

BRIEF REPORT OF A MUSIC COURSE CONDUCTED AT SIRIBA FOR THE NYANZA MUSICAL SOCIETY

MUSIC, like so many other things in Africa today, is going through a period of transition. There are those who feel that genuine African music must always conform to the traditional patterns of the past. Others are of the opinion that the old music of the country cannot survive the severe shock of impact with Western culture.

In Kenya, the Nyanza Musical Society is quite outstanding in its intelligent approach to this subject. This Society which was formed as long ago as 1941 has two main objects in view. It exists to encourage the performance and development of the traditional music of Africa, and to introduce to those unfamiliar with it, the best musical traditions of the West. One way in which the Society does this is by the organisation of Music Festivals. Several years ago it was very wisely decided to plan a music course for all choir-masters entering choirs for the Festival. As a result, two things have happened. The standard of performance at the Festivals has improved enormously, and possibly even more important, there has been an increasing interest in the serious study of music.

At this year's course there were well over a hundred men and women present. One aspect of the course is specific preparation for the Festival held later in the year. In keeping with the Society's aims, each choir sings one of its own traditional songs. The choice and treatment of an African song for performance at a Music Festival is no simple matter and the problems which arise are discussed and guidance given where possible. Music, of course, has always held a very important place in African society; in fact, each event of any significance in the life of the individual, the family or the community as a whole, has had its own particular music. On the other hand, a Music Festival is at one and the same time a novel idea and an increasingly popular one. The task of wrenching African songs out of their social setting and adapting them for use on the Concert platform raises a number of difficulties. Choirmasters very naturally want to add interest to the folk songs they choose. These are all traditionally sung in unison and consequently one of the first things that happens is that attempts are made to add harmonies. Very few Nyanza choirmasters have had the opportunity of studying harmony and as a result, the harmonisations which they put to traditional melodies, are, with a few outstanding exceptions, unsuitable imitations of elementary Western harmony picked up by ear.

In an attempt to try and overcome this difficulty an interesting experiment was made during this recent course. This was to introduce the choirmasters to the idea of writing counterpoint in two parts, instead of prosaic four part harmony. The reason for taking this step was this. It is much more likely that an African melody will retain its original character if another similar melody is simply added to it in contrapuntal style, than if harmonies taken from rather dull Western music are made to support it, or even worse, are allowed to swamp it. During an eight days' course the amount of time available for this subject of counterpoint was very limited but the instruction given was implemented by concise notes which the students took away with them.

Besides the traditional songs which choirs sing at the Festival, set pieces are also chosen from the music of the West. All these are carefully studied during the course. Generally speaking, it is music written three or four hundred years ago which is most suitable for African choirs. The rhythmic interest of the music of that period, and its simplicity of melody are both much closer to contemporary African music than the more rigid rhythms and chromaticisms of later Western music.

At this year's course an introduction was given to the study of musical form, both in European and African music. For many Africans, Western orchestral music

cannot be appreciated until it is understood. One evening during the course, the Minuet and Trio from Mozart's 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik' was studied. The movement was carefully taken to pieces, examined and then put together again. Members of the course were intrigued to discover that music has as well defined a pattern as that found, for example, in colourful African basket work. The reason why musical patterns are not immediately apparent is that music is always moving and therefore to the inexperienced ear those patterns may well pass unnoticed. To remedy this the music must first be halted. This will provide an opportunity to discover what motifs there are, how often they are repeated, and how they all fit together to make up the complete pattern. Oddly enough, this evening spent in the study of musical form was most popular and the source of a great deal of genuine pleasure. It was surely a compliment to the lecturer that his enthusiasm was such that certain members of the audience thought that he must have had a little something to drink.

It was a surprise to all a day or two later to discover that fundamentally the same pattern as that of Mozart's Minuet was found in miniature in an African folk song. In many cases, the discovery of the artistic integrity and precision of pattern of the traditional music of Africa, greatly restores respect for it. Careful study of African music brings to light a number of difficulties concerning notation, particularly with regard to rhythm. A folk song was sung by a member of the course and those who knew it joined in with a clapping accompaniment. Without knowing it they were beating two against three, the song itself being in triple time and the clapping in duple. This example is one of the very simplest and in general, complexity of rhythm is one of the hall marks of authenticity in African music. There are those who scoff at any attempt to write down African music, and it is certainly no easy task. On the other hand it is intensely interesting and infinitely worth while. The sense of accomplishment when an African song is finally mastered in this way is most satisfying.

William Byrd who was organist to Elizabeth I, once wrote:—

“Since singing is so good a thing.
I wish all men would learn to sing”.

The future of music in Africa is secure in the African's feeling very much the same way as William Byrd. There is also a determination to raise standards and to make imaginative experiments in the development of the traditional music of the country. Altogether the outlook is clearly a good one.

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