ON TRANSCRIBING AFRICAN MUSIC

by

THE REV. A. M. JONES

There are two standpoints from which to survey African music. One is the impressionist point of view. This seeks to evaluate the total effect of the music on the listener or the performer. It is concerned more with quality than with detail; with descriptions of the people and the instruments engaged in making the music and the sort of sound they produce. It is an aesthetic approach and is therefore essentially subjective in character. It attempts to answer the question 'From the musical point of view, what is to be said about African music? is it beautiful? is it colourful? is it rhythmically virile? what does it sound like?' Such an approach has its value and yet by itself it can never reveal African music to the world. The reason is that it concentrates on the *effect* of the music produced and does not seek to discover the *way* it is produced. Were the fundamental techniques of African music-making the same as those used by the observer there would be no point in this latter inquiry. But if they are not, then in order to apprehend this music it is essentially to study not only its aesthetic aspects, but also, and we would say predominantly, the exact techniques used in producing it. In contrast with the impressionist, this is the analytical point of view.

The criterion of the reliability of an analyst's investigations is that he should be able to commit the music to paper with complete accuracy. That is, he should aim at putting down the music in such a way that an independent observer could, from his score, actually reproduce the music. Thus it is quite useless for the researcher to put down what he *thinks* the African sings or taps on his drums. That is subjective and valueless for exact study. He must contrive methods by which he can check his transcriptions so as to be able to *prove* not only to himself but to an independent observer, that what he has written is actually what the African has performed.

In a matter so complex as African rhythm this may sound a counsel of perfection. So it is: but nothing short of a transcription which aims at this sort of accuracy is of real value to any other research student. Unless we can trust the score of an analyst, its value as scientific evidence is nil. This business of transcription is, we submit, the key to the whole understanding of the African musical system.

It is the fashion nowadays with African music researchers to make large numbers of representative recordings on discs or tape. What is the value of such a collection? On the positive side, we have in semi-permanent form a selection of tribal musics which we can compare aurally; we can find obvious similarities or disparities and we can thus make distribution maps of certain typical musical features such as the use of instruments or the location of characteristic forms of singing. This is valuable: but apart from such limited research, disc and tape recordings are not likely to be of much direct assistance to the critical student, for the records only allow us to hear what we would have heard in the village with the disadvantage that we cannot see or interrogate the performers. We are confronted with a composite sound made up of the combined efforts of all the players. We have no means of discerning direct from the record, the exact pitch of the notes used in the melody. We cannot discover how the rhythms of the various percussion players are combined. For the serious analyst these limitations make the disc or tape an unsuitable basis on which to work unless special recordings are made from the purely analytical standpoint. From an ordinary recording of village music we cannot hope to transcribe accurately on paper what each individual is doing. So if we wish to understand African music we must shift the emphasis in our field work. It is valuable for reference to have a representative collection of music from all over Africa, but it is not sufficient. We should learn far more if the researcher were to spend his time in the village patiently

unravelling just one or two songs or instrumental pieces and producing on the spot a transcription which he can prove by internal evidence to be accurate.

There is, however, an important use of disc and tape which has so far been little exploited: this is the making of analytical records. Let us imagine a village dance. Everybody is singing, the women are clapping two different but simultaneous clap-patterns; there is a man playing one or possibly two rattles using rhythms which cross the clap-patterns: and there are three drums each with its own rhythm-patterns. It would be very illuminating if, before hearing the *ensemble* we could hear on the record the rhythm of each contributor played separately. There is nothing difficult about this: all that is required is to ask each party to perform alone. It would often be better still if while the whole *ensemble* were playing, the recording engineer held his microphone near each contributor in turn. We should thus hear clearly on the record the sound of each contributing element set against the faint background of the whole party of players. Having thus recorded the elements separately, the recorder should now proceed to the next step, which is to build up the *ensemble* player by player. He gets the first party to start, say the first clappers, then adds the second clappers, then the song, followed by the rattle, and then the first, second and third drums. If recordings were made on these lines, the listener would gain a very much more intelligent appreciation of what is happening than he can extract from a conventional recording. Such records are virtually non-existent and of course commercial discs will never give this sort of thing as they are designed for African listeners who already know by instinct what is happening. But it would be a great step forward in the scientific approach to African music if those who make records for research purposes, even if they are not musical themselves, would take the trouble to carry out this simple procedure. It is very thwarting to an analyst listening to a record to have to say to himself: 'If only I could hear these rhythms played separately I should know just what is being done'. In fact, were this procedure adopted, it might be possible to produce fairly good transcriptions of simple music from records.

While some form of mechanical recording is essential for the unravelling of all but the simpler examples of rhythmic counterpoint, even so the investigator will need to have had first hand experience of transcribing African music from living performers if he is to interpret his recordings correctly. We refer here not to disc or tape but to other laboratory apparatus. For the research worker nothing can take the place of the discipline entailed in the hard grind of direct transcription: it is an essential exercise which will well repay those prepared to master it. It brings us face to face with the fundamental problems involved and develops that detached critical attitude which takes nothing for granted and seeks for subtle checks within the score to prove whether the transcription is valid or not. This is the way above all others to become acquainted with what African music really is. It is superior to learning to play an instrument and taking part in an *ensemble*, for it is perfectly possible to do this successfully under an African tutor without having any real idea as to what exactly one is really doing, still less what the other performers are doing relative to one's own playing. We claim that it is possible to produce a transcription of simple African music which is rhythmically reliable, without the use of apparatus. This is a fascinating business: it involves the use of a good deal of cunning: it has the spice of adventure, for each song is a new challenge to the powers of observation and deduction: and there is immense satisfaction in being able to prove, as one frequently can, that the finished transcription is correct. We propose to describe how a musician should set about transcribing an African song. The method is based on the writer's own experience, and no claim is made that this is the only way.

We are not here considering the transcription of instrumental music and its harmonies still less of drumming. This is usually a matter of intense difficulty. One can hear the harmonies and name them as they are played, but it is often incredibly difficult to put them in correct sequence on paper, owing to the speed of playing and the in-

ability of the player to go slowly for one's benefit. We are limiting ourselves to the problems confronting a transcriber making his first attempts at a simple song.

The three fundamental factors which a transcription must show are the melody. the words and the time values for these. The words of a song are of prime importance in transcribing. Listening to an African song it is not unusual to be able to say, 'That is simple: I can sing it myself'. You then call the leader and ask him what the words were: you write them out and now you find to your surprise that there are far too many syllables to fit the tune you thought you heard. The truth is that the ear and the brain tend instinctively to simplify a song in terms of the music native to the hearer. We do, in fact, only hear on *impression* of the song and it is a fatal practice to try and transcribe a song heard at a distance. It is bound to be badly inaccurate. We must know, before writing a single note of music, exactly what words are used and how many syllables we have to account for. We write these words below a blank music stave: and we are careful to find out if there are any repeats: for example, when the cantor has finished singing the first line, does the chorus repeat the cantor's line before going on to the next words or not? Or if the chorus picks up new words straight away, does it repeat these words, and if so, how many times? Or if it has, say two phrases to sing, does it sing both of them once, or twice? or does is sing the first phrase twice before adding the second phrase as a *Coda*? These points are of great importance in determining the rhythmic structure of the piece as will presently appear.

Enough has now been said for the transcriber to make a start. He proceeds by steps in this order. He gathers a party of singers and tells them to sing the whole song several times. He listens with the intention of determining three points: first the approximate pitch (key), second the modality, and third, the nature of the repeats.

Next, with the help of the leader, or the most intelligent African present, the transcriber writes down all the words, including repeats, under a blank stave.

Now the song is sung over again several times. The transcriber starts to write in the melody. The best plan is to stop the singers and to get the leader only to sing the song bit by bit. Unless he is above average intelligence he will probably have to start at the beginning of the song every time, but that does not matter. This process is continued until the end of the song is reached. As to the time-values of the notes, at this stage the transcriber merely writes a rough approximation. He will probably find that the best plan is to make a quaver stand for the shortest note used.

The next step is the difficult one. It is the crucial step for the accuracy of the transcription from the rhythmic point of view. The step consists in determining the *time-line* of the song. Many songs are accompanied by hand-clapping or by stick-beating. It is much easier to determine the time-values of the hand-claps or stick-beats, which always consist of a steady regular pulse or of a short irrelular patter repeated *ad lib.*, than to determine the time-values of an African song-melody. It is impossible to do the latter without some yard-stick against which to measure them. To determine the nature of a clap or stick pattern, it is possible and necessary to use a system of cross checks. We should never allow ourselves to write down such a pattern by ear and then say: 'That is what I *think* it is'. Such a course is disastrous. One *must* know with accuracy, what this pattern is, and with suitable technique it can be found out. Anyhow, claps or stick-beating are the time-line of the song, and if we can observe on which syllables or between which syllables the claps fall, then we can determine the exact duration of each note of the song. We can do this also with canoe songs where the stroke of the paddle forms the time-line of the songs: with pounding songs: in fact any song which belongs to some rhythmic movement has a time-line and the transcriber *must* first determine the rhythm of the time-line and then proceed to mark in this rhythm on his score above the melody line. The adjusting of the time-values of the melody-notes is then mainly a mathematical process. A little experience is all that is needed, and having gained some proficiency the transcriber will marvel at the astonishing accuracy of even simple village singers. Their melodies fit with 100% accuracy

into the framework of the time-line and they never make a mistake in singing, or if they do, they are instantly aware of it and stop. The more one penetrates the details of African musical procedure, the more one marvels at its inexorable accuracy.

It must be clearly grasped that the claps in the time-line have nothing whatever to do with stress either melodic or verbal. The indication of a time-line above a melody fixes the time-values of the notes but gives no clue at all as to its musical phrasing. This is one of the peculiarities of African music. In Western music a duple clap would convey to our minds a sense of duple time, and a triple clap would suggest to a triple lilt and these rhythms would be reflected usually in both the melodic accent of the tune and the verbal accent of the words. In Africa, nothing of the sort happens. The clap is purely a *time factor*: it is impartial and neutral: it carries no emotional content: it merely exists as a metrical foundation on which the time-values, and only the time-values, of the song are built. Thus it is quite possible and usual and natural for an African to clap either a duple or a triple clap to the same song, if its total number of units of time is divisible both by 2 and 3, as is usually the case. Such a procedure makes no difference whatever either to the phrasing or to the accentuation of the melody.

At this point the importance of writing out all the repeats in full becomes apparent. The repeats are an integral part of the song. In order to discover the total number of claps which belong to the song, the African singer must be asked to sing the whole of the song, including repeats, and then start singing it again without stopping. The length of the final note of the song is an essential part of it, and this final note must have its correct number of claps. It is usually but by no means always protracted. If this procedure be adopted, it will be possible to count the complete number of claps belonging to the song and it will be found that this number is always divisible by 2 or by 3. If it is not, then the transcriber has made a mistake somewhere and correction should be made before finally putting in the exact time of the melody-notes.

A very usual time-line for an African song is a small rhythm-pattern repeated as often as necessary. This is musically more interesting than a steady clap because it is in itself a musical feature of the whole song, but it is more difficult for the transcriber. As the clap-pattern forms the inexorable rhythmic background of the song, there can be no possibility of accurate transcription till the exact time-values of the pattern itself have been determined. This is often, and indeed usually, by no means easy even when we know that these patterns are probably either 8, 12 or 16 time-units in length. We do not recall a single clearly established exception to this rule, yet this is not a valid reason for supposing that all clap-patterns are of such a length and that there are no exceptions. In other words the 8, 12, 16 rule is a pretty safe guide and unless the transcriber's notation adds up to one of these numbers he can normally assume that he has made a mistake.

In this short essay we have considered briefly only the fundamental matters affecting transcription and its importance. Much more should really be said about the whole matter. We have, however, emphasised the importance of transcription because of the great need of trustworthy transcriptions if the principles of African music are to be fully understood and if progress is to be made in the ethnographic and comparative studies of the distribution of African musical techniques. Unless a music score can claim a high degree of accuracy it is valueless for the study of African music. So much may hang on one small feature, and again it is so easy to draw false conclusions. Thus the aim of the transcriber at all times must be quality before quantity. A few carefully done transcriptions on which all possible checks have been made are of untold worth to the research student. What we need above all things at the present time in the field of African music is accuracy—accuracy of transcription leading to accurate and definite statement of facts.

NOTE:—Several items recorded by the I.L.A.M. and published in the "Sound of Africa" series of A.M.A. (long playing) records have been recorded in the manner suggested by the Rev. A. M. Jones, bringing in and taking out individual performers in turn.—EDITOR.