

CD REVIEW

Mantombi Matotiyana: Songs of Greeting, Healing and Heritage.

Michael Blake, Executive Producer. 2018.

Stellenbosch: African Open Institute. CD.

Distinguished bow-player, Mantombi Matotiyana, along with the Africa Open Institute at Stellenbosch University, has released an album of *uhadi*, *umrhubhe* and *isitolotolo* songs titled “Songs of Greeting, Healing and Heritage.” This solo offering is the first of its type from Matotiyana who has recorded and performed extensively and for many decades with the well-known Amampondo ensemble and Dizu Plaatjies’ “Ibuyambo” project. As a prominent South African multi-instrumentalist and composer, Matotiyana plays the *uhadi* gourd-resonated musical bow, the *umrhubhe* mouth-resonated musical bow and the *isitolotolo* mouth-harp or jews/jaw harp. These instruments are all situated within a diverse matrix of southern African overtone-based musical instruments. Matotiyana is one of the master musicians within this tradition, alongside Madosini (Latozi Mphahleni) and Nogcinile Yekani, among others.

Engineered, mixed and mastered by Dave Langemann, the production style of this release is clean and sparse. Matotiyana’s music is presented without adornment and the result is a powerful portrait of her musicianship. While Matotiyana is an astonishing musical bow performer, what is communicated instantly through this recording is the technical and poetic quality of her voice. Her songs, when accompanied by sung lyrics, are gentle warnings and reminders of how to live a good life. *Wachiteka Umzi Wendoda* (So the home of this man falls apart) reminds us how one’s home can come undone if one does not take care of it. She sings to her protagonist: *Yeke lento uyenzayo* (Stop what are you are doing). Songs like *Somandla* and *Umoya Uthethile* speak to a deep spiritualism, which is a recurring theme throughout the album.

Numerous tracks pitch bow compositions with their choral counterpoints, drawing a direct aural line for listeners between overtone melodic material and sung vocal lines. Bow player and academic, Ncebakazi Mnukwana, describes the importance of this demonstration of “the fluid transposing of the musical arts of bow-song from voice to instrument and back” (6, liner notes). *Molweni* opens with an upbeat *umrhubhe* composition woven from call and response overtones (bouncing between low and high) followed by the unaccompanied, interlocking choral version of the song. The result is effective. Here Matotiyana sings with herself, overdubbed, to create a complex and asymmetrical polyphony of her own silvery, vocal quality.

Much of the album is performed solo. Matotiyana does not need an ensemble and only calls upon other performers on certain pieces. The traditional composition *Wen’*

UseGoli is performed alongside collaborator, Dizu Plaatjies, multi-instrumentalist Ernie Koela and vocalist, Hope Mongwegi. This *umrhubhe* tune evolves into a fleshed out, vocal arrangement of a sorrowful song. The lyrics speak to the familiar trope of familial disruption as migrant labourers from across southern Africa leave their homes and travel to Johannesburg in search of work. *Luphelile madoda*, she sings, as love has run out in that city. *Majola* is another example of a thicker arrangement, drawing upon the bass and tenor sonorities of Plaatjies and Koela, to create a full a *capella* rendition of this song.

Like many composers of *uhadi* and *umrhubhe* songs, Matotiyana derives much melodic material from minimal lyrics. *Kubuhlungu Ukugula* is an example of how variation, meditation and vocables are used to expand upon a simple lyrical cell. As Matotiyana sings, “It is painful to be sick from the ancestral call, who doesn’t know that?”, her vocables and accompanying descending, overtone melodies mourn the emotional and physical predicament portrayed by these words.

The album ends with Mantombi telling “her story” in isiXhosa. While we may not have insight into why she chose to record particular songs or into the artistic decisions and process behind the arrangements featured on this album, this spoken conclusion provides a sense of her lineage, her personal acknowledgements and the value of this album to Matotiyana as both an artist and person. She describes how she met Dizu (Zungula) Plaatjies and how, since that time, he has helped her artistically. The heartfelt thanks that follows give insight into the challenges faced by many indigenous instrument players when performances and recognition of their skill is transient and slow to come. A transcription and translation of this text can be viewed on the “herri.org.za” online journal (see References).

As the first in a possible series of releases from the Africa Open Institute, this album is rich in beautiful black and white portraits of Matotiyana performing (taken by Aryan Kaganof and Michael Blake). Contextual information is provided by Ncebakazi Mnukwana and long-time collaborator and composer, Michael Blake (who initiated this project). A short biography is included for those who are unfamiliar with Matotiyana’s life and past achievements and Mnukwana provides background information on the music, describing the history and acoustics of the *umrhubhe*, *uhadi* and *isitotolo*, the recording process and the meaning of the songs.

“Songs of Greeting, Healing and Heritage” is a well-produced album and listening experience. Many listeners may be hearing these instruments for the first time but many in southern Africa are aware that quality studio recordings of artists such as Matotiyana are rare. While Matotiyana’s life’s work is sonically represented and this album forms an important contribution to southern African heritage, this recorded work is contemporary. It speaks of historic and current issues that are at play in

our society and societies the world over. The lyrics in these collected songs should give one pause – they are at once specific and universal, historical and current. As a composer and commentator, her moralism reminds us to take care of ourselves, our relationships, homes, heritage and land. Considering the current challenges faced by South and southern Africans, these themes, woven into the overtones of past times and different spaces with timeless sonic technologies, could not be more current. Amid the dense strands of harmonics, parallel harmonies and whistled tones (*umrhubhe nomlozi*), this album brings together song, sound, praise and story, creating a listening experience that is immersive and thought-provoking.

References

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