

Asante Ntamera Trumpets in Ghana: Culture, Tradition and Sound Barrage. Joseph S. Kaminski. 2012. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate. CD, 37 b&w ill., 27 music transcriptions, appendix, index, 226pp.

The first questions that come to me on reading this book are: Is this music? and How can there be sets of *untuned* trumpets in Africa, when there are so many of the tuned variety? By the end of the book, however, the reader is fully reconciled, persuaded by the author's detailed and thorough-going descriptions, which are aided by the full documentation on the CD. In fact his subtitle already gives more than a clue with his choice of the words 'sound barrage', the loud, combined, un-coordinated mix of any number of different instrumental groups all within earshot of each other, which is felt to give a spiritually protective ambience to the Asantehene, the king of the Asante.

The recordings of royal occasions on the enclosed CD indeed reveal a tumultuous 'noise' that calls out for sense to be made of it. This Kaminski has certainly done here. The important fact to be remembered is that the Asante language is tonal. Therefore *Ntamera* has to be approached as speech, not as music (whatever this word might mean in Africa). Certainly it cannot be described as tonal, and it seems to me only barely rhythmic. Much of the book deals with the texts 'spoken' by *Ntamera* groups. Kaminski himself is a trumpeter and was able to participate fully on royal occasions for the Asantehene, the implication being that he must have attained a level of fluency in the language. His confident writing gives the impression of quiet thoroughness and believability.

Many ensembles exist, particularly at the court of the king, and are described in admirable detail. Within the limitations of an ivory tusk with only two holes — the blow-hole and a tone-hole at the tip — the lead player reproduces the speech tones of the language, often 'speaking' praises and proverbs, while the six other trumpets in an ensemble repeat characteristic, recognisable one- or two-note rhythmic patterns behind him. Interestingly, the lead trumpeter opens the tone-hole for the *lower* sounds of his patterns, as these are easier to lip down when the hole is open. When blown firmly, the high open note is used only for cueing signals. Another valuable point is *Nkofe*, the name of one of the Asantehene's ivory tusk groups, *nko* (horn) + *fe* (to blow); *fe* links with the phoneme used for blowing in some southern African languages such as Nyungwe and Shona, related to the *vu* of the infamous South African football trumpet *vuvuzela*.

The 'barrage' is obviously considered important in Asante society for the protection and support of royalty, but the recordings would certainly not win any prizes for the beauty of the sound alone! "Intentional dissonance dispels evil spirits, and the greater the clangor, the greater the sound barrage". The barrage is reminiscent of many other co-sounding group events around Africa where musicians have the ability to concentrate on their own group's sound even when close-by unrelated groups sound much louder, especially to musicians who are on the outside edges. "The simultaneous performance of different songs ... is related to energy level and increasing intensity as each entry

comes in.” *Ntamera* is “not cacophony”, but is communal and spiritual, a “whirlwind ... leading to reuniting the ancestors with the living.”

However, the recordings are not necessarily quite as dissonant to all ears as the author makes out, partly because of the preference for thirds, which recur commonly between the two lower backing parts. These often move in parallel, at an indeterminate interval of between 300 and 500 cents, i.e. between a minor third and a fourth, with c.400 cents predominating. The author does not seem to mention this apparent preference, which is typical in the vocal music of southern Ghana and reminiscent of other parts of Africa where thirds are prominent.

Kaminski talks about “strong beats”. He is concerned with fitting the *Ntamera* sound into a metric frame, but how certain is he that it really exists? He might equally well have ascribed it to natural speech rhythm. There are no accompanying metric instruments inherent to a *Ntamera* group, but what about the players’ movements while they play? His concern reminds me of the Western musician’s constant need to “find the one” in an African cycle. I believe ‘Where’s the One?’ is even the name of a New York café! Without seeing the movement, I could not judge the real metricality from the recorded sound alone.

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