# A PLAN FOR AFRICAN MUSIC

*by*

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## PREAMBLE

Before talking about African Music within the theme of this Conference — "Music and Education", I would like to quote from two eminent authorities — the one an Educationist, the other an Artist.

The Educationist — Sir Eric Ashby — in his book on "African Universities and the Western Tradition", draws attention to the gulf which at present opens between the western educated African graduate and the mass of his own people, and stresses the point that African intellectual life should become "not only a recipient but a donor of world knowledge". The Universities of Africa, he says, must not only preserve this present loyalty to the Western tradition; they must also discover and proclaim a loyalty to the indigenous values of African society.

The Art historian — Sir Herbert Read — in a recent article on "Art and Communication", speaks of art — including music — as "a token of mutual understanding" in a community. And, springing as it does from the depths of the unconscious collective forces, it may yet prove to be the bridge, not only between Africa and the West, but between old and new in African society.

Art is a manifestation and a transformation of these unconscious collective forces, and in this sense he maintains "Art is identical with Education".

So the theme of my proposition is this:-

1. That Africa has something important to contribute to the sum of world music.
2. That by fostering their genuinely indigenous music, Africa may bridge the gap between itself and the West, and between literate and preliterate in its own society,
3. and that by doing so, Africa could make from its legacy of musical talent, a unique contribution to modern education.

The great question at this moment of time in African history is how to make African music effective for education in the face of all other distractions.

It is in this context that I present for your consideration a paper which I have entitled:-

"A Plan for African Music"

### Definition:

There are so many kinds of music in Africa that, as usual, it is advisable first to define one's terms. For the purpose of this paper, the music under dicussion is the compositions of indigenous, sub-Saharan, African people, and without recognisable foreign influences. This music shows the same integrity, logic, sensibility and originality as their own languages. Like their languages, a single variety of music-making may be found only within a limited area, but taken together, the different varieties are found to share certain common characteristics which justify their inclusion under the title of "African music". All of them are contemporary, continually evolving, well founded in past practice, clearly understood and performed by everyone in each local group, though rarely by outsiders.

Unfortunately, African music does not yet share the great advantage already enjoyed by African languages of being relatively easy to write down on paper, and to read back again once it has been written down. Here is the missing link between authentic African music and formal educational practice.

### Objective:

It is this advantage, I understand, which is part of the business of this Conference to discuss and plan to overcome. If we are successful, we should ultimately be able to bring the study of African music into line with that of other musics of the world,

ensuring its continued usefulness as a social art within its proper present day context, and, give credit and encouragement to those gifted African composers and musicians whose music is hardly ever heard outside their own village or district.

There would be several other side benefits, not the least of which would be a sense of national pride in African skill and achievements, a feeling that life is more worthwhile; for that, surely, is the function of the arts . . . to increase the meaning of life to those who share in them.

To do this effectively, it has long been felt, we must somehow bring indigenous African arts and particularly African music into the normal curriculum of African schools, colleges and eventually into the Universities themselves. A good start has already been made in at least four places, Nsukka in Nigeria, Legon in Ghana, Bulawayo in Rhodesia, and Makerere in Uganda. But this is only the beginning.

We know that certain objections against the encouragement of African music have been raised in the past, but with increasing knowledge they have mostly been overcome. We are not here concerned with any exotic or semi-exotic music, but only with music which has its origin within Africa. We are concerned here only with the facts, the realities, of African music.

The first reality is a rather strange one. With few notable exceptions, the scope and extent of African music is virtually unknown to Africans themselves. Most of them are only aware of the music made and played within their own small circle of relatives and friends, which perhaps is one of the reasons why they are so open to outside influence and, musically speaking, are so easily thrown off balance. This is hardly surprising as you have to travel great distances if you want to hear, at first hand, even a reasonable selection of the many effective styles of music which are still actively performed all over the continent.

**Discovery:**

So, any plan for African music must first be concerned with discovery. This means getting out into the country, into the villages and towns, wherever representative performers may be found, and recording a wide selection of current, authentic items, and all that that entails in the way of inside knowledge of the arts associated with music, such as dancing, storytelling and ritual, with costume and instrument making. This will mean not hundreds but thousands of recordings if all the major styles of African music are to be included, let alone the minor ones.

**Collection:**

If we record an average of only one item from 10,000 people, it would give us a collection of about 20 thousand items from the present population of Africa. That is, only 100 compositions per million people; and that, I expect, would not be a fraction of what could be collected, if my experience in the last 40 years is anything to go by.

These figures must not dismay you. They are well within the bounds of possibility. I myself have not only discovered and recorded, but have already published well over 3,000 items . . . and what a variety!

**Recognition:**

Although there are several minor collections of African recordings stored away in various private and public archives such as those of radio stations, there is, as yet, no major source of general and reliable information within Africa itself which, I consider, does adequate justice to the scope and variety of indigenous music as a distinctive and continent-wide cultural phenomenon.

There may be many valid reasons why this should be so; lack of communications between districts, between territories and the outside world, has not only kept African music away from the world outside, but the outside world from intruding into African music. That day is nearly over, and unless we in this our generation, do something

positive, that intrusion, however beneficial in other ways, may destroy something which you know and I know, is important indeed to the future cultural status of African people everywhere.

As far as music is concerned, the intrusion has often been effected with the best intentions on both sides. There was superior technical equipment; the demand of radio programme time; the quick appeal and the novelty of new dance tunes; new musical instruments; new best selling records; it was all so logical. On the academic side it seemed so much better and more effective to teach music, foreign music, through known channels of instruction with the only available textbooks — there were no others; so why bother about so-called "primitive" and "heathen" music? So straightforward . . . so reasonable!

I remember very clearly one of my early impressions of African music when I heard it for the first time on my arrival from England in 1921. Here was music that was not just entertainment, but a music that worked for the people who made it. It was not idle music. Ever since then I have been made more and more aware of the many functions of music-making in Africa. It has become increasingly clear to me that so useful an art should not be allowed to peter out for the lack of understanding and encouragement.

**Plan:**

What then should we plan in order to encourage African music to continue to work?

We cannot teach African music as it should be taught without the textbooks.

We cannot write authoritive textbooks without a broad assessment of the whole effective range of African music-making to draw upon.

We cannot assess the virtue of the music without hearing it, without a broad enough collection of recordings. (Distances are too great.)

We cannot make our collections if we do not get out and make the discoveries in the homes of the musicians.

This, then, would be the order of priority I suggest. (The order would be very much the same for a single research worker as for a team of workers:-)

*First Stage:*.....Discovery, and Collection.
*Second Stage:* .....Assessment, and Textbooks.
*Third Stage:* .....Publication, and Teaching.

**Programme:**

There is our possible objective. How do we turn it into a practical programme?

It seems to me that there should be three clearly defined stages in the work, the first two requiring special organisation before the schools, universities, and colleges can hope to take over. These first two stages would not conflict with the excellent work already being done, but would be in addition to it.

*The First Stage* would concern the organised discovery and collection of data. Specially appointed teams would be needed, but one of their tasks would be to encourage everyone with any love of African music to co-operate, and in this way ensure that the initial survey covered every important aspect of indigenous musical talent.

*The Second Stage* would require the services of skilled persons who had already had sufficient first hand research experience of African musics, coupled with literary ability, to be able to start on the compilation of reliable textbooks in close association with research men and women in other territories . . . in other words, there should first be broad agreement on principles regarding the underlying theory, the logic, of African music before the elementary books are published.

*The Third Stage* would bring the Education Departments into the picture, as there would then be sufficient field work accomplished for them to sponsor the publication of books and recordings, organise the curriculum within their jurisdiction, and stimulate new composition and performances.

## THE FIRST STAGE

**1. Discovery:**

We need, I believe, research units throughout the continent (the Sub-Saharan regions), properly financed and equipped to go out into the villages and discover the indigenous items which are currently in practice.

Commonwealth countries might well set the pace in this, and one would have liked to think that one research unit could have been shared by neighbouring countries. Present day politics however may make this difficult.

Once the scheme is launched and the first teams available, a strong publicity drive in the African territories concerned could be undertaken through press and radio to make the whole of each country aware of what is required, and this in turn would encourage inter-territorial co-operation.

People in all walks of life would be encouraged to inform the team where music and musicians were to be found, thus hastening the discovery of worthwhile items and ensuring that no skilled composer or group of musicians was overlooked.

**2. Collection:**

I would recommend to you the excellent example of the students at the Michigan State and Indiana Universities in the United States, who in the past twenty years, have collected for the Indiana University Folklore Archive, over 60,000 items of national interest, the major portion of which was folk songs, verse and lyrics collected from their families and friends within their own home regions during their vacations. Their handwritten manuscripts have been adding to the collection, I understand, at the rate of 3,000 items a year. If that can still be done in America, it can certainly be done in what we would like to think as far more musical Africa. And this could be started at once by schools and colleges throughout Africa without waiting for the formal establishment of local teams.

Thus, although the local research teams would be the spearhead of the drive to discover and so collect music with their recording apparatus, every patriotic and intelligent person in a local community could, if he or she wished, make a contribution to their own heritage in this manner.

Musicians of unusual talent would naturally be the backbone of any research team, but everyone does not need to be a trained musician to be able to help in this work, but only to have an appreciation of musical skill and craft. Linguists for example would be particularly useful, as it is well known that musical styles in Africa closely follow the trends of languages and dialects. And Historians; it is even possible, for example, to follow the course of recent migration by the nuances in musical style, and to piece together much historical information from chanted legends, few of which have ever been written down in extenso.

It is essential, I believe, among other things, to try to record as soon as possible, the songs and music of the older people before they die and slip into the region of no-memory. Such songs, even if they are no longer sung by the younger generation, help to reveal not only a certain continuity of styles, but also past events which were important at that time. (For example, there has recently been a study of the recordings of a number of Karanga songs which I first recorded 36 years ago, in 1929 in Rhodesia, and which have been recorded in half a dozen versions since then. (vide African Music Society Journal — "African Music" Vol. III No. 3.)

Translators, people who are efficient in both a local language and in English, would be of the greatest help if they could translate the songs and stories which were recorded within their own district where they could make direct contact with the local performers and make certain they understood the references and the context of idiomatic allusions in the songs. This has always been a major difficulty of visiting research students.

A really good, wise interpreter is a great asset. This work I suggest might well be the special responsibility of local schoolmasters and schoolmistresses.

Carpenters and metal craftsmen could be most useful in our research, particularly on the instrumental side, by studying the local methods of making effective musical instruments with the material available. Africa has a wealth of variety in musical instruments which are in daily use and one instrument, the *Mbira*, under a hundred or more names, is unique to this continent alone.

All such information is relevant and valuable. It serves not only to delineate the elements of a tradition, but helps to reveal the continuity in accepted and satisfactory methods of music making which have stood the test of time and have crystallised poetic imagery and artistry. Knowledge of this kind is the very stuff of education.

Now that we have excellent recording apparatus, our collections will be far more valuable than the reports of the early writers who had no such advantages and who were often biased by their own preconceived ideas of what music should sound like, or were not particularly musical themselves. David Livingstone is a case in point.

In these and many other ways the team of collectors would be able to guarantee that each item collected was as fully annotated as possible and its authenticity assured. The workers in the Second Stage would be able to base their conclusion on reliable data.

For this initial stage of the work, (discovery and collection), I am inclined to think that a period of about three to five years should be set aside, that is from the time each field unit could be assembled, trained and set out on their clearly defined task. Any person taking part in this field work should have no difficulty in finding suitable employment afterwards, especially in education.

During this period, and supporting the field workers, would come the "backroom boys" skilled in the technical aspects of electronics — a section which might well be sponsored by each national radio organisation, the helpers who would be required to do one or two important tasks . . .

1. to make copies of selected material for distribution to teams working in other African Commonwealth countries, and
2. wherever possible, to see that good use is made of the more important items recorded, for example by inclusion in radio programmes.

In this way they could bring swift recognition to musicians who had recently been discovered, and, incidently, obtain for them wherever possible, suitable monetary reward for their skill. (Radio producers are usually grateful for such discoveries and are prepared to pay the normal fees to contributors to their programmes.) This would have the immediate side effect of publicising the field work of the research team and stimulating public interest. A few selected items might also be published on commercial records, for the same end, recognition of the real talent which is often ignored behind the prevailing vulgarities of the popular record market.

It would not be necessary during the First Stage of the work, for the music to be transcribed into notation, for several good reasons. This should preferably be left to the Second Stage when adequate evidence has accumulated and a broad horizon achieved. In any case, it would be impossible to transcribe for publication all the music which could be recorded in the field, and, indeed, it might not be necessary to do so once sufficient data had been collected to form a wide enough selection of items. Much of Africa's music is essentially of a kind which you must learn to take part in, directly from the people you are with, and not from paper. This is particularly the case with dancing which almost everyone learns from example. Paper work comes later.

## THE SECOND STAGE

This is the stage of the expert. The persons who will undertake this work will be those who have already served their apprenticeship in the field and who have the added gifts of musical insight, logical thinking and literary ability.

Theirs will be the task of sifting the evidence already collected, drawing conclusions from the data and committing it to paper in such a way that practical educational substance will emerge.

The work in hand is the laying of foundations; and, (as you know) the foundations of a successful building are usually hidden in the soil of the country on which it stands. What is built above will depend upon the skill of the builders, and the firmness of the foundations.

**Textbooks:**

The first music textbooks are likely to be written for African schools within each home territory, giving priority to local varieties and styles of performance which young people can readily grasp from direct observation within their local environment and heritage. This means giving priority to songs both old and new in local vernaculars, accompanied, where possible, by instruments which can be made locally and are not beyond the skill of the instrument makers, the players, or the purse of the local buyers. It would be folly to discard what is readily at hand in the hope of acquiring something further away but too expensive.

It has been found over the years, that the transcription of African music demands special insight into the structure of the music and *an ability, on the part of the transcriber to perform on African instruments*. Without this inside knowledge, transcriptions are often found to be both inaccurate and misleading and, so far as African musicians are concerned, almost useless as a guide to actual performance. It would also be advisable for the textbook writers to be able to re-visit selected musicians to confirm observations and dicuss problems which may have arisen.

More advanced textbooks would in time cover more than one territory, and eventually the whole continent.

## THE THIRD STAGE

At this point the technical skill of other professions will be needed, in particular that of the printers and publishing companies. Once the educational authorities have approved the form and style of the books being written for their schools, still further technicians will be needed to ensure that sufficient apparatus is available and teachers trained who are capable by personal example, of putting the musical lessons into effect. The equipment need not come exclusively from distant factories but might well entail an increased output by local craftsmen for whose product there would be an ensured market.

Teacher Training Colleges would have to undertake to put the new textbooks to the test by completing set courses before trying them out on their pupils. Naturally, only a section of the student body would take up music as a school subject, but the objective would be to ensure that, ultimately, any musically gifted person was given the best opportunity of making full use of his talent for the benefit of himself and his compatriots.

**Territorial Co-operation:**

Once the local scene has been properly covered, the experts would then be in the best position to co-operate with those of adjoining territories, with those who had been dealing with vernaculars most closely allied to their own, and in this way gradually build up knowledge of the inter-territorial aspects of African musics. At this point, as with the arts in any country, detailed information is no longer enough, and musical genius and vitality must take over.

There will always be room in any society for the practical musician who performs to the best of his ability the works which others have initiated. Originality however, is not given to many, as Tagore said . . . "There are those who are easily first, and those who come decently after." One of the objectives of music education, in addition to training "the many", is to single out "the few", the truly original and gifted persons, and give them a flying start. This means supplying them with the "tools" which will enable them to make full use of their talents to best effect among their own folk. The accent upon the requirements of their contemporaries as opposed to outsiders, is important. It is of little use, and indeed a "luxury", to train musicians to perfect their grasp of a foreign medium and then for them to have to migrate in order to earn their living in some foreign environment. They are lost to Africa, save in exceptional circumstances.

The work of handing on the intuitive talents of the natural musical genius (the "folk musician") through tuition to pupils in schools and students in colleges does not immediately concern us here, as our present plan for African music goes only as far as making that kind of tuition possible, and in presenting the necessary evidence in a scholarly manner.

**Future Policy:**

Other imponderables must now exercise our minds.

If the undertaking of putting African indigenous musical genius on the map is considered to be worthwhile, what organisation, if any, should we try to set up to bring this into effect within the African territories both inside and outside the Commonwealth? (Remembering that there is also some quite good African music and dancing, I believe, outside the Commonwealth Countries!)

Should it be left entirely to each country to decide what it can do, and how it might finance research teams and their apparatus?

Should we discuss the possibility of an effective scheme of inter-territorial co-operation, with or without a central administrative bureau, which would assist all the participating territories, and so, possibly, have a better chance both of raising the necessary funds and of cutting down overhead expenses; or leave it once more to folk music societies and casual private enterprise?

In other words, who should make a start? . . . Private individuals in each country, or some public organisation? What should we recommend at this Conference? These are matter of policy.

One thing is quite clear to me from my own experience. Such a scheme as I have briefly outlined is both possible and practical, *given the funds, and the dedicated personnel.* The music is there, waiting to be discovered, appreciated and used by far wider audiences, as my own sample recordings have proved. Thirty years ago there might have been some doubt about it for lack of evidence which at that time was still hidden. In thirty years time, without some effective effort on our part, there may be little or no evidence left, except in the more remote places. It may well have been frittered away.

The physical side of the operation would not present any great difficulty, such as the standardisation of equipment, of transport, the provision of accommodation and supplies. The recruitment of suitable personel, their training and direction would be harder, at least in the initial stages.

What is needed now is both the sense of urgency and the initiative. Awareness of the problem must preceed its solution.

The very fact that African music has been chosen as a subject of discussion at this Conference in its relationship with African Education, gives me hope to think that this may be the turning point in the present decline of genuine music-making in Africa.

Here in this hall is a responsible body of people representing a Commonwealth association of cultural ideals. We know that African music has worked well in the past, and we must decide now that it must be made to go on working in the future for a better and increased meaning in life for Africans everywhere.

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As a direct result of the foregoing paper, the following resolution was published in the British Press.

COMMONWEALTH MUSIC CONFERENCE

The University of Liverpool, 1965

A Conference on "Music and Education in the Commonwealth" was held at the University of Liverpool from Friday, 24 September to Tuesday, 28 September, 1965, as part of the first Commonwealth Arts Festival.

The Conference was attended by distinguished musicians from many countries. The Conference President was Dr. Yehudi Menuhin and the Conference Chairman, Professor Basil Smallman, James and Constance Alsop Professor of Music in the University.

The members of the Conference representing Australia, Canada, Ceylon, Ghana, India, Kenya, New Zealand, Nigeria and the United Kingdom resolve:-

1. that an organization be established to foster music within the countries of the Commonwealth;
2. that, the Conference discussions having emphasized the close connections between all the arts, the name should be *Commonwealth Cultural Organization*;
3. that, through this organization, plans be formulated to preserve the distinctive cultural heritage of different peoples within the Commonwealth;
4. that such plans should allow for the continuing integrity of all our arts by encouraging development and practical use at all stages in educational systems; they should also promote an interchange of ideas;
5. that the proceedings of this Commonwealth Music Conference should be published at an early date.

28*th September*, 1965.