is too dominant for the African element to be recognisable. I heard a lot of this type of music on my trip, and I had the feeling that it did not really communicate deep meanings to anyone. But I also heard a lot of music that showed a good influence of European music, and I felt that this type is destined to become a significant expression primarily of the church in Africa, but also in influence throughout the entire world.

Ethiopia illustrated well the contrast between traditional music and a highly developed musical culture (not a European one, however). In the Southern mountains of this great country both the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches have begun missionary activity in recent years. In most cases they have not translated western hymns into vernacular languages, but have instead encouraged the people to express their new-found Christian faith in songs that have grown out of their traditions. I particularly remember one hymn which is an adaptation of the Apostles Creed. It is a simple song, but very beautiful. Certainly old and young, illiterate and educated can express their faith more adequately in this hymn than most of us can when we merely repeat the creed Sunday after Sunday. At the other extreme of musical development is the music of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church where the average church cantor is trained for seven years to learn the intricacies of church music. Drumming and dancing are used at certain festive occasions, but it is

highly disciplined and developed art. The dances are slow and ordered with an intense emotion displayed throughout.

Some of the most beautiful music I heard was in Liberia where the singing was very traditional. In the Krahn area, the use of chromatic parallel thirds was very unusual for Africa, but fit into the musical culture of the area. Sometimes drums were used, sometimes they were not.

The rhythms and variety of instruments in the Congo were most impressive at Mulunguishi Mission near Elizabethville, the students did not have enough instruments so they improvised their own. In addition to the drums, rattles, and kalimba, there were bottles, pieces of metal, one-note xylophones, and girls alternately striking their mouths and their chests with hands. Each different sound had its own rhythm that crossed with the other rhythms. Also at Mulunguishi I heard for the first time in Africa a Methodist Communion service set almost entirely to African music by Kanjundu Frederic. Someone has called it, the first "Methodist Mass". At Kimpese Institute near Leopoldville, Burt Cox the English choir director, has made tremendously exciting African settings to the Psalms. He is one of the few Europeans who has succeeded in composing African music that is not unduly influenced by European music.

In the Camerouns, I was impressed by the music of Pie Abbe Ngomou, a Roman Catholic priest, who has used the small gong as the basic instrument in his mass. The ringing of the bell serves an important function in the Roman mass as the bread and wine are elevated and transformed into the body and blood of Christ. In Abbe Ngomou's mass the traditional African bell is appropriately used as a rhythm instrument throughout the mass.

In northern Malawi, the early Scottish missionaries (too bad there were not more of them in the rest of Africa) did not discourage African music. They were probably too much aware of the number of Scottish hymns that originated from folk songs. They encouraged the early Ngoni (Zulu exiles) converts to adapt some of their war songs for use in the church. As a result, the churches in this area regularly use African music and over a period of years the songs have evolved into a uniquely African and yet uniquely religious style that is tremendously impressive.

And finally, I must tell you about Nigerian church music. This is the only country I know of that has successfully combined the organ with the drums for use in the church. Lagos probably has more pipe organs than any other city in Africa, and this is not necessarily a legacy of colonialism. New organs are being built all the time. But this does not keep out the drums. The hour-glass talking drum, where the pitch is controlled by squeezing the drum under the arm, fits well with the organ. The leading composer of this type of music is the Rev. A. T. Ola Olude, who has written several hundred hymns based on traditional tunes, and following the tones of the new words which he writes. Enthusiasm for music, generally, and church music, in particular, is very great in Nigeria. Both Lagos and Ibadan have their own church music societies, and training is being given to younger musicians.

I do not want to give the impression that all of Africa is now embracing indigenous church music. In most parts of the continent we still hear a preponderance of translated hymns and masses. But there is a new awakening, particularly in the younger generation. And the historical movement of events in Africa is on the side of more and more African music in the church. To this movement the All-Africa Church Music Association can be a guiding light.