

AFRICAN RHYTHM AND AFRICAN SENSIBILITY,

AESTHETICS AND SOCIAL ACTION IN AFRICAN MUSICAL IDIOMS by John Miller Chernoff, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1979, pp. 261, photographs, \$20.00.

If mediation of one culture to another, inter-cultural understanding, is what ethnomusicology is concerned with, then we have in this book a Rosetta stone for mediating, or translating, African musical behaviour and aesthetics. There has been a gap in our understanding between the words spoken or written about the techniques and structures of African music and the hieroglyphic mass of African musical behaviour at the other end of the stone. Obviously the music must have organisation and rise from comprehensible human wellsprings, but we lacked basic keys to formulate it in English, or even in language at all. This book goes a long way towards remedying this by focussing not on technical analysis, as most writers do, but on the social and psychological generative principles behind African music. Just as a person's behaviour can be understood at a deep level by knowing his psychological set, so Chernoff focusses on such intangibles as African style, aesthetics and values. Dangerous topics for a non-African to tackle ... ones that many shy off, possibly for lack of experience or identification, or merely for fear of ridicule. But Chernoff jumps in with enthusiasm and dedication, even with naive zeal. In the same way as someone had to dig up and laboriously decipher the Rosetta stone, so Chernoff must have realised, unconsciously at first as he describes, that the only way to the knowledge he wanted was to go and do his own digging. This he must have done with a conscientiousness to equal Champollion's, achieving an intimate and well-pondered knowledge of several Ghanaian styles, not only in the playing, but also in the whole social ambiance out of which the playing arises, and to which he devotes most of the book.

He describes the shape of the book: "... we first accept the different principles on which African music is based, then we learn to admire the way it achieves excellence, and finally we can appreciate its movement and cultural meaning". Acceptance, admiration, appreciation are not always by any means part of writings on Africa. It is obvious that he loves and respects the people and their music. Does this necessarily make him biased or less reliable? What is important to me is that I cannot help reacting with shocks of recognition to so much of what he has to say, although my experience has been in parts of Africa very far from Ghana.

The book abounds in thoughts which ring true even though his methods do not seem to be notably empirical. Perhaps this is because of his background in psychology, among other things, which enables him to give what is for me one of the best written answers yet to the question: *Why* do Africans want to make music and *why* do they make it as they do? "As my involvement with African musical forms deepened, my observations reflected more and more my relationship to the surrounding social environment" (p.9). "I should try to consider myself as more than simply a student of their music present among them" (p.10). "... a researcher realises that the process of learning about and adapting to life in foreign cultures is as much a breaking down of the categories and concepts he has brought with him as it is a recognition and realization of the most meaningful perspectives he can establish" (p.20). And on a more sublime note, "... there is always need for new mediation to overcome boundaries in the name of love" (p.21). His close personal involvement with his music and his musicians is plain. Other ethnomusical scientists reviewing the book so far have evidently been disturbed by this degree of identification. In times past this would have been called 'going native' and looked on with horror. But those times are long gone and our 'scientific method' with its built-in 'observer/observed' structure is also becoming subject to increasingly critical attention.

He has discovered for himself for instance that the expression of human relationships in participation is the prime wellspring of the music: "... the most fundamental aesthetic in Africa: without participation, there is no meaning" (p.23). "... African music... has something to do with the continued workings of people's relationship to society ... offers a superb approach to

understanding Africans' attitudes about what their relationship to each other is and should be" (p.36). Here and elsewhere he acknowledges his debt to Robert Thompson, whose book "African Art in Motion" he quotes frequently.

The ticklish question has been raised of how representative his experiences are of Africa in general, as against Ghana in particular. Those who insist that Africa should be seen as a bundle of particularities (and who seem to defend their position with surprising vehemence) will not like Chernoff's referring continually to "African music" when he means "certain musics in Ghana". But he does not make claims for African universality, although I, for one, think that in many respects he could have. As another musician who believes that doing it yourself is the only good way to understanding African music, I find myself responding to nearly every page in the book. The A. M. Jonesian 'smile' will be much in evidence, I think, on all readers who really know their African music. (A. M. Jones wrote in Vol. 1, No.3, 1950 of the African Music Society's Newsletter, predecessor of "African Music", about the certain smile of recognition when Africans recognise a sound, or a process, that is truly African, a recognition which in my experience too shows the fundamental unity of African aesthetics). Certainly I have never underlined, circled or scribbled approvingly so much in any other book!

He is distinctly excited about his 'fundamentals' of African sensibility. In fact he offers so many 'most fundamentals' that one might wonder which is the most of the most! But it does not help to try to order his psychological insights strictly logically, as our Western training bids us. They have to be seen as illuminations of an African wholist and humanist world view that hardly responds to Western analysis. There are many propositions, admittedly, that Chernoff states and restates in endlessly different phraseology but to me this is not much of a disadvantage, as other reviewers have objected; his truths are basic, and to approach them from different angles warms and rounds out the illumination.

I feel I must share a few of the proliferation of quotable quotes from the book. They are not so potent out of context, but readers can easily refer to their own context of experience and see to what extent his observations hit the mark.

On rhythm: "In African music, it is the listener or dancer who has to supply the beat ... The full drum ensemble is an accompaniment, a music-to-find-the-beat-by" (p.50). "... the only way to hear the music properly ... is to listen to at least two rhythms at once" (p.51). "One rhythm defines another" (p.52). This last aphorism must naturally lead on to 'one person defines another' which surely applies to African views of personality. "... a good drummer restrains himself from emphasising his rhythm *in order that he may be heard better* ... (he) concerns himself as much with the notes he does not play as with the accents he delivers" (p.60) "A good rhythm, if it is to enhance itself, should both fill a gap in the other rhythms and create an emptiness that may be similarly filled" (p.114). The idea of rhythm being a progression of gaps strikes me as excellent, and places emphasis on the complementarity of African musical relations.

I appreciate his connection of *repetition* with *clarity* and *depth*. "... repetition of a rhythm often serves to clarify its meaning" (p.80); and again, "... a drummer uses repetition to reveal the *depth* of the musical structure" (p.112).

Talking about the problems of teaching Westerners African rhythm; "... even on a basic level a Westerner can find it easier to think about this sensibility than to exercise it" (p.54), i.e. that which enables him to enter a part intuitively and without counting. I give a shudder of recognition!

On values: "... my education in African music was an education in my awareness of spiritual and ethical principles" (p.140). "In the African context, performance in music and dance responds ultimately to a single aesthetic concern, the realization of community" (p.149). "... music-making in Africa is above all an occasion for the demonstration of character" (p.151). "A typical musical event ... presents us with a basis for an interpretation of African social life, an

interpretation modeled on Africans' own standards of order" (p.154). "It is not easy to be evil... when music is playing" (p.167). "While other peoples have focused the main force of their philosophical and religious energies on such issues as love, suffering or fate, Africans have devoted their greatest attention to the relationships of time and presence... people are constantly alert and ready to recognise each other, and they become extremely sensitive to the way they participate" (p.164).

The climax of the book is the description of the occasion when Chernoff mastered the "beating" of the Kondalia dance (p.139), a perfect moment in existence, when everything was seen with the clarity of perfection; looking, watching, seeing correlate with the intense aural awareness of the musicians and everybody else present. "At the moment when I saw all their faces clearly, I shifted directly into a complicated style. Ibrahim almost fell over backwards..." (p.139). I challenge anyone who has had the experience of learning African musical performance to give a better description of one of those typical 'high points' which can occur, sometimes inexplicably, in any kind of African music.

This brings me to my only serious objection to the book which is that in spite of the instinctive sympathy which one feels with it, one cannot tell to what extent Chernoff's philosophical thought coincides with African thinking. We need more direct evidence, more direct African contributions on the subject. I say this even in spite of the wonderful long quotes from Ibrahim Abdulai, one of Chernoff's main drum teachers, on p.101 ff and others. These too have to be reinterpreted and re-presented, and here I feel Chernoff does not give enough attention to other African thinkers, such as to musicological colleagues. In a sense he is outside the normal area reserved for 'ethnomusicology' which is one of the reasons that Alan Merriam, in his review in "Ethnomusicology" Sept. 1980, had such difficulty in perceiving the book's thrust. Part of his conclusion reads, "In order to understand its point of view, the reader must forget labels, and simply slip inside, perhaps much as he would with a good novel. I am not sure that this is a book to be analyzed as much as it is to be absorbed."

I certainly recommend strongly that it should be absorbed by any outsider attempting to understand African music, and culture besides. Its value to Africans may be less, perhaps because the hieroglyphics on their end of the stone read out in plain to them; they already have a fundamental awareness of what Chernoff has discovered for himself. But I expect that the most lasting value of Chernoff's steps towards unscrambling the code of African aesthetics will only come out as we start to see the vindications and the refutations which his book must inspire.

ANDREW TRACEY

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MUSIK IN AFRIKA: Artur Simon (ed.). Essays by Alfons Dauer, Ludwig Gerhardt, Herrmann Jungraithmayr, Gerhard Kubik, Artur Simon and Hans-Heinrich Wängler. Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, 1983. German text, 432 pp. 52 black and white, 11 colour photographs, transcriptions, drawings, two stereo cassettes.

Es ist eigentlich ein Wagnis, den Ausdruck „afrikanische Musik“ zu verwenden; denn es gibt keine afrikanische Musik, sondern nur viele afrikanische Musikarten.

It is actually a risky undertaking to use the term "African music" because there is no African music, rather many types of African music .