
KENYA'S COLONY MUSIC AND DRAMA OFFICER

by

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The Department of Community Development in Kenya realised long ago that a constructive and imaginative use of leisure can do much to fill the vacuum left by the abandonment in many instances of traditional forms of entertainment in Africa. The increasing interest in Music and Drama in the territory during recent years, particularly amongst the African population, seemed to call for a re-assessment of the role of the Department in these spheres of adult life.

At Jeanes School, the Colony's main centre for general adult education, it had been possible to make some contribution in this field already. Most of this however had had to be made during the vacations and it became clear that it would be detrimental to other work at Jeanes School even to attempt to maintain the contribution, and quite out of the question to contemplate increasing the assistance which could be given. There was an ever-increasing number of requests for help being made, and in order to meet this demand, it was decided early in 1957 to release a member of staff at Jeanes School from general duties in order that he might take up responsibilities as Colony Music and Drama Officer.

Music has always held a very important place in African society. 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. But music, like so many things in Africa today, is going through a period of transition, if not revolution, and there is a great need for vigilance with regard to present trends. Change and decay need not be synonymous, but it is obvious to the most casual observer that much is being lost that is of value, and much is being taken up that is quite worthless.

A great deal of valuable work has been done in the field of music for many years by voluntary organisations in Kenya, such as the Provincial and District Musical Societies. These societies have always shown a healthy self-reliance, by way of organisation and self-support, but as amateur bodies they have wisely sought help in matters which presented difficulties. It is at this point that the Colony Music and Drama Officer has been able to be of some assistance. In the main this has concerned three things.

- (i) Choice of music for Festivals.
- (ii) Training of choirmasters.
- (iii) Adjudication at Festivals.

The choice of suitable Western music for African choirs demands considerable attention. It has to be borne in mind that the scales used in traditional African music are seldom those found in classical or modern Western music. Bearing this and other factors in mind, it has been found that generally speaking, it is music written either three or four hundred years ago, or within the last twenty-five years which is most suitable for African choirs. The rhythmic interest of the music of these two periods, together with its simplicity of melody, are both much closer to traditional African music than the more rigid rhythms and chromaticisms of the nineteenth century for example. Morley's 'Sing we and chant it' or 'Now is the month of maying', Tye's 'Laudate nomen Domini', Vaughan Williams arrangement for male voices of 'The Jolly ploughboy' or his exquisite four part carol 'The blessed Son of God', all these are admirable and quite lovely.

Music Courses for the training of choirmasters very often serve a dual purpose. On the one hand they give choirmasters an opportunity to prepare for a particular Festival,

and on the other, they provide them with a chance to enrich their own musical knowledge and experience. Some Music Courses, in fact, are organised independently of any Music Festival and in this case the sole object is to raise standards of musicianship. With regard to the specific preparation for a Festival, this concerns both African and European music. Mention was made of this in an article in the *Journal of African Music* in 1955—Volume 1, No. 2. It was pointed out there that the choice and treatment of an African song for performance at a Music Festival is no simple matter. 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 and one of the first things that happens is that attempts are made to add harmonies and these are very often unsuitable imitations of elementary Western harmony picked up by ear. This kind of problem has been dealt with constantly at choirmasters courses with most encouraging results. African songs presented at Music Festivals throughout Kenya nowadays are sung with all their original strength and charm, and if a choirmaster attempts to 'gild the lily' he does so with great caution and with an increasing sense of musicianship. Besides this question of the African songs to be sung at the Festivals, the set pieces chosen from the music of the West are also carefully studied during the Course.

It is obvious that choirmasters must be able to read and write music competently. Many African choirmasters in Kenya have a good basic knowledge of tonic-solfa notation, but if their capacity to read music is restricted to this system, they will be severely handicapped, since only a proportion of the world's vocal music is available in solfa, and of course, no instrumental music whatsoever. One of the objects of Music Courses therefore is to give an introduction to staff notation, basing this on the student's knowledge of solfa rather than depending on a non-existent keyboard instrument.

There has been an interesting development from these choirmasters courses. They were first started many years ago in Nyanza Province, in the Lake Victoria area, on the initiative of an Education Officer. As a result standards of performance began to be raised and this has continued to happen. After a number of years, however, it was felt that some of the older choirmasters needed an incentive to carry on still further with their music studies. At the Annual Choirmasters Course in Nyanza in 1958, to which no less than 120 choirmasters came, the suggestion was put forward that some of them might like to begin to measure their musical knowledge against some recognised standard, such as the theory examinations of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in Britain. Ten choirmasters, nine men and one woman entered for one or other of these exams in March 1958 and everyone of them passed. In October six of them entered again for a higher Grade, and they were joined in the exam by two more, sitting for the first time. Again all of them were successful; one candidate passed Grade VI with 92 marks, another Grade IV with 90, another Grade III with 86, and five passed Grade II.

The adjudication at Music Festivals is of such importance that a separate article in this number of the journal has been devoted to it.

The number of Singing Festivals held in Kenya increases almost yearly. In 1958, major Festivals were held in Mombasa, on the coast, in the Teita Hills a hundred miles inland, at Embu in the foothills of Mount Kenya, and in the Lake Province where a whole series of local Festivals culminated in the Finals at Provincial level. There was also the Annual Colony wide Kenya Music Festival held in Nairobi, in which Africans, Europeans and Asians all take part, and to which people come from all over the territory. Schools too had their Inter-House Music Competitions. The European Girls' Secondary School in Nairobi devoted a whole day to making music in this way and the oldest African Secondary School in the country, the Alliance High School, has had a House Singing Competition for many years. The Colony wide Women's Club organisation

also organised District and Provincial Music and Drama Festivals which led up to the Colony Finals when the winners from the Provinces competed against one another for the much coveted Colony trophies.

A quite different kind of Music Festival was held for the first time in Kenya in 1958. It had been decided to hold a Music Course for African Instrumentalists, in order that more might be discovered about instruments that exist, how they are made, tuned and played. In one District which lies at the foot of Mount Elgon on the Uganda border, a lively African District Council immediately set about organising a local Festival of African instrumentalists, in preparation for this course. This proved a most delightful occasion and about ninety instrumentalists came together for a day's music making with stringed, wind and percussion instruments. It is very much hoped that this will become an annual event in that district and also that the idea will be taken up in other parts of the country.

Another article would be required to deal with the Drama side of Kenya's Colony Music and Drama Officer's work but in the first eighteen months of his work it has been proved that it was right to release him from other duties so that he could give help and encouragement in music and drama throughout the Colony, and it remains to be seen what future developments will emerge.