

NOTES ON CANON LURY'S ARTICLE

Canon Lury expresses in this article (which we reproduce by kind permission of the Editor of *The Journal of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa*) several opinions which have been gaining ground throughout Africa in recent years. The African Music Society and the staff of the International Library of African Music have found increasing interest in the possibility of bringing scientific knowledge to bear upon this important part of mission work throughout the continent. We hope the publication of this and similar articles in our Journal will stimulate interest in new religious music for Africa, and it is with this end in view that we now add a few editorial notes in extension of what Canon Lury has written.

It will be borne in mind that music in itself has no virtue, save that which is given to it by usage and association. The emphasis upon 'wrong associations' by African converts may frequently preclude their taking a detached and scientific view of the music of their own people. In the same way that older generations of Africans were weaned away from African styles of music by the first missionaries, so must younger generations now be weaned away from the sterile compromises which have been the outcome of false associations.

The use of drums to accompany church music has already been tried with great success by the Catholic mission of St. Jean at Elisabethville, where Joseph Kimele has composed a *Salve Regina* to drums. It is published on a Long Playing record in the Society's 'Music of Africa' Series (No. 10, Decca LF 1224), and was given an Osborn Award by the Society. This item has created much interest throughout the continent and elsewhere, and was highly acclaimed when broadcast recently from Australia.

Plainsong was originally developed from melodies sung in unison before the invention of harmony, and was commonly used in pre-Christian times. Christian plainsong was largely Latin, and represents the evolution of a Latin style of melody, suited to the singing of prose rather than poetry. The use of plainsong, unmeasured and melodic, would undoubtedly be suited to African languages provided the tonal rules of the local language and not Latin were employed. The fact that Latin music has sounded more akin to African tongues may well account for the success already achieved in this direction. (See *Groves Dictionary of Music*, Vol. VI p. 811) Since the use of the most simple Tonic and Dominant harmonies have been the undoing of so much ecclesiastical music in Africa, a new start from sound principles of plainsong may well provide one solution to the problem.

With regard to the scales employed by Africans . . . we have already determined by accurate measurement that certain tribes habitually use pentatonic scales, others hexatonic and others again heptatonic. Several scales may be used in any one tribe, though it appears, at present, that a tribe which habitually uses pentatonic scales is not likely to be able to perform in the more complex modes or scales and will show a tendency to skip those consecutive intervals which are smaller than those normally employed by them. This may not necessarily apply to the more musically differentiated tribes. Thus a normally heptatonic tribe may find it easy to employ pentatonic modes, but here we find that they are likely to use the note or interval pitches to which they are inherently accustomed. This trait persists even in the singing of foreign hymns and accounts for the essentially African tone quality which is so characteristic of most indigenous choirs.

The adaptation of 'well known tunes' is, by and large, doomed to failure for the above reason. It is, in our opinion, not connected with the presence or absence of chromatic keyboard instruments. A very practical demonstration of this can be experienced in the singing of the excellent Namirembe Cathedral Choir at Kampala, Uganda. When accompanied by the organ the Choir keeps approximately in tune with the dominating organ, but as soon as the singing is unaccompanied by the organ, the tone quality of the Choir improves and reverts to their Ganda intonation. It is only European criteria (which may well be false in an African setting) which demand 'in tune' singing with instruments which are adapted to and evolved from the two tempered western modes, major and minor.

We have noted during recording sessions in Zanzibar and elsewhere along the Swahili coast a tendency on the part of singers to wander away from the pitch of the accompanying indigenous instrument. It is therefore not surprising to find that singers in the Cathedral there ignore the pitch set by the organ.

The ability to keep pitch during the course of an unaccompanied song varies from tribe to tribe. The majority of African tribes with whom we have recorded, go sharp during the course of a song. Some invariably go flat, a habit more common to European choirs. Only few maintain their pitch throughout.

In our experience the unrhythmic singing indulged in by some mission choirs is an art acquired from their foreign teachers, many of whom prefer to sing emotionally rather than rhythmically. The great difference in singing styles among the various denominations in the mission field makes generalisation unwise.

We do not advocate the use of artificial aids such as tuning forks to start an unaccompanied song. A good leader should invariably set the correct pitch for a mode. If such an aid is found to be essential in spite of training, then the construction of single wooden xylophone notes might be preferable. They are easy to make, and can be tuned in the presence of the choirs which have to sing to an agreed pitch for any mode.

The structure of modern Christian hymns (in the restricted sense) is based upon a class of sacred poetry which is foreign to African poetic forms. The habit of adapting the same melody to different poems is also foreign. The solution to the problem of an improved style of ecclesiastical singing in Africa may well rest within these two major directions . . . the preparedness of all concerned to use indigenous prose and poetry forms, and the renunciation of the habit of setting the same melody to different words or verses. The tonal value of African words, and in particular those words in which semantic tone and stress are essential, makes it imperative that melodies shall be linked permanently with the words for which they are composed and only loosely adapted to other words, word tones and stress, not melody, being paramount. This also raises the question of the proper use of harmony. Many tribes naturally use organum, singing in parallel or approximately parallel motion between the voices, where the same words are sung simultaneously. Reversion to the more common African form of antiphonal singing with solo and refrain may provide a temporary solution to the problem.

We would welcome contributions from readers upon this subject for publication in "African Music".

Hugh Tracey.