

BOOK REVIEWS

"AN ATTEMPT TO A KINYANKORE CLASSIFICATION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS", by PAUL VAN THIEL, W.F., Review of *Ethnology*, No. 13, 1969, pp. 1-5, Institut für Völkerkunde, Vienna University.

Father van Thiel has here attempted a novel way of classifying African musical instruments — by the verbs used to indicate the action made to sound the instrument. The Ankole apparently use four: *okuteera* — to hit, *okugambisa* — to make speak, *okushungura* — to shake as in winnowing, and *okubonda* — to stamp.

From a practical point of view, it is a pity that so many of the Ankole instruments happen to fall under the first heading, 13 out of 20. There are five in the second group, and only one each in the last two. This, to me, diminishes the usefulness of the system. A second point is that the author does not mention to what extent, if any, the Ankole themselves conceive the classification of their instruments along these lines. This must surely be an important consideration.

Having classified the instruments under these headings, the sub-headings follow the Hornbostel-Sachs system, which I happen to find inadequate for describing many African instruments, but that is beside the point. What is important is that van Thiel has used African terms as a basis for classification — an approach that is, and should become, the direction of movement in Afro-musicology.

ANDREW TRACEY.

"THE STUDY OF PRIMITIVE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS. Brief notes on some existing approaches and systems of classification", by DAVID RYCROFT, Review of *Ethnology*, Volume 1, 1969, No. 14, pp. 1-8, and No. 15, pp. 1-5, Institut für Völkerkunde, Vienna University.

David Rycroft comments upon different methods of classification of primitive musical instruments.

The primary object of any classification system for musical instruments is to reveal the intrinsic physical nature of the instruments concerned and so provide a standard of comparison for musicologists and others which can be readily understood. Either too simple or too complex a system will defeat its own ends but should be tempered to the range and complexity of the instruments to be studied. An ideal system would not only state clearly the *physical* properties of the instrument but also give an immediate idea of the nature of the music produced from it.

The Hornbostel-Sachs system of classification, of which the author approves, has provided the basis for several systems adapted to local conditions. However, Rycroft's recommendations add little to the clarification of classification difficulties when dealing with the specialised problems of African instruments. This may be, in part, the unfortunate method the printers have employed in setting out his improved system. A field worker in Africa would perhaps have difficulty in determining exactly what was intended. In addition several important aspects of instrumental description are omitted, such as the number of strings, slats, reeds, etc., the kind of scale produced, whether penta-, hexa-, heptatonic, etc., and no provision at all is made for detailed description of Africa's common and widely varying musical instrument, the *mbira*. Without such indications embodied in the decimal system it might prove to be adequate for the casual or museum collector of instruments, but ineffectual and even misleading to the student dealing directly with the instruments themselves and the music produced by them.

There appears to be no good reason why a system devised for any particular part of the world should have to conform strictly to one devised for all instruments of the world seen as a whole, provided always that the local system is thoroughly logical and by its very nature readily translatable, when necessary, into the terms of a general system. In this respect Afro-musicology in particular is only one part of ethnomusicology and must first work out its own solutions before it can contribute fully and properly to the wider universal problems of all musics.

HUGH TRACEY.

SONGS, DANCES, MIMES AND SYMBOLISM OF VENDA GIRLS' INITIATION SCHOOLS.

A series of four articles in *African Studies*, Volume 28, Nos. 1-4, 1969, by Prof. John Blacking, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Part 1. Vhusha; 2. Milayo; 3. Domba; 4. The Great Domba Song. Total pp. 186, 32 pp. ill., 12 pp. music.

"Lured by the promise of witnessing ancient fertility rites, dark-skinned maidens dancing to the throb of tribal drums, we found ourselves at last in the fabled kingdom of the Bavendas . . ." Thus might have started, at any time in the last hundred years, a typical travel magazine article on the so-called "Python Dance" of the Venda of the northern Transvaal, the name by which it is known to tourists, travel agents and the average South African who has ever heard of it.

Like a reporter for the National Geographic, but never having visited the Venda in their home country, I set out rather on a journey of exploration through the forest of social, textual and musical description contained in this series of articles by John Blacking, with the question in the back of my mind — will this simply provide more fuel for the sensation-mongers? My report is that, for those dedicated people who will study this work in its entirety, it should certainly dispel the aura of exoticism, old-fashioned African romanticism and eroticism which have surrounded this particular African dance,

and increasingly so now that it has become the darling of the South African film industry, viz. "The Naked Prey" and other films. Nothing does this better than knowledge. This must be one of the most completely documented and explained (in terms of Venda life) descriptions of an African initiation school ever made. As the author says, the purpose of his paper is "to draw attention to the human and intellectual achievements of the *domba* dance, and particularly of the words of the soloist." This I believe he certainly does, and has thereby rendered the Venda a great service. The question, of course, of whether those people who stand to gain most by this insight will ever read this paper, is another matter.*

Continuing on our voyage of exploration and coming to the music, the analysis of which is dealt with in some 20 pages, the question here is one of navigation. I was left, having read it, with more knowledge than I had before but also with more confusion, in spite of the author's formulation of no less than 85 "rules applying to the performance and structure of the *domba* song". Does the author really understand the principles which he formulates himself? I was happy to note his statement "... if anyone wishes to use this material for a demonstration or refutation of theories about ... musical structure, he is most welcome to do so". Happy only because this reflects so tellingly the dilemma of any ethnomusicologist faced with such a complex music and with the agonising question of whether or not he has projected the right theoretical framework onto it.

The framework which Blacking has found is the overall presence in much Venda music of the melodic and harmonic patterns of the *tsbikona* reed-pipe dance, their national dance. This was also the theory advanced in his book "Venda Children's Songs" (reviewed in *African Music*, Volume 4, No. 2). There, as here, *tsbikona* itself was not analysed, but the overall pattern was presented as an abstracted series of "chords" which show that it can be considered as consisting of a descending series of seven notes in a heptatonic scale, each note accompanied by its "companion" note a fifth lower (or a fourth higher). From this pattern can be generated any number of different melodies. The great *domba* song itself is closely related to *tsbikona*, particularly the part of it called *kehulo*, in which the *domba* participants sing and yodel fragmented pieces of melody in polyphonic style, in very much the same way as the individual reedpipe parts of *tsbikona* are combined. This we have to take on trust, because the actual construction of *tsbikona* is not demonstrated. In view of its evident importance in Venda musical life one might have thought it essential to explain it first so that one could then assess the relationship for oneself.

This study of the music of *domba* is particularly interesting to me as it shows so many similarities with Shona music, such as the use of yodelling, the low-pitched "*u bvumela*" parts (Shona — *kubvumira*), the tendency for contrary motion in vocal music, and in general the existence of a single harmonic/melodic regulative principle (i.e. that of *tsbikona*) which seems to underlie much Venda musical thought. I have found something very similar in Shona music, particularly for the many varieties of *mbira* (see my article in this number). In fact one particular sequence of notes used in *tsbilalelo*, the "dismissal" song of *domba*, which Blacking describes as being very common in Venda music, is perhaps also one of the most typical sounds of Shona music; in *tsbilalelo*: b' — d' — g' — b' combined with b' — a' — g' — f#. These notes, if extended by a final chord of b' with e' (which *tsbilalelo* in fact does, though not included by Blacking as being "typical"), are found in many Shona songs and are almost a model of the chord sequence or part of the chord sequence most commonly used on the Shona *mbiras*. I have also heard the same chord sequence on the Venda *mbira*. Another of the *domba* songs, No. 25, seems to show the same type of sequence. This would perhaps indicate a wider musical relationship than dependence on *tsbikona* alone.

Blacking's use of so many western musical terms, such as "tone-row", "dominant", "tone" instead of "note", standard key signatures (although he claims that something that looks exactly like a key signature is not intended to represent a key signature!), his special usage of "mode" and "scale", "tonic" and "keynote", all of which tend to move one's theoretical associations away from the music instead of towards it, are merely reefs that complicate the navigation and the understanding. With perseverance, however, one may reach the clear waters beyond and recognise this as an important work of original observation. And one which, incidentally, should get rid of this sort of thing:

"... and now, our senses sated with ceremony, with the smell, sight and sound of primitive, sensual Africa, we took leave of the proud Bavendas in their mountain fastness and returned to civilisation..."

ANDREW TRACEY.

"THE BANTU COMPOSERS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA", by YVONNE HUSKISSON, South African Broadcasting Corporation, P.O. Box 8606, Johannesburg, South Africa; 1969; pp. 335, illus.

Dr. Huskisson, who is Organiser of Bantu/Indigenous music for Radio Bantu, the African language service of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, has compiled biographies of 315 African (known as "Bantu") composers of South Africa, and three from South West Africa, giving portrait and such details, in English and Afrikaans, as life history, education, titles composed, hobbies, a classified list of birthday dates, etc. This is primarily intended as a teaching aid to complement the series of African language school broadcasts initiated by the S.A.B.C. in 1964. It is an outgrowth of the "Composer"

* What they would certainly do, if they were able to get hold of this scientific journal, would be to look at the pictures. I question the rationale of publishing 32 pages of pictures of bare-breasted girls in the course of a paper which is probably designed to correct the type of attitude exemplified in the sentence with which I start this review.