

RECORD REVIEWS

A review of the African Music Society's first issue of eight long-playing records in the "Music of Africa Series" appeared in the periodical *The Gramophone* (September, 1954) under the signature of the well-known reviewer, Mr. W. A. Chislett. In his feature, "Nights at the Round Table," a record review by the same writer appeared in the *Oxford Mail* to whom we are indebted for the reproduction of this article :—

THE FASCINATION OF THE TALKING DRUMS

Most people who read stories about Africa and less advanced students of African history (among which I number myself) will be surprised to learn that the sending of messages over long distances by relays of drums is confined to quite a narrow belt of country.

It is true that in many parts of Africa, as in many other parts of the world, information is sent by pre-arranged signals and that drums are among the instruments used for this purpose. But the "talking drums" are confined to a narrow strip of Equatorial Africa along the banks of the River Congo and its chief tributaries. Here there are no pre-arranged codes. The drums are made to produce sounds suggested by words in the local language.

How this is done is explained and demonstrated on a recently issued Decca record (LF 1169) made on the spot by Hugh Tracey, the Rev. W. Ford and two drummers of the Lokele tribe of the Upper Congo.

The secret of drum talking lies in the fact that the local language is based on a two-toned plan and in the use of correspondingly two-toned drums.

It is, of course, necessary to reduce the number of words to bare essentials, using the nearest appropriate synonyms in cases where two words or short phrases have the same "tone-melody" and rhythm.

To hear the talking drums speaking messages with explanations by Mr. Ford is quite fascinating. The fact that owing to their limited knowledge of English the drummers on the record do not always deliver the correct message merely emphasises its authenticity. When at the end the drummers go ahead on their own, calling out as well as drumming the words, everything is made quite clear.

On the reverse side of this disc a group of royal Tutsi drum rhythms are demonstrated. These come from the little kingdom of Ruanda, in which the unusually tall Tutsi caste, whose menfolk often achieve a height of six feet six inches and sometimes seven feet, are the aristocrats and are served by subjects of more normal size.

The Tutsi drummers are also heard on another record (LF 1120) along with those of other East African tribes. Of particular interest is a kind of Maypole dance played on 15 tuned drums of the Ganda tribe.

Although to the western musical world the word "drum" and the name "Africa" are almost synonymous, Africa is the home of many other instruments and some of these are demonstrated and explained in this remarkable series of Decca records made on the spot by the enthusiastic, tireless and much-travelled Hugh Tracey.

We can hear xylophones, end-blown flutes or flageolets and harps, as well as voices and drums, from Uganda (LF 1173); unaccompanied singing, bells, horns and rattles from the Congo (LF 1172); and the zither, flute, mbira (a small instrument in which the sounds are produced by plucking an array of metal or bamboo notes) and a horn band, together with voices and drums from Tanganyika (LF 1084).

The horn band is quite remarkable. The horns, which are straight, are made of sections of gourd pieced together. Each instrument can only produce two notes and a band therefore plays after the manner of our bell-ringers.

Kenya produces several sizes and varieties of lutes and lyres and the percussion instruments include castanets, rattles and bells (LF 1121).

Guitars of normal shape and size strike a more sophisticated note, but this instrument is far from being a newcomer to Africa. It was introduced by the Portuguese to their colonies several centuries ago. And a member of the same family, the Arab Oudh (called Udi by the Swahili) reached Africa still earlier. In more recent years the gramophone has enabled Africans to hear the South American and West Indian styles of playing and doubtless we shall soon get a new variety of the popular calypso.

A fascinating record (LF 1170) demonstrates how the guitar is played in Uganda, Kenya, Southern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo.

So great is the recently-aroused interest in African music that the Dr. Tom Osborn Memorial Trust in 1952 initiated a series of awards for the best recordings of African music for the year and these are now competed for annually. Eight prize-winning compositions are recorded on LF 1171 and in future years doubtless an "Osborn" will be as coveted an award in the new world of African music as an "Oscar" is in the world of films.

— W. A. CHISLETT.

NOTE.—All the above long-playing records can be obtained through the International Library of African Music—price 22/6, plus postage. Members of the Society living in the United States of America may obtain the same recordings issued under the London label Nos. LB 826—LB 832. Price \$19.95 the set or \$3.85 each.—Editor.