

## CHANGING TIMES<sup>1</sup>

by

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Africa today is in the throes of violent social and political changes. It is in this social atmosphere and against this background that the African makes his music. Though this atmosphere and background may be more clearly defined in the urban communities, it is by no means confined there, for the urban worker on his visit or return to the reserve shares with his fellow tribesmen his urban experiences.

Ethnomusicologists and students of African music have too often become involved in the technicalities of music as an art, forgetting that it is one of the most spontaneous and revealing expressions of the inner life of the individual and the social group to which he belongs. Melville J. Herskovits, one of the first anthropologists to recognise the importance of music in culture, writes, "But it is at the core of anthropological thinking that each problem investigated be recognised as only one manifestation of one segment of man's complex culture, and that it be studied with full consciousness of its wide implications."<sup>2</sup> In discussing the comparative study of music outside the Euro-American culture sphere he states, "For its implications lead us to some of the most fundamental truths about the nature and function of culture, and suggest the importance of the contributions that investigations carried on in this field can make to the study of culture as a whole."<sup>3</sup>

To the extent that we are bound to our own culture, despite conscious efforts to be scientific, objective and dispassionate, there is always the danger that we evaluate and interpret African music in terms and concepts European rather than African. Because the African is rarely articulate in explaining the theory and aesthetic of his music the investigator is hard-pressed to penetrate the thinking and feeling of the creative musician. Nevertheless, this remains the prime objective of the ethnomusicologist's research. What value and meaning does the music hold for the native singer and instrumentalist and his participating audience? Hugh Tracey's unpublished study of Shona music, written in 1932, is a pioneer effort in this field and could serve others well as a model for similar studies with the music of other tribes.

In a paper pregnant with ideas and suggestions for new approaches in the study of African music, William Bascom writes, "It is my belief that we would better understand change in political beliefs if we knew more about the way in which music, the dance, or any other forms of traditional behaviour develop, and of how they are modified by the outside influences with which they are brought in contact."<sup>4</sup> The soundness of Bascom's belief is confirmed in a collection of political songs sung by two choirs of the Northern Rhodesian African National Congress and recorded by the writer in Lusaka in September 1959. The texts and the music of these songs provide an insight into the thinking and feeling of a sizeable body of Africans in Northern Rhodesia, Africans who are able and willing to rise above their tribal differences in the interest of African nationalism and the political, economic and social benefits which they hope to acquire thereby.

African music is basically functional. In addition to the pieces for the delectation of the individual singer or instrumentalist such as the music of the musical bow and flute, and a sizeable category of entertainment music for the enjoyment of the social group, there remains the vast body of music that is definitely associated with religion

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<sup>2</sup> HERSKOVITS, MELVILLE J.: *Man and his Works*, New York, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> HERSKOVITS: *Op cit.*

<sup>4</sup> BASCOM, WILLIAM: *The Main Problems of Stability and Change in Tradition*, *Journal of International Folk Music Council*, Vol. XI, 1959. Also in *Journal of African Music Society*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1959.

and the daily and seasonal activities of living. As the 'emergent' African abandons or relaxes his native religion in favour of Christianity changes in cult music become inevitable. Similarly as his pattern of living and employment changes he tends to cease practising the music associated with his former activities and way of life.

It seems a universal law that when a social institution ceases to function in the life of a society, the music associated with that institution and forming an integral part of the culture-complex is either abandoned or replaced by a new music adapted to the substitute institution. Numerous examples from the musical cultures outside Africa can be cited in substantiation of this principle. The American negro spiritual, developed in the days of slavery when the negro longed for freedom and a better life but despaired of attaining it this side of heaven, was functional music created and sung in response to a human need. Having lost much of its functional significance it is presently preserved as a folk art relic of the historic past. A new type of spiritual song, tuned to the temper and tempo of the times and directed to the social needs of today, has taken over the function of the traditional spiritual. The Sun Dance songs of the North American Indians of the Great Plains have died as the result of the prohibition of these ceremonial dances by the United States Government during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Their place in the religious life of the Indians has been taken by western Christian hymns sung in the vernacular, or the music of the Peyote cult, a syncretic religion combining native and Christian beliefs, practices and symbols which has been chartered in some states as the Native American Church.

African music is in a state of flux. Detribalization, urbanization and improved communication through the medium of the press, radio and sound film have accelerated changes that have grown to seemingly uncontrollable dimensions and in an irreversible direction. Repeated alarms have been voiced warning of the danger of the African losing his most precious heritage, his indigenous culture, and with it his music. The missionaries have been belabored for their efforts of the past in alienating the African from his music and giving him in its place the European Christian hymns, ill-adapted to the language and musical idiom of the African.

In view of the present chaotic and volatile state of African music, what attitude and approach is the student and amateur of African music to make? It is time to cease searching for an irrevocable past and accept the present for what it is. This does not imply a disrespect for or avoidance of the remaining survivals of a changing culture, but it suggests that more attention be devoted to the contemporary music. In an essay attempting to outline the scope and objectives of ethnomusicology I wrote:

"To these fields which we inherit from the past should be added two categories which seem rightfully to belong within the framework of our discipline, popular music and dance. By popular music I refer to that sizeable body of material which, while failing to qualify as genuine folk music or as art music, represents by its wide-spread popularity a musical expression of the mass of people who produce, consume and support it. In more complex civilisations this category would include jazz as well as most of the commercial music that clogs our air-waves. Among acculturated tribal societies and ethnic groups it would include all non-traditional material. The hybrid musics that have developed as the result of the impact of an alien culture upon indigenous cultures are rapidly increasing in quantity and significance. As they assume the social and spiritual functions of the traditional music which they displace they become ever more important as subject matter for the ethnomusicologist."<sup>26</sup>

The repeated criticisms directed to the missions for the irreparable damage they have done to African music are no longer generally applicable. A new generation of missionaries has appeared, men and women, many of whom have supplemented their religious training with studies in anthropology. Though they may have a limited understanding and appreciation of the native art, they do regard it with respect and with an intuitive feeling for its significance to the African. I have attended a special Sunday afternoon service of the Mzilikazi Baptist Church in Bulawayo at which the Africans re-enacted the daily life of the kraal with singing and dancing. At All Souls Catholic

\* RHODES, WILLARD: On the Subject of Ethnomusicology. *Ethnomusicology Newsletter*, No. 7, 1956.

Mission in Mtoko District I was extended the hospitality and facilities of the mission and allowed to record the singing of traditional songs by the young people after Sunday morning mass. At Matopos Brethren in Christ Mission and at Mrewa Methodist Mission I found the missionaries most helpful and cooperative in my recording of native music. Recognising the value of native music to the African, the Mission Board of the Methodist Church in America is sending to the Umtali Mission a former student of mine whose work will be the encouragement and development of an African hymnology within the Christian church. Times have changed and are changing. Rather than lament the passing of the 'good old days' let us make the most of what the present offers.

In my work during the past year in Southern Rhodesia where a greater degree of acculturation is to be observed than in many parts of Africa, I have been amazed by the number of native songs that I have recorded from the children in the government African Primary Schools in Bulawayo. This material is strong evidence that the African musical tradition is still alive and that with a little encouragement it can be brought again to flowering and fruition. If the final product shows variation from the ancestral stock it must be accepted as a mutation and the result of a natural evolutionary process.

Music is one of the most treasured cultural heritages of the African. It makes a direct and instantaneous appeal to his emotions and a frontal attack upon his motor-sensory system. The whole-hearted participation and complete involvement of the African child in communal music making reveals much information to the observer who is able to interpret overt behaviour in psychical terms. As the urban family ceases to function as it once did in the tightly knit and integrated life of the kraal, it becomes increasingly important that the schools assume some of the responsibilities of the home. What better way of leading the African youth to a sensitive awareness and pride in his cultural heritage than through the medium of music? Though the threshing, grinding and stomping songs and other tribal songs have lost their functional meaning for the urban youngster, they will still serve to give him a sense of cultural continuity and relationship with his ancestors for their language and musical idiom are his own.

Native Education Departments of governments have not yet taken full advantage of the resources of traditional music as an educational medium. Beset with the problems of a steadily increasing school enrollment, a shortage of qualified teachers, shortage of school buildings and an inadequate budget, the Native Education Departments have had little time or opportunity to explore the subject of music. We recommend that in the general interest of African education greater emphasis be placed on traditional African music. A course in African music in the curriculum of the Teacher Training Schools would not only serve to lead the future teacher to a new appreciation of his culture, but would provide him with a repertoire of teaching material and techniques for drawing from his pupils their contributions learned from their elders and their own original creative efforts. Such a course, if properly presented by an imaginative, creative musician, has unlimited educational possibilities in many directions. Governments have preserved in their museums the traditional musical instruments, many of which are rapidly becoming obsolete. Is it not equally important to preserve the musical tradition in the living voices and fingers of the African youth? Sound recordings on tape are historical documents for the future scholar. Their value in perpetuating a tradition is dependent upon the use that is made of them. Too often they get shelved in the dusty archives of museums, libraries and scholars' studies, unavailable to the large public to whom they would be most valuable.

African languages show no signs of dying. The changes which they are undergoing through the acceptance and adaptation of foreign words are evidence of their vitality and ability to maintain their identity against the powerful impact of an alien culture. Similar changes are taking place in African music. It is not for the student of African music to oppose an inevitable trend that is the result of the normal process of culture change. This changing music is his data, his material for study and interpretation.

If this changing music is to be more than an abortive attempt to imitate the music of the West, it must be rooted in the African traditions of the past. The preservation of indigenous music is justified not only for its historic and aesthetic value but also for its unique function as the foundation and source of a vital, developing contemporary music.

The literature of choral music composed in *tonic sol fa* notation by mission-trained African composers has been much maligned, and to no end, for it still remains very popular with choirs. Much of it has been unduly influenced by Western music, but I believe that further study of this material will reveal more Africanisms than meet the ear on casual hearing. Has any European nation produced a better or more moving national anthem than *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*? Is it not possible that this composed choral music may be developing into an African art form of the future? It is not to be criticised because it fails to develop into symphonic proportions. It would be unreasonable to expect such form and development from a people where the music tradition is basically vocal.

Opposition to and criticism of the use of *tonic sol fa* notation in the schools and churches is wasted effort that might be used more constructively in other directions. The system is so firmly established that even an edict from an authoritarian government could not eradicate it. In its favour I would say that I have heard African children, trained by African classroom teachers, sight-read from *tonic sol fa* notation more accurately, with the exception of modulatory chromatic tones, than the average American child is able to do from staff notation. School masters who have willingly cooperated with music collectors by having their children record traditional songs have been perplexed and hurt when the collector refused to record a choral number because it was not a pure traditional piece. Tape is expensive and the collector was evidently not interested in the performance, but in the interest of human relations. It seems that the visitor would have done well to have shown some interest in the performance of the choral pieces of which the schoolmaster and the children were so proud.

The African has accepted European culture as a desirable addition to his inherited culture. At great effort the adult African is studying English and the subjects of the European curriculum in night schools and through correspondence courses. He is equally receptive to and desirous of making and enjoying European music. To discourage or oppose this trend is futile and can only be interpreted as an attempt to exclude him from sharing in the musical culture of the world. If the African can be bi-lingual as he is, speaking his native language and English (many of them speak several native languages in addition to English), there is no reason why he cannot be bi-musical. By that term I mean the ability to perform the musics of two cultures with due respect for the individual style and character of each. African music should be played or sung in African style with traditional tone production and coloration, tempo, rhythm and abandon. Unless these stylistic features are present it becomes a pastiche of African music. European music should be played or sung with due regard for tone quality, phrasing, expression, dynamics and all those characteristic elements that cannot be communicated on the printed page but that constitute essential components of a traditional style. This demand for bi-musicality is not an unreasonable one. I have seen it demonstrated by school choirs. It is a matter of developing a musical style in relation to the parent culture.

The student of African music who would serve his discipline well and make his maximum contribution must study his material not as abstract art but as a living expression of contemporary Africans in a changing world. An understanding of African economy, social life, religion, education and political activity will throw light upon the music just as the music will often illuminate and explain activities in these fields. We must avoid limiting the African's progress by our own culture-bound concepts of him and his music.