

MUSICAL APPRECIATION AMONG THE SHONA IN THE EARLY THIRTIES

by

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INTRODUCTION

In the years 1932-1933 I undertook the first investigation into the phenomenon of indigenous music within Southern Rhodesia with the assistance of a moderate grant from the Carnegie Corporation and with the moral support and well-grounded misgivings of my friends.

Apart from the casual publication of a few indigenous songs no one up till that time had made any serious attempt to investigate this side of life of the local inhabitants, the so-called Shona, who in the sixteenth century had been called the Karanga, the people of the kingdom of Monomotapa. They now include five distinct groups, Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, Korekore and Ndau, each speaking their own dialect of the Bantu language "Shona", extending across the region between the mid-Zambezi and mid-Limpopo Rivers.

It so happened that I was far from being the ideal person by present-day standards to undertake the work from a musically academic point of view, as my formal education had ceased at the age of 18 and what instruction I had had in musical matters was minimal. However, what I lacked in conventional training may have been compensated to some extent by interest and an ability to achieve a certain rapport with African folk musicians which was unusual at that time.

Many months of close contact and conversation in the vernacular with transparently genuine folk musicians led me to postulate a number of conclusions about their musical sensibilities which were considered entirely novel in 1933 and were, in consequence, rejected out of hand by most of my contemporaries. So much so, that the report I wrote of my research findings was never accepted for publication by either my financial sponsors, the Carnegie Corporation, or by the educational bodies in Africa. Anthropologists of the period were preoccupied with "the sex life of savages"; musicology was in its infancy and looked upon solely as an exercise towards academic promotion and kudos, and certainly not as a foundation upon which future African musicians might build their distinctive craft, and educationists were busily struggling with the problems of introducing a "higher culture" to "backward peoples". So my report on African music in Rhodesia was born out of season, and has lain in my drawer ever since.

On showing it recently to an American friend, Professor Willard Rhodes of the Columbia University, New York, he urged me to publish the chapter on "Musical Appreciation" if not the whole report. Here, then, with minor corrections only, is the first appearance of that chapter seen in the light of conclusions at which I had arrived over thirty years ago.

A word of explanation is necessary regarding my use of the word "affect" as a noun, a liberty which I took in desperation in order to find an adequate translation of the Shona word *manyavi*, which had continually cropped up in conversation. The dictionary interpretation of "affect" v.t. includes the meaning "to move the feelings of". A noun derived from this sense would indicate "the mover of feelings" and be as distinct from "affectation" (a pretence or feigned emotion) as "sentiment" is from "sentimentality". Other, and perhaps more fortunate words such as "receptivity" or "interest" may spring to mind in retrospect, but since "affect" was the word chosen at the time I have not attempted to change it.

My investigations in those days did not indicate to me that the tentative theory of musical appreciation among the Shona as here set out amounted to a fixed belief which was generally held and expounded by Africans in that region. On the contrary, my deductions were based upon first hand impressions of the largely *unconscious* attitudes of sensitive Shona musicians towards their art. I had found that by formulating this empirical theory, conversation on the subject between the musicians and myself became easier with a higher degree of comprehension between us. An understanding of this point of view, however valid or invalid to a western mind, seemed to me to be as necessary as the acceptance (for purposes of research at least) of the common African projection of a "spiritual" rather than a "material and scientific" interpretation of causation as prevalent in the Western world.

It is in this light and within these limitations that I now present this early chapter in my work for African music as a step towards the better appreciation of music-making in one part of Africa.

THE NATIVE MUSIC OF RHODESIA 1932-33

"MUSICAL APPRECIATION"

How to measure musical appreciation has never been adequately solved. One can only hope to make rather wide generalizations of the Shona ability to appreciate music, especially in these days when European-directed schools have so strong a hold upon African children. It is through the children that they have launched a concerted attack upon local culture. African music is still active, but the semi-European music which is fostered by most of the schools has begun to show its influence.

Before we discuss musical appreciation, it is necessary to remark that the music in question is Shona folk music, their own national art, performed by native musicians for a native audience. It is important to bear this rather obvious statement in mind, as both supply and demand are African, and apart from a scientific study, there is no real necessity for Bantu music to be measured by an arbitrary European standard. Yet the advent of the European into the high veld of Africa has complicated a simple issue; hymns have arrived, not so much as music but as ammunition in a cause, with shattering effect upon local talent.

Foreign influence is only a part of the subject of African musical appreciation, though to us this side is apt to be unduly exaggerated if not to eclipse the real issue. It is regrettable how few persons have sufficient ability to rid themselves of national prejudices to enable them to estimate with any impartiality the artistic value of a foreign music. Most of those whose acquaintance with African music is more than casual are not even passive, but are in the field with the avowed object of propagating a creed and, in so doing, of destroying the traditional forms of indigenous culture.

Knowledge of Shona music is not sufficient; one has to be able to share it with the Shona, react when they react, to move to their rhythms and experience their ecstasy. You have to be on your guard against a tendency to underestimate certain aspects of African music if they do not happen to appeal to you personally, instead of noting their value to the local audience. Naturally enough, the average European does not care for African music, unless he can trace a semblance of a familiar idiom to which he can respond. The same is true of the African view of European music. A common ground of musical appreciation is therefore hard to find as the vocabulary on our side is so bound up with our preconceived ideas, and on his so inadequate.

It is commonly remarked by anthropologists that primitive people do not express themselves in what are called aesthetic terms. The truth of this statement depends upon the interpretation we give the qualities to which we can apply the word "aesthetic".

The question whether we project these qualities in a form intimately associated with ourselves, or whether we regard them as autonomous, having identity of themselves, is most important to this discussion of musical appreciation.

So far as European music is concerned, it has been claimed by authorities such as Dr. C. S. Myers, that the characterisation of music, (calling a tune "happy", "sad", "angry" music, giving it a name and so on) "is but a persistence of the primitive and deeply rooted tendency of mankind to personify all natural objects, whether animate or inanimate, and to regard them as independent entities, wholly apart from their practical value or their import to or effect upon the listener." "It is indeed", says Dr. Myers, "through this detachment from the human self of art-material and of its immediate experience, and through its contemplation for its own sake, that awareness of beauty becomes possible."¹ Dr. Myers here raises two important questions. Does the African personify his music, and if so, does he attain sufficient detachment from it to become aware of the aesthetic quality of beauty? However true this may be of Europeans it is certainly not the case in my experience of African musicians.

Let us go direct to the Shona for his ideas on the subject. Musical appreciation is dependent in the first and last place upon the performer and his listener. But between these two there is no direct but only indirect contact. The song or music of the player is only one of the links in the chain, which runs like this:

Rombe - Player		Mutereri - Listener	
Njere	Rgwio	<i>Manyawi</i>	<i>Chirombo</i>
Skill	Tune	"Affect"	Spirit
A.	B	C	D

The skill of the performer and the spirit of the audience are "personified", but not the tune or the "affect". (*Chirombo* is a general term for a spiritual concept including both souls and spirits, social or anti-social.)

The player by his skill (A) produces the tune (B) which stirs the interest, the receptive side of the listener's nature (C), which awakens the appropriate spirit (D) which in turn reacts in the listener. The skill of the player is personified. I here use the word "personified" not in the sense of an image of a human person, but rather as an "autonomous entity." This is demonstrated in the Shona cult of *Mashawi* souls, for a father will often say that he hopes the *Shawi* of his craft will awake in his son. As far as I can determine, neither the music nor the "affect", the "*manyawi*", are personified, but are looked upon as means to an end. "The music" is not a "thing", they say, "it has no boundaries." Indeed, unlike European music, the local music can rarely be said to have a beginning or an ending. The *Chirombo* on the other hand, is personified and is an essential part of the psyche of the listener. Thus, the personified skill of the performer through means of music gathered by the receptive *manyawi* can awaken the personified spirit in the listener. This is what the Shona himself says: "*Manyawi awanu akabva panjere dzawanu wanoziwa kuimba nokuridza. Shawi haribudi pasisina chino chokuridza.*" "One's receptive side is affected by (or stirred in accordance with) the skill of those who know how to sing or play. The *Shawi* soul will not appear without the means of music." In the same way the *Shawi* cannot be persuaded to overcome its natural shyness (one's self-consciousness) unless the *Manyawi* is first awakened by the music. This quickening of the *Manyawi*, they say, is in direct proportion to the skill of the player, and also to the mood of the listener. If the *Chirombo* of the listener is not thrilled, then the cause is either that the listener is not in a receptive mood or the skill of the player is insufficient. The awakening of the listener's *Shawi* denotes high skill in the player. Lesser skill will only awaken the *Manyawi*, and, although it may thereby give certain mild pleasure, it is insufficient to raise the artistic or religious ecstasy.

¹ C. S. Myers. The Psychology of Musical Appreciation.

The close affinity between art and religion in Shona mentality thus becomes clearly noticeable. The difference lies only in the manner in which the soul or the spirit is raised. The religious thrill is styled "*mutambo*", a feast, and the secular or artistic thrill "*katamba*", a revel; both are produced through the agency of the receptive *Manyawi*.

Of the *Manyawi*, there are said to be five or more distinct kinds:

1. *Manyawi wokuseka*, the "affect" of laughter.
2. *Manyawi wokutamba*, the "affect" of dancing.
3. *Manyawi wokuwuka*, the "affect" of divination or magic.
4. *Manyawi wokufunga*, the "affect" of thought.
5. *Manyawi wowurombo*, the "affect" of sorrow.

There is a sixth, known as *Manyawi wokutaura*, the "affect" of speech, as raised by intoxication and religious mania, which possibly does not concern us for the moment. No two *Manyawi*, they say, can arise simultaneously. For instance, intellectual cognition momentarily destroys any other form of pleasure, and although it may give pleasure in itself is destructive if it intrudes upon another. So also sorrow will destroy laughter, or laughter thought. This does not quite account for a complex emotion such as jealousy.

It is not difficult to see in these *Manyawi* three of the attitudes of musical appreciation described by Myers* under the headings of:

1. the intra-subjective or emotional
2. the motor excitement or suggestive appeal
3. the intellectual or critical consideration of music.

But Myers's fourth attitude, the characterisation of music, does not seem to be acknowledged by the Shona, who will say that a man is charmed by notes, but not by the tune; in other words, the skill of the player is the agency of the mysterious or magical potency of the music, and therefore it is only rational to maintain that it is the craft of the player that raises the "affect" and not the player himself. The art of music therefore is looked upon as a means, and is not regarded as a "self-active subject" to which one can apply human qualities, such as sorrow, joviality, playfulness, or stupidity. In every case music is regarded as being dynamic and indescribable except in terms of the skill of the player or the "affect" of the listener. This may well be described in one word as "magical", having a known cause and a known effect, but whose means are incomprehensible. This explanation may well account for the fact that as far as I can determine, there exists no satisfactory word in their language to cover the abstract terms "art" or "music" in the generally accepted sense in which we use them to express the whole phenomena of artistic and musical expression.

Let us take these *Manyawi* reactions in turn. (The word "*manyawi*" must not be confused with the similar word "*manyowe*". The former is "affect", the latter is "affectation". Mrs. Louw's dictionary of Chikaranga gives the meaning of the former as conceit or pride, which I believe to be incorrect, conceit being "*manyowe*" — an affectation.)

The first *Manyawi*, "*wokuseka*", is the pleasurable sensation in humour and laughter, which if carried to extreme will awaken the *Chirombo*, and become autonomous, possibly in the form of hysteria.

The second, "*wokutamba*", is the irresistible desire to get up and dance with the music, or to sway to the rhythm of a tune. The *Chirombo* is easily awakened by this means and both artistic and religious thrills are procured more often than not through dancing. Nearly all ritual is associated with the dance and consequently with the drum, the word for which, "*ngoma*", is synonymous with the word for a "dance" and also for "music". The *Zungu Shawi* of young people, they say, is most easily raised by song and dance through this Puckish *Manyawi*.

* *Op. cit.*

The *third*, "*wokwuka*", is the intense concentration evoked by divination by means of the dice, bones or religious symbols. It may be said to be the fascination of the arts of the diviner, a fascination none of us grow out of quickly. There are few who do not enjoy a visit to a conjuring show and a few women who can resist the attraction of having their fortunes told. Certain pieces of African music induce this atmosphere of pleasant mystery, as well as the activity of a religious dance.

The *fourth*, the *Manyawi* "*wokufunga*", is the intellectual appreciation of music, or, more correctly, of the skill of the player. It is aroused, they say, by a player who can achieve several variations (called *Mishandu* or *Mikandiro*) to his tunes both in melody and rhythm. In this connection they dissociate the thought process from the pleasure derived from the thought. It is possible to think about the intricacies of the music but we get no pleasure from it. But as soon as pleasure is noted, the *Manyawi*, they say, has awoken, i.e. the "affect" of intelligent appreciation. This is the nearest approach to an objective appreciation of musical beauty that I have been able to discover.

The *fifth* *Manyawi*, "*wowurombo*", is the "affect" of sorrow, which is brought about by songs of lamentation and mourning. In this case it is interesting to note that it is not the *Shawi* soul but the *Mudzimu* spirit of the listener which is aroused by the sorrow *Manyawi* for, as they say, "*unofunga kufa kwawakaeta*", "one thinks upon the death that it has brought." (The *Mudzimu* is said to be responsible for the death of an individual at the command of *Mwari*, the High God of the Tribe, and is the ancestral guardian spirit-complex.) This *Manyawi* cannot be said to bring a pleasurable sensation but a sorrowful one. It is possible for the European to say that he greatly enjoyed listening to a lament. But not so the African. He is sad with sorrow, glad with gladness.

From this it will be seen that the Shona does not characterise his music to the extent of obtaining aesthetic pleasure from the art itself, but only from his association with it. Again we are drawn to the conclusion of personal association and see in music the magical touch, the "participation mystique."

Valuable conclusions may be drawn from this concept regarding the nature of the Shona thought processes. At all points, it appears, they are intimately associated with their art, living it out as a part of themselves, a mystical and vital essence in their lives.

Perhaps in this one direction the primitive mind can be most clearly distinguished from the less primitive, or "civilized". Whereas the primitive does not dissociate himself from the magical means through which music works (and we might also include all art and religion in this category), recognizing both the cause in the artist and the effect in the listener or beholder, the European subordinates both cause and effect to his characterization of the means which he calls "Art". Art he describes in aesthetic terms, through flights of pure fancy, the qualities of which he believes to be absolute. Thus he can speak of Beauty, Truth, Ugliness, as if they had form and substance of themselves. There can be no such qualities unrelated to ourselves, our mentality and our art. "Art for art's sake" must be a meaningless phrase to the Shona if indeed it were possible to translate it into his language, for he has not falsely characterized the means, and has been content only to personify the ends.

Perhaps the most striking impression of African life obtained by a European observer is the vitality of his music. In it he witnesses a part of the man himself, vividly expressed to suit the mood of the moment, and not merely an acquired talent suited to the drawing-room or the concert platform.

In the villages the music is discussed only in terms of suitability. If the song or tune is calculated to produce the required result then it is a good song or tune. Thus at root, they have found the universal truth that suitability for purpose is the foundation of all Beauty. The more beautiful a tune the more powerful its effect. But a tune cannot be beautiful without good playing. So we get the African term for Beauty synonymous with *Skill* in its cause, and with "*Affect*" in its result. The greater the skill in the artist, the greater the Beauty in his art, and in consequence, the greater the "Affect" and

subsequent pleasure in the listener. Shona sense of Beauty, therefore, is wrapped up in the associated emotions, and not in dissociated characterization of art.

It is not difficult to perceive the association in the African mind of European music with European manners. If an African believes it is desirable to behave as a European and to join a Christian Church he feels it is only reasonable to sing the foreign music, or he will not expect to obtain the Christian form of religious thrill. To suggest that he can sing his own music in the worship of a "foreign" Deity must indeed seem revolutionary and a reversion to the associations of his normal (non-Christian) spiritual life. He is even prepared to accept foreign abnormality if the result appears to justify the strain of cutting away from home and kind; and indeed, he is not short of European advisers who, rightly or wrongly, urge him to do so.

It may be claimed that music of itself is a magical means to a definite end — a magic of which we are still deeply aware. Take, for example, the effectiveness of our patriotic and religious strains which are played to induce those attitudes of mind, patriotism and spirituality.

The teaching of European music in African schools appears to have created a false association of indigenous mentality with that of the European. The learning of European music has seldom increased an African's musical ability. In fact, the reverse is more usually the case for he neglects the very essence of musical sincerity in striving to attain a foreign veneer in place of natural inspiration. Africans who have succumbed to the foreign spell almost invariably show a lamentable lack of musical taste, partly, no doubt, because they have only managed to master the simplest examples provided by their foreign teachers. It is extremely doubtful whether European contact has in any way improved the African's innate artistic abilities. It certainly has added little to his mastery of artistic media, and the imitation of foreign mannerisms is no advance whatever; in fact it is only likely to accelerate the disastrous process of national cultural disintegration.

Until the Shona consciously revalues his arts in a more objective light, freed from the bias of a supposed inferiority of natural talent, we can expect him to be misled by his desire to capture what he imagines to be the more powerful European "affect", and to neglect the very things which are in reality the only cultural ones. The European counterfeit is at present burying the genius of African musicians, for the simple reason that where we Europeans primitively personify the *Means* of music, (according to Dr. Myers), they personify the *Ends*. So far in the race of culture contact in Africa, the *Means* appear to be ahead — but to what purpose?