

BEMBA MUSIC

Extract from a lecture

by

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Last year I showed the sections in the music of Babemba according to the different classes of life, and how I could adapt each section into the church. (See last year's lecture)¹. This year I shall only talk about music performances in Bembaland and a little theory of how a song runs.

Bemba music is not a melodious one. I mean we do not exercise melody always very much. But it is there. Bemba music is exercised mainly for two things — teaching and rhythm. I shall now talk about each separately and briefly:

Melody:

Bemba ancestors did not sing to see how beautifully a song would sound. Singing was only an emphasis to their teaching. That is why even today we find that most of the Bemba songs are not very melodious. There were times when people did sing beautifully with tuneful melodies and this was when they sang traditional songs like "Mupukumo", "Kalela" and they were not dancing at all. Dancing songs are generally very short and plain and only full of talking. For example, "Mumbwe aibe mbalala". In the songs of praises called *Mishikakulo*, you will hardly find melody. They are set in a poetic manner. Funeral songs in the western Bembaland have very full rich tunes and are sung very slowly.

Even if a song has a bit of melody, the Bemba will never sing it going high up and down, their harmony is sung in somewhat parallel lines. Most of our Bemba melodies begin somewhere high and come down, sometimes quickly to a station, and sometimes slowly, then from there to the next station and then to the end. In some songs we have four stations, in others three or two. When people are very happy they sing very high notes as decorations to the real tune and lengthen it much. It is true that most of the Bemba songs end in *mi*. But sad music ends also in *doh* or *sol* or *fa* or *ti*. Initiation songs generally end in *doh* and *fa*.

Harmony:

The Bemba harmony cannot be taught to them. Nature has taught every Mubemba how to harmonize songs of different types. A composer trying to invent some new harmony is not only wasting his time and power but is also inventing unnatural things for Bemba music and so makes his song not a Bemba one. Thus it is very difficult for people to know them. Bemba songs are simple and move along according to the twisting of words.

It is slowly coming to be a belief that Bemba sing in thirds. This can be true in many and most songs, but again, a composer will not teach the people in thirds, they know by nature. Harmony is an important thing in Bemba music but it is wrong to compose it. It will slip in naturally.

Rhythm:

This is the most important part of Bemba music. Any song that is not sung with either drums or clapping is only good for funeral services, that is all. Any kind of singing other than sad songs must and should be accompanied with drumming or clapping or any other different noise from singing. It is a blue lie to say that true Bemba

¹ African Music Vol. III, No. 2, pp. 27-35.

singing could be done without accompaniment. Women while singing pounding cassava, have their pestles to do the accompaniment. People rowing canoes sing having their paddles to conduct the rhythm.

Teaching:

Babemba do not sing to produce good sound of voice. They mainly sing to produce words of teaching. Singing only helps to emphasize the meaning of words. A person who is sung about in a song on account of his good deeds is very highly honoured.

That is why many European choir leaders when they first come to Lubemba think that we do not control our voices and our singing is rough and harsh. It is our original custom that we must shout when we sing happy tunes. One cannot teach Bemba people the European musical signs like *crescendo*, *allegro*, *presto*, *vivace* to sing well. The nature of the song will tell the Bemba to either soften or get it loud. It is truly a waste of time teaching Babemba western musical sounds. They have their own natural ones. Just listen to them singing, you will feel it. They need not be the same ones as western ones but they have them in their own way.

In singing our Bemba songs we are expected to say words clearly and not the melody clearly. This is so that the melody does not disturb the clearness and meaning of the words. Singing is one of the Bemba tools for teaching people.

Choirs:

It is not a custom of Babemba to have a conductor in front. Clapping and drums or any other accompaniment are the conductors. You will find no song at all where the whole team has to begin together. There is always one who sings the first word or phrase then all respond. Any Bemba composer inventing a song where all the group begins together is not only bringing out very new strange inventions in music, but is also causing a lot of confusion in the songs of Babemba.

Do not we see many times that when the conductor wants us to begin together some come a note after because they were fastening their button or so, and generally the conductor gets angry as if music should cause people to be angry, instead of being happy.

In Bemba music there is no slavery by so many complicated rules here and there. Even when the *Kasanla* begins a song it is not a command that all must join. We join in freely and gradually until everything gets at full speed. So to introduce many rules in Bemba music is just as good as having no music at all in that land. We better work on their very simple rules and develop them, but again not to develop them to such a standard that we emphasize *diminuendos* etc. In Bemba singing anyone can begin a song. For starting you do not need to give a signal or count 1, 2, 3, 4. Just begin and they will come in.

Drums:

There are three main drums. I have mentioned them before. In Bembaland they do not wait for drums to sound first, the drums join in later on, one by one. The big drum is the one which encourages dancing very much. Drumming again is different in each set of music.

In music we shall fight that:

- (a) The composers of Bemba music value the words and their meaning, and rhythm rather than any other element.
- (b) That any song composed should have a lot of teaching rather than mere melodious tune.
- (c) That those stations described must be respected in any song or composition.
- (d) That no wide or long interval be exercised in composing Bemba songs.
- (e) That verses of songs be as short as possible.
- (f) That the moving along of the song should, generally, be descending in thirds.
- (g) That stational notes should never be played with when composing.

- (b) That harmony is as simple as that in traditional tunes of Bembaland, and must be introduced by the people themselves.
- (i) That any song that is neither funeral nor *Musibakulo* must and should be accompanied with music instrument or clapping.
- (j) That any song composed is mainly for teaching, that means, words are what count.
- (k) That no musical rules or signs be introduced in Bemba singing, and that no choir leader stands in front to give the signal for beginning.
- (l) That songs which involve the singers to begin together be lessened.
- (m) That drums should be at least three in a song.

These are some of what I have found in my land about music. But about culture I have just begun and I pray that some of my fellowmen of Bemba may join me in what I am doing and that one day we shall be able to collect as much as possible and putting it together with what has come from Europe we shall sit as brothers and mix so that we can have one common way of living, not too much on the side of Europeans or, on the side of the Babemba.