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## AFRICAN MUSIC IN RHODESIAN NATIVE EDUCATION

by

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Being the transcription of a talk recently given by the author to a group of visiting educationists at the Leverhulme Conference in Southern Rhodesia.

There is general world acceptance that the simple African native is possessed of unusual powers to express himself in music. This ready recognition confers very little benefit upon African music because it is too often prompted by indiscriminate appreciation.

The European resident of Rhodesia may applaud the ease with which the African copies the cheap and abundant music of these days and at times even improves upon it.

The visiting evangelist may be thrilled by hearing his favourite hymn heartily sung in piano-accordion harmonies with occasional consecutive intervals that touch the musical palate with the piquancy of a stray pickled onion in a dish of potato salad.

The modern dance musician salutes singing and drumming which his accustomed ear acknowledges as rhythmically surpassing his own intricacies.

The lover of folk music quickly learns that there is no folk song from anywhere in the world that has not its African counterpart.

With such wide support, based upon such a variety of right and wrong reasons one would expect that the African attitude to the subject of music in schools would be such as would secure for it preferential teaching and enthusiastic acceptance and practice.

It is, in fact, difficult to get pupils, teachers or parents to accept music as at all necessary in the curriculum. In rural areas, where the parents have had little or no schooling, there is still a thriving practice of folk music which owes nothing to organized schools. The adult African considers that since he himself was able to acquire knowledge and skill in music without going to school, it is unnecessary to waste the precious time available by giving school instruction in it.

Since the school generally insists upon the teaching of music, this situation is met in the African mind by concentrating upon the un-African aspects of music such as in acquiring skill in reading Tonic Solfa, in singing in vertical harmonies, in singing in English, in learning vernacular songs set in ridiculously twisted and inverted accents to European melodies, and in firmly resisting any yielding to spontaneous expression whatsoever.

It is difficult to secure fair treatment for African folk songs, which are thought to be too short and easy. European influence in the encouragement of folk music has not provided any strong lead. Had we been more ready to sing our own folk music, to demonstrate our own folk dances, then the African would have been quicker to imitate in his own medium.

If, when faced with crudities in African folk song, we had been ready to admit the presence of the same quality in our own folk song, as well as in folk-lore in general, we might have retained for the ambitious African an undisturbed respect for his own art, and a sense of discrimination in the practice of it, which would have countered the present African neglect.

There are, in addition, certain intrinsic qualities in African folk music which make its preservation or cultivation a difficult matter in these days of easy communications. Father A. M. Jones, of Northern Rhodesia, who has given long years to the study of African music, refers to these difficulties in his critical essay, "The Study of African Musical Rhythm". He describes an attempt to record in notation an African song by what he calls the Direct Method. After conceding that it might be remotely possible to write down the words and the approximate melody, and to add to that the punctuation of the handclaps, he says that the transcriber "realises that his transcription will not be

complete unless it contains the drumming correctly put in and related to both the singing and the clapping: in fact he ought to realise that up to this point he has recorded only the embellishment of the real piece, which is the rhythm of the drum. But let it be stated categorically that if our investigator listens to that drumming for a life-time, he will not, by pure listening, be enabled to write down the rhythms of each drum, let alone put it down in correct relation to the singing and clapping. The European is here completely out of his depth. There may be as many as four drum rhythms crossing each other: by this we mean that the first beat of the bar of one drum is not the first beat of the bar of any other drum. Each drum has its own starting point, and the combination of these cross rhythms produces one firm resultant rhythm which is that heard by the outside observer.

Added to these four cross rhythms, there is the handclapping which again crosses the drum rhythms, and the singing which crosses them all. The transcriber has to listen to six variant rhythms simultaneously, and each rhythm has its own main beat which may not coincide with that of any other. This is quite beyond the most brilliant musician. It simply cannot be done. It is in the combination of singing, clapping and drumming that we get the full impression of the characteristics of African music, and we cannot fail to realise that it is basically different from our own music. At the same time, here is something natural to the African, and although it is incredible and incomprehensible to us, surely there is here something vital. One feels convinced that the rhythms move according to rule; the whole pattern is shapely and intensely musical, yet it evades us. In many years of close study, and with the expenditure of not a little brain work, and even after having mastered the drum rhythms of each drum in two separate Bemba dance drummings, by learning to play them, the writer has not been able to identify a single example of either handclapping or singing so as to be able to transcribe either of them with certainty in correct relation to the drumming. The subjective method here shows its inherent incapacity to deal accurately with the problem of recording."

Although Father Jones accepts with moderation the value of gramophone recordings he is careful to point out that this mechanical aid makes but little difference to the problem of transcription.

This essay, which was published in December, 1937, concludes with an account of an experiment wherein the electrical recording of rhythms was successfully achieved. One feels that, with the improved mechanism available to-day, such experiment would be worth repeating on a wider scale.

Although certain factual evidence was made available by the experiment, Father Jones was unwilling to draw more than cautious conclusions. He did say, however,

"We expect no sort of help from the African with the analysis of cross rhythms. He knows his own drum, and how to incorporate it into the whole ensemble, but he has no analytical sense whatsoever. He cannot say what is happening."

Yet of the collective result he says, "Here indeed is harmony, but it is rhythmic harmony. It is the harmony of the drums and claps. They are music to the African—and music, too, to the European who has ears to hear."

Amid such difficulties does the European student attempt the transcription of African music. Those few Africans who have tried to preserve folk-songs have resorted to tonic sol-fa notation. With simple songs, creditable results have been achieved, yet the tonic sol-fa notation is inadequate to express African rhythms.

Here then, is the dilemma confronting the lover of African music.

Does one continue to attempt transcription, even if inadequate, into staff notation?

Does one give up the attempt, with the interest which it stimulates, and abandon folk music to the unequal struggle against cheap and abundant world music.

Does one salvage what one can by modern sound recording and thus preserve some evidence for African musicians who will bring at some later date the competence that is now lacking? The value of the recordings made by Mr. Hugh Tracey and the African Music Society can hardly be over-estimated.

A possible solution is indicated by Sir Stewart Wilson in his essay on "The role of Folk Music in Education." (*Unesco*).

"We must, in the present day, distinguish between the creation of folk music and its practice. In the past, the two were inseparable, but in many countries that is no longer the case. The evolution of folk music by means of oral tradition belongs primarily to the pre-literate stage of a community but its practice under present conditions is no longer necessarily dependent upon oral transmission.

There are many factors which tend to destroy the traditional ways of life: general education, growing ease of communication, the spread of industrialism, urbanization of village life and the consequent loss of a community sense. And traditional music making becomes more and more submerged by music that is "laid on" by the radio, the cinema and the dance hall.

But, paradoxically, some of the very agencies that have helped to destroy the traditional practice of folk music such as primary education and the radio, are now among those that are contributing most effectively to its revival and, in many countries, folk music which 50 years ago was the almost exclusive possession of one class of society is now known and loved by people in all walks of life.

Folk music has inevitably to a great extent become divorced from its former associations. We cannot, even if we would, restore the conditions in which folk music was made; nor is this necessary for its appreciation. Folk music must now take its place alongside other musical creations as a work of art, and it is upon its intrinsic merits that it will stand or fall."

In Southern Rhodesia over the past twenty years a number of musicians have studied African music in schools, and have been delighted with the folk songs in use, with the unusual skill displayed by African pupils in sight-singing while using tonic sol-fa and with the high level of appreciation of rhythm evident in all musical activities. On the other hand the massacre of song offered in worship, the concerts of block harmony minstrelsy, the easy surpassing of the best efforts of European crooners and croakers all appalled music lovers. This depressing picture is generally true, yet throughout Southern Rhodesia there have always been individual teachers, both African and European, who have set their own high standards in choice and performance of songs.

Recently the Southern Rhodesia Native Education Department, faced with the need to make the best use of teachers of limited qualification, decided to issue for the five years of school work a syllabus containing daily subject matter. It was my task to prepare the syllabus in music, providing for two lessons each week. In the absence of any song book in the vernacular, yet surrounded by denominational hymn-books none of which could be prescribed and none of which was musically suitable for use, I decided to try to restore the emphasis in teaching to activities related to indigenous music. The music syllabus begins with movement to song, continues with mime, and attempts through the use of sol-fa syllables and the chev  time names to impart skill in the use of staff notation. Tonic sol-fa notation is not taught, although the sol-fa syllables are used. The African teacher has an important part to play in the syllabus, for while the subject of each lesson is suggestion to him, the task of finding a suitable African song is his alone. As you would expect, the success of the syllabus varies with the skill and enthusiasm of the African teacher. It is too early yet to say whether the scheme will succeed, but first reactions would indicate that the subject of music is now moving in the right direction and that indigenous music is being encouraged.

There is the further point that if the African can achieve the same skill in use of staff notation as he had already demonstrated in sol-fa notation, the result may well be two-fold. The door of understanding of that kind of world art music which is not frequently heard on the radio may be opened to Africa, and, perhaps more important, the African may be able to open to the world the door of understanding of his own intricate music.

I cannot accept the view that African music is beyond our notation because of the unusual rhythm patterns which characterize it, or because of difficulties in the scale intervals used. Staff notation provides a most flexible record. We are aware of the rhythmic variation possible in the same piece of music played by different performers yet read off the same copy. Similarly the scalar intervals produced by a violinist playing unaccompanied Bach for example, may differ considerably from the performance of the same passage on the pianoforte keyboard. It may be that some additional symbols may prove to be necessary to accommodate African music just as certain modern composers have used additional signs to meet the requirements of an unusual interval or effect. I am conscious, however, of the increasing demand for the use of staff notation, which the African considers, as he does the English language, to be the door to wider knowledge. It is quite impossible to convince the educated African that he does not require staff notation in order to practice his own music, when he knows that the rest of the nations of the world, each proud of its own language, yet provides its music in an international notation intelligible to all.

This inevitable development will have its effect on the stream of African folk music. At the fifth Annual conference of the International Folk Music Council the following provisional definition was adopted.

“Folk music is music that has been submitted to the process of oral transmission. It is the product of evolution and is dependent on the circumstances of continuity, variation and selection.”

Increasing African skill in making a record should conserve the stream of folk music as had happened already in other lands. The stream may run deeper, and perhaps less clear, and it will certainly find new channels, but this is part of the price of conservation. Oral transmission need not come to an end, but is likely to be reduced, thus altering the process of evolution. Continuity might be strengthened, but variation would be made almost impossible, while selection would be influenced by factors other than the inherent appeal of the music.

There are other benefits which await African mastery of staff notation and these may be found in the realm of religious music. The Christian Church in Africa has hitherto failed to provide for the African Christian any considerable body of song suitable for worship. Father Jones examined a thousand European hymn tunes and found only three which could be put directly to African use, these three having a rhythmic structure which ended in a weak accent. It is possible to introduce adaptations to certain European tunes, but if the African church is to achieve sincerity in worship and be moved by the power of song in the vernacular, the tunes have to be found in indigenous music.

Of plainchant tunes Father Jones says “It is often urged that here lies the solution of our rhythmic difficulty. Part of the genius of Gregorian music is its free rhythm. There are no beats. The Solesmes Fathers lay down the rule that normally the natural accent of the words takes precedence over the natural rhythmic accent of the tune.

But is this a solution when we apply the principle to Bantu words? I submit it is not . . . Whatever adjustment may be made within the line of the hymn, when you come to the crucial test, the end of the line, you find that most of the lines end either with two weak accents or with a strong one. Both of these are quite impossible for use with Bantu dialects. The presence of one weak accent at the end of line completely

destroys the feeling of rest which should occur at these points . . . Certain compromises might be made, but the contention holds good that existing Plainchant tunes are rhythmically just as unsuitable as modern European tunes for the African to sing."

A further objection is offered by Father Jones.

"Plainchant is built up on eight different scales each having a different tonality. Most of these scales do not sound at all like our major scale. In practice we find generally that the African can sing plainsong tunes only when the tune sounds like one made in the major scale.

Again plainsong tunes often have several notes to one syllable of the words. Now in his own songs the African almost invariably sings one note to one syllable.

Plainchant tunes, just as the western tunes, must be chosen by experiment. Any failures must be cast aside."

This problem in religious music has been occupying the mind of Dr. Johan K. Louw, the representative of the African Music Society in Nyasaland. In the African Music Society's Journal for 1957 he wrote

"It is essential that music should be very much more an expression of the soul of the people than it is to-day."

During conversation with Dr. Louw last week I learned something of his plans to improve this situation. The effectiveness of African singing in worship, although it may appear to be a religious problem, cannot be solved by any appeal for greater devotion to praise in song. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" is a simple question compared with the task of singing the Lord's song in a muddled version of the mother tongue to tunes that don't fit. The answer cannot be brought into the church until it has been worked out in the school.

At a recent conference on adult Education held at this University College, Professor Mackenzie made reference in his lecture to the general benefits to the community arising from a proper appreciation of the value of the arts. Dr. Louw, who was present, returned to Nyasaland with the conviction that an African Music Centre for Nyasaland could be established, provided that the necessary co-operation could be obtained.

The centre would be attached to an existing school, probably the Kongwe Secondary School, where it would provide a constant stimulus to a large body of students. It would require a separate block of buildings containing a library, a recording studio, an arts and crafts room and would also provide simple boarding facilities for visiting African musicians.

It is most encouraging to record that Dr. Louw's own mission has given favourable consideration to this project, that other missions are interested and that related government departments have promised support. Up to date, the scheme is making very good progress.

It is many years since Mr. Hugh Tracey proposed a similar plan for Southern Rhodesia. One can only hope that the success of the Nyasaland project will carry the conviction here, that the establishment of an African Music Centre in Southern Rhodesia is not the provision of an educational frill, but fundamental pile driving upon which much educational superstructure can be securely based. Such a central institute might stimulate a movement similar to the People's School of Music in the Netherlands which aims at the making of Hausmusik, music for the home, rather than for the public. One longs also for the counterpart of the Rural Music Schools Association of England, patronised by Royalty, supported by the Ministry of Education and the Arts Council, and meriting the interest of conductors like Sir Adrian Boult.