ROWS OF SQUARES: A STANDARD MODEL FOR TRANSCRIBING TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MUSIC IN CAMEROON

Transcribing traditional African music is an arduous undertaking. On the one hand the musicians, composers of the music, stem from a long line of generations whose only way of passing their art to posterity was by word of mouth. They had no technique of preserving their art in writing. On the other hand, these oral traditions have been subject, for unforeseeable ecological reasons, to the often unpleasant after-effects of pollution, which, instead of helping them to develop greater vitality, often deal the final blow which leads to their disappearance. Yet these musics, as products of man's artistic and spiritual progress, embody messages of wisdom directed at all generations of our humankind. As such they convey not only well-crafted material forms capable of affecting our deepest feelings, but also modes of thought which can richly nourish and dynamically stimulate our creativity. It is in this sense that these musical traditions are worthy of interest and deserve our close attention.

Unfortunately our present world is going through a serious crisis, brought about by its own development. The current changes do not always guarantee peace and tranquillity. The industrial and technological complex encourages material consumption to the detriment of creative originality. 'Joie de vivre' is no longer the result of dynamic creativity but of facile rivalry among men to consume impetuously without lifting a finger. The lack of control of this impetuosity and the absence of a decisive solution to its after-effects are deeply worrying. We will not look reality in the face. We try to make excuses. A moral climate of confusion and treachery is created. Tradition does not inspire confidence any more; it is devalued; we try to abandon it and even turn against it. We consider it unenlightened. On the other hand, industry and technology do create, to be sure, extremely exciting and fascinating vistas. But they also cause such catastrophic increase in pollution that life is seriously altered by it. This disorients man, and pushes him to reconsider his situation. So he returns to his traditional past and attempts to bring it to his rescue.

The return is, unfortunately, no longer easy. Either the traditions have disappeared, or else they still survive, but hidden in the bush of a highly esoteric mentality, impenetrable not only to foreign intrusion, but also to the false-hearted. Thus it becomes imperative, if we want to return satisfactorily to our various traditional values, to go with empty hands to the few recognised scholars in our cultures of origin. We must do our utmost, whatever the cost, to regain their confidence and scrupulously to respect their liberties.

It will be to our interest, we who are attempting to return to the sources of our cultural originality, to know how to spend time with these traditional masters, in their homes, in order to receive sustained and regular lessons in the practice and theory of their traditions. They are more at ease in the natural context of their village, in surroundings produced by the eminently spiritual presence of an environment which is both friendly and conforms to their categories. I consider that one must accept the reality of one's condition, and adopt the positive values of one's traditional past without shame – without for all that ceasing to build the present – and use the modern techniques of the time to the full.

(Transl. A.T.)

A better future can only be guaranteed according to the degree to which we can restore strength and vigour to the essential positive values of our various traditions, by using duly selected and thoroughly mastered modern techniques. It is up to us, on the one hand, to discover and define these values better, and on the other to use the techniques of our time to build them into a solid base for harmonious development in present-day life. We shall thus be able to bring about, without useless rush or regrettable collision, a fruitful meeting between our traditions and the great values of foreign cultures, the latter being content with a subsidiary role in the improvement and completion of the great values of our own various cultures.

It was with this understanding that I wrote "Les Mendzaŋ des Chanteurs de Yaoundé".[1] I set out my personal experience of xylophones, which began with long experience with traditional masters at my home. After considering such aspects as history, organology, techniques of manufacture and use, I tackle squarely the thorny problem of transcribing the traditional music of our xylophones and accompanying instruments. This music and the instruments carry great positive value in the traditional culture of my ancestors. Not only have I lived and still live happily with them, but I have also used them to help the mass of people in my country to rediscover the intense delight and pride of belonging to the cultural tradition of their origins. Because the traditional scale of this music does not correspond to the Western tempered scale, I have perfected a simple and original new system for transcribing our traditional music, starting from the principles behind the traditional manufacture and use of our xylophones.

Creating and assembling the mechanics of a new technique cannot be done in a day. It develops gradually with use. In my book, as in the article "Les Mendzaŋ des Ewondo du Cameroun"[2] I have naturally paid more attention to formulating principles. I have only outlined the practical aspect in a few illustrations. To remedy this default and to contribute towards the actual use of the new system, I propose here a standard model of rows of squares.

In principle, in our new system, for a musical instrument which is played with *two* hands, whether alternately or simultaneously, we use *two* separate but co-ordinated groups of squares. If the instrument has only one keyboard, each of these two groups will thus consist of only one horizontal row of squares. This applies to xylophones, slit drums and membrane drums (Ill. 1, see French version).

For instruments played with one hand, whether directly with the palm and fingers, or indirectly with some object, a single group of squares will do. If the 'keyboard' consists of merely one playing surface, the group of squares will also consist of a single horizontal row of squares. This applies to *nkəŋ* (double bell), *nyas* (rattle), *kob* (clap), percussion sticks (Ill. 2).

For chordophones, if the instrument comprises one set of strings, vertical or horizontal, a single group of squares will do, each string (or each group of strings producing the same note at the same pitch) having its own horizontal row of squares. This applies to harps, lyres and zithers (Ill. 3).

If the instrument comprises two sets of strings and is played with two hands, we shall use two separate but coordinated groups of squares, each string having its own horizontal row of squares.

Our *mvet* falls into this category. Its strings are supported by a bridge which gives them the tension to vibrate properly. This bridge divides the strings into two

unequal parts. The shorter part gives the higher notes, the longer part the lower notes. This chordophone in fact comprises two separate sets of strings. Thus the fingers of the two hands are required to move separately. The music is transcribed accordingly, i.e. with two coordinated groups of squares, each string having its own row of squares. The first, higher group, represents the strings of the upper part of the *mvet*, that is, the shorter higher strings, which are above the bridge and towards the shoulder, when the *mvet* is in normal playing position. The second, lower group represents the strings of the lower part of the *mvet*, that is those which are both lower in pitch and held downwards towards the knee. Each of these two groups contains as many horizontal rows of squares as there are strings in the playing area of each hand, each string having its own row. A five-string *mvet*, my own instrument for instance, needs two groups, each of five rows of squares (Ill. 4).

As for wind instruments, I liken these to human voices, each voice having a single row of squares for transcribing its melody.

In order to show the practical application of this transcription system, I would like to offer here a few pages of notation of my own music, an extract from the 'Alleluia' from my 'Ebony Cross Oratorio'.[3] The orchestral accompaniment consists only of African instruments: an ensemble of four *mendzaŋ* xylophones *(omvək, akuda-omvək, nyia-mendzaŋ, endum)*, a *nkul* slit drum, a *mbə* large membrane drum, a *nkəŋ* double bell, *nyas* rattles, *kob* hand clapping. The *mvet* is also included, but was not used in the Alleluia on this record.

It goes without saying that I shall be very happy to receive any suggestions or constructive criticisms which interested readers may have for or against this new system of transcribing the traditional African music of Cameroon.