

A BANTU SUITE
for
PIANO, XYLOPHONE, WHISTLES AND VOICES

by
HEINZ HIRSCHLAND

1947 was the year in which I wrote three African works: Ngoma for male choir, with Zulu words, woodwind and percussion; "Valley of a Thousand Hills" for woodwind and piano, based on melodies influenced by the Natal missionary schools—and the Bantu Suite.

This work, which I performed on the opening night of the Durban Centenary celebrations in 1954, was originally composed for piano solo, but I felt that the xylophone, the most important instrument of the Venda and Tshopi, added to the character and colour of African music.

For a composer, trained in the European idiom, the problem arises how to bring this type of "barbaric" music into a plausible shape without losing its most important features.

The three main characteristics of Bantu music are its rhythm, its repetitiveness (fascinating, but also jarring to the white ear) and the downward trend of its scales and melodic motives.

These characteristics preclude a building up and developing of a piece—and that is exactly where the problems start.

The Bantu Suite consists of 4 movements:

1. *A Zulu, Abam' Nyama.*
2. *Durunduru.*
3. *Gwagirande.*
4. *Jongo*, based on a negro motive I found in Rio de Janeiro.

No. 1 opens with a barbaric touch: Piled up 9th and 11th chords are creating an atmosphere of wildness and primitivity.



The piece is composed in ternary form with an added coda and, in order to break the monotony, the motive is constantly repeated in a varied form, yet the characteristic downward trend is kept intact.



Lots of dissonances appear, particularly 2nds, 7ths and 9ths, in order to create a semblance of the shimmering xylophone sound and its natural harmonics.



In the middle part different motives are used and I tried to remain as close to the original as possible.



It is typical hammered xylophone music and the effect is almost like a mixture of Bach and Chopin.



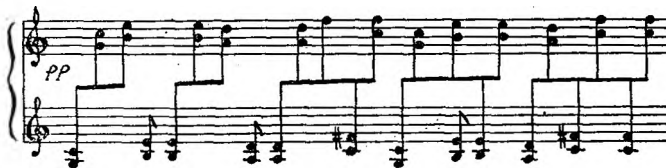
if such a thing were possible.

The third part builds up with a wild and passionate crescendo to a coda that reminds of a Chopin Polonaise, all the freshness, vitality and vigour of this primitive music is apparent.



No. 2 is the most lyrical of the four pieces. It is written for piano and 3 male humming voices. The dreamlike atmosphere is enhanced when the three singers are hidden behind the open lid of the grand piano and the voices seem to come from a distance.

The rhythm is free throughout and the melody seems to float in the air.



and later:



Unlike our endings that are prepared and logically concluded, Bantu music ends abruptly due to its lack of shaping.



No. 3 is again in ternary form. A typical motive, in pentatonic fashion, forms the first part which remains lyrical.



The middle part, with a scale-like motive works up to a vivid and passionate climax and the piano, in conjunction with the xylophone, brings typical passages.



The 3rd part ends almost romantically, the tune vanishing in the distance.



No. 4 is based on a Brazilian theme. Bartok's treatment of folklore and his free improvisational style inspired me and the barbaric touch remains throughout the movement, the piano being treated like a percussion instrument.

The rhythm is free and sharp dynamic contrasts provide the effect of a war dance, the xylophone adding to this expression of belligerency.



The style is often close to atonality, and despite the 3rds no definite tonality is recognisable.



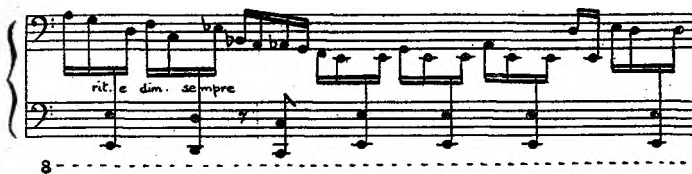
Some xylophone effect of harmonics.



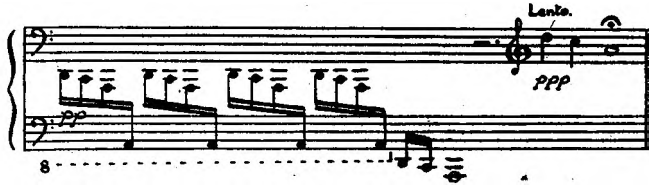
A turbulent climax is being built up.



Drums gradually fade away in the distance evoking a picture of a luscious landscape, full of heat, colour and mystery.



The Ending:



The "Valley of a Thousand Hills" was recently played on the Bavarian broadcasting station in Munich, I played the piano version of the Bantu Suite on the Dutch radio in Hilversum in 1955.

I am most indebted to Mr. Hugh Tracey without whose persistent research work in Bantu music this valuable music would have been unattainable.

My latest work is a full length opera, called "Johannesburg—Park Station".

Several African melodies in the original version are introduced which lend typical colour to the different native scenes.