

BOOK REVIEWS

“STUDIES IN AFRICAN MUSIC” by REV. A. M. JONES.
Oxford University Press, 1959. Vols. 1 and 2, pp. 295 and 238, 18 plates etc., 7 gns.

Last year there appeared a major study in African music, produced with great care and in great detail, by the Rev. A. M. Jones, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, who is also a Research Member of the African Music Society. Due to the obvious importance of a book such as this, we asked for reviews from a number of our members with interests in different aspects of the subject, in order to give a more comprehensive picture of the value this book is likely to have for students of African music.

Some of our reviewers have taken it upon themselves to draw attention to the shortcomings which they find; this being the way of reviewers. But in our view the value of this work lies in its attempt to explain some of the vital principles of African music, and particularly rhythm, to the world in terms that, if not comprehensible to the complete layman, are at least within the grasp of anyone with musical ability. It is only by means of major publications such as this, and not in purely scientific periodicals that the world can be properly instructed about our subject.

Anyone who has seen Father Jones demonstrating African rhythms on blackboards, tables or anything handy will recognise again his own great enthusiasm and his ability to raise enthusiasm in other people for something that is essentially and excitingly different from other world musics; his tenacity in sorting out order from apparent confusion, and the intriguing originality of his theories. The Society has special pleasure in recommending this *apologia* of one of our most experienced members who has had over thirty years of musical contact with Africans since he first left England for Northern Rhodesia.

Reviewers.

1. Rev. Brian Kingslake.
2. Dr. The Rev. Brother Basil.
3. James McHarg.
4. John Blacking.

1. The Rev. A. M. Jones, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, has now given us this *magnum opus*, the fruit of a lifetime of brilliant and painstaking research, albeit in a limited field. Its publication is a landmark in the scientific study of African music.

The work is in two volumes, the second twice as wide as the first—so that unfortunately they cannot stand together in any ordinary bookshelf. Volume I (295 pages) contains the text, with numerous thematic illustrations, also 18 full-page photographic plates, a folded map of Africa, and a folded graph. Volume II (238 pages) contains the musical score of eight dance ensembles, scored generally for two gongs, claps, voice (with words), and four drums.

We have been accustomed to think of the author as “Father Jones of Northern Rhodesia”; but, since his return to England, he has gone all West African, and the main corpus of material in this work comes from the Ewe tribe of Ghana. Even when he gives the score of his *Loila* dance (Lala tribe) he does so only to demonstrate how well it fits in with the standard Ewe gong pattern, which he prints above it throughout. Why this preoccupation with Ewe music? The answer lies in his fortunate meeting with an intelligent Ewe master-drummer named Desmond K. Tay, resident in London. In fact Mr. Tay is virtually the co-author of the book, as he supplied all the technical material. His name is not on the title page, but he is referred to continually throughout the text, and a magnificent portrait of him appears as the frontispiece.

While welcoming this fruitful cooperation, one feels a qualm of doubt as to whether it was wise to depend so absolutely on one man’s interpretation of the music. Would it not have been better for Mr. Jones to go to Ghana and hear an Ewe drum ensemble for himself and question other master-drummers?—or else to have confined himself to the music of Northern Rhodesia, of which he has first-hand knowledge?

The introductory chapter of the book makes a bad impression. The author begins by suggesting that no accurate transcriptions of African music have ever been made by anyone but himself—with the inconspicuous exception of a few bars by Natalie Curtis, Brother Basil, Rose Brandel and Herbert Pepper. Of the Hornbostel school, which he admits “laid the foundations of modern scientific ethnomusicology”, he says: they “tend to rely on their powers of abstract analysis largely from gramophone records”, and their articles, “though couched in learned language are based on no real first-hand knowledge” (p.5). But what of the transcriptions produced, for example, by Hugh Tracey and John Blacking of the African Music Research at Roodepoort? They unquestionably possess the necessary first-hand knowledge! And, considering the author is on West African ground, he might at least have mentioned Ekundayo Phillips’ little book, “*Yoruba Music*”, published by the African Music Society—the work of a professional African musician. Such sweeping condemnation or annihilation, by the author, of almost

every student but himself, puts the reader in a hostile frame of mind from the outset.

But this ill feeling quickly wears off, as one begins to follow him through his Tovey-like analyses of the music scores in Volume II—first of children's play and fishing songs, and then of more advanced material: dances of the religious cult-houses and dance "clubs", and the ordinary social music led by a professional master-drummer.

The analysis of the musical scores occupies five of the eleven chapters. Another describes, with photographic illustrations, the gongs and drums constituting the orchestra. Another two chapters deal with the homogeneity of all indigenous African music south of the Sahara, and give a thought-provoking classification of tribes on the basis of whether they sing organum in thirds, or in fourths:fifths (see the folded map). Another chapter enquires into the relationship between the tones of the spoken language and the melodies to which they are set. And a final chapter, on "Neo-Folk Music", shows the urbanised African's adaptation of European four-part harmony and the jazz and tap of America to his own idiom—this is also well documented with musical illustrations. An Appendix contains an attempt to help Europeans to perform the African drumming; though one doubts whether many will benefit much from it!

The author's approach is intensive rather than extensive. That is to say, he rightly considers it better to study a few items of African music in minute detail, rather than a great many only superficially. But this method has its drawbacks in limiting one's field. In large areas of Africa, where there are no big trees, there is no drumming at all.

To master the contents of these two volumes would require many weeks of strenuous effort by a trained ethno-musicologist. But even a cursory examination is well worth while; it introduces us into a strange enchanted world of pure sound, made up almost entirely of complex patterns of drum and gong taps. To call these "complex" is an understatement; the very thought of them makes one dizzy! Imagine two drummers playing together in cross rhythm, 3 against 2. Now stagger them so that they are out of phase. Now add two other drummers, and a singer, and clap accompaniment, all rhythmically at cross purposes and out of phase with one another. The whole is organised and held perfectly together by the regular beat of the gong, which itself has a rhythmical kink in it:



The result is a pulsating, scintillating network of exciting sound, as impressive in its own way as the most elaborate harmonic set-up of a European orchestra.

Some of us have had the experience of hearing these African drum ensembles, but have considered that an analysis of them would be quite impossible—especially as one element (that contributed by the master-drummer) is often improvisation. But Mr. Jones has done it! He employed a drum-recording machine of his own invention, by which drum taps were electrically recorded as marks on a moving strip of paper. This would have been useless, of course, without the collaboration of Mr. Tay, who was able to play all the parts in turn against the fixed pattern of the gong rhythm quoted above, in such a way that they could afterwards be correlated and synthesised into the full score.

To me, the most fascinating chapter in the book is one which relates the language tones to the song melodies. In all West African languages, the meaning of a word depends on the relative pitch of the syllables, so if sung to an unmatched melody it just makes nonsense. Taking one of the authentic songs, Mr. Jones set out to examine it from this point of view. First Mr. Tay spoke the words, and the frequencies of all the syllables were measured on a tonometer. These were then graphed against the melody. The correlation was found to be remarkable. Though the melody seemed to exist in its own right, yet over 90% of the notes were found to follow in the direction of the speech tones—up, level, or down. The author then examined the 1% of exceptions, and formulated some simple rules to explain these. It is an important achievement, and throws a flood of light on the vexed problem of how to set a tonal language like Ewe to music.

But doubts are raised by the tonometer scale given on p. 235. The frequencies indicated for the notes D, D \sharp , E, etc., do not, of course, correspond with the equal-interval "tempered" scale of our Western pianos, but what are they? They do not agree either with the so-called "natural" scale derived from the harmonic series. Nor do they agree within themselves, as in no less than seven cases (E, F, F \sharp , G \sharp , A, C \sharp and D) the frequencies given for the upper octave are not exactly double those given for the lower octave, as of course they should be. Is this, then, the special Ewe scale? If so, then we should have been told so from the outset, and the frequency ratios should have been indicated on the score.

The author writes casually on p. 217: "*Leaving aside the question of the exact tonality of African melodies, . . . African songs are diatonic.*" Does he mean diatonic in the European sense? All the scores and thematic examples employ the European staff, just as if they could be played on our piano. Not a hint is given^a to the "exact tonality", which in fact is "*left aside*" altogether! Nor are we informed that different tribes use a different tonality—which surely must be the case.

Apart from this one serious defect, the work is magnificent, and will surely become a classic, especially as a study of West African drumming. But it will not be used as widely as it should be, until it can be retailed at a cheaper price than seven guineas.

2. The work covers such considerable ground that in this short review there can be little more than rounding remarks.

The amount of patient labour the author has evidently expended in presenting his work with more than satisfying accuracy is amazing. This accuracy was greatly assisted by the use of a recording apparatus—a tonometer of the author's own invention, a fact which detracts not at all from the value of his work, and it is fair to accept his numerous musical transcriptions almost without question. Thus we are given a very comprehensive account, according to our convention of music-writing, of the various rhythmic and polyrhythmic characteristics of, in particular, Ghanaian music, common enough also in other parts of the continent, and often baffling to an attentive listener; a clear, final demonstration on the relation of *Tone and Tune*; an enlightening chapter on the *Homogeneity of African Music*—although we would rather say on the homogeneity of rhythm as demonstrated in his *Comparison of Drumming*; and a pertinent diagnosis of *The Neo-Folk Music* that is now flaring up from North to South.

Two thirds of Vol. I will have little appeal to the general reader, although the author's ethnographic bent pervades throughout as one of the most arresting facets of the work and brings occasional truces even to the specialist¹. Even as a specialist however one wonders if this section really takes one further in one's deciphering of African music. The author's musical dissections—for dissections they are—have undoubtedly the trade mark of a scholar and accomplished musician, yet one is not satisfied: African music is presented to us on a Western platter, from the beautiful studio photographs to the rich and thorough nomenclature of our musical system. Following the author closely, one cannot help listening to and judging African music with one's Western concepts, and thus it becomes subservient to a Western mentality. The author's sole informant, Mr. Tay, a very pleasurable personality indeed and obviously a fine musician himself, contributes little to alleviate the overall impression, because he also is at pains to translate his music into Western terms and concepts. There lies the gist of the matter in point. In an earlier work, the author had this to say:

*"It is, one hopes, not uncharitable to say that there is hardly an example of African rhythm in existence on which one would feel safe to build a theory . . . The whole problem of African rhythm is being viewed constantly through European-tinted spectacles. The subjective element is dominant, the value of the result is more than questionable. It stimulates interest but not conviction. It exposes the problem to wild hypotheses and theories for which there may not be the slightest trace of demonstrable and unassailable evidence."*²

Now it would be unjust to return these words against the author himself, for he has travelled a long way through the treacherous maze of the field and his modesty oozes, as it were, almost unnecessarily from step to step. But my contention is this: unless the African himself can master his own art to the point of being able to translate it into his own terms and concepts, and to graft our system into his own, not *vice versa*, until then we are ever complicating things for ourselves and no less for the African. We are faced with two different musical systems, and forcing one into the other will never do. Not even on the strength and accuracy of scientific instruments. These no doubt cover a vast field—in the present work mainly on a 'horizontal line'—but they cannot reach the subjective African element which alone would lead to an objective and final demonstration of the African musical system. One or two examples might suffice to illustrate my point.

On p. 17 the author writes (his italics): ". . . it is the claps which are the time-backbone of the song", then, on p. 19, for *Song 2*: "There is no clap for this song." The second statement weakens the first, even though we are told that the clap "has been superimposed on the music score to indicate (according to Mr. Tay) the underlying time." One has only to observe the first reaction of any group of African children and grown-ups whenever they hear a genuine African tune: it seems at first as if they had received a mild electric shock, then the bodies start swaying, the feet or the hands beat time, or it may just be the swaying of the shoulders or the head, and a dance is in progress. They obviously found the proper underlying time, clap or no clap, but could we assume that while the body, or the head or shoulders, were swaying there was some kind of mental calculation going on and that the underlying time they came to was what they were unconsciously looking for? The claps were put "to show where they would fall in relation to the song" (italics mine). I think this is as far as we can safely go to comply with our Western concepts and avoid the pitfall the author keenly points at. It is not possible to erect a system out of something that, in the author's words, "is so natural and unconscious for him . . . that he has to make a conscious effort to analyse" without introducing much of the subjective element foreign to the Africans. It is probably true that the same *Song 2* would be treated in similar way by a Sotho, or by any African for

¹ "The work falls into two separate volumes which are interdependent," but the two volumes are of different sizes and one has to struggle all the time with either volume in order to keep abreast of one's reading. How much more practical one book would have been, say 8 inches by 10 inches! And the price of one binding as well . . . This is to be considered, because a book is like a friend one likes to have around and talk to; even a corpulent friend, while two irritating ones . . .

² Jones A. M. *African Music*. 1949, Part II, p. 63.

that matter, the language being no barrier to his finding the proper underlying time, clap or no clap. As the author rightly says: "In whatever categories or families we divide the African . . . in the (African) world of music there exists no barrier";³ but this fact makes the problem more remote still as regards our subjective element; it intensifies the oneness of the African musical system as opposed to ours.

Again, on p. 75, while the author is aware that the melody of *Song 1* of the *Nyayito Dance* "is typically African", he dismisses its affinity with Gregorian modes on the ground that "the whole ethos of these African melodies is different". This may be true enough if we consider Gregorian modes in relation to *African music*, as the author did; but the same melody and several others in his work would lead to a different conclusion if they were considered *in relation to Gregorian modes*, as could easily be done, for instance, in the light of what Fr. F. Giorgiotti in his "*MUSICA AFRICANA*" describes as the "African music system"; and here the melody would show affinity with the eighth mode; the melody on p. 28 ends on the tonic, not on the dominant, as also on page 33.⁴ I might also mention in this connection the case of one of my students, a gifted youth from the South-West. He knows enough harmony to play a good accompaniment of his own for any Latin hymn (when we discourage part-singing), but I have not yet started him on accompanying plainchant. When the choice of hymns is left to him, two things happen: he prefers Gregorian hymns, and his accompaniment, understandably almost note for note and choral-like, is nevertheless unmistakably in the proper mode of the hymn he is accompanying. Two points should be remarked upon also: his accompaniment of Latin is often too brilliant and he has to be checked occasionally, otherwise the congregation is plainly distracted; secondly he cannot distinguish between Gregorian modes.

For all this, the Rev. A. M. Jones has established in no uncertain terms that African music, and in particular African rhythm, has a genius of its own, and that he is wise who can penetrate its *arcana* without fumbling miserably. Whether we agree that the author is that wise man totally or in part, the merits of his work are great and all his own, with due recognition to Mr. Tay, his intelligent and sympathetic assistant. And to pass rapidly to the rest of the text: the chapter "*Tone and Time*" illustrates, in the thorough and exhaustive manner of the author, the complexities of the problem brought about by the speech-tone line of any African language as applied to music. By implication, the study rules out once and for all, and *en bloc*, the long list of hymn books based on 'beautiful Western tunes' which flourish all over the African continent. It should deter any musically-inclined and well-intentioned missionary from embarking on the venture of adaptations without a good knowledge of the problem involved, or without the help of a reliable and helpful African guide.⁵

In the chapter on "*The Neo-Folk Music*", besides writing a fine page of history of music, the author diagnoses with great sympathy and understanding the appalling state of African music today as interpreted by the rising generation; that brand of grey music which is neither African nor Western, but a kind of pidgin or mongrel music which inflames the young like bush fire and has now attained the virulence of a plague. Certain aspects of the problem evidently remain open to discussion.⁶ Meanwhile, would that the better educated African, who often despises the genuine music of his people, ponder this clear cut appraisal of the author:- this new music "is a pathetic degradation and denial of the priceless African heritage."⁷ For these are the words of a man who has given the best years of his life to the service of the Africans and their music, and his love for both is as genuine as the "priceless heritage" he has, and still is, trying to save.

3. The publication of these carefully prepared and beautifully printed volumes represents a most important advance in the study of African music. Volume I provides the text-book, while Volume II contains the relevant musical scores.

These scores are particularly welcome, because, as Father Jones points out, so little written African music is available, and in his opinion, even that little is unreliable. In an essay published in Dec. 1937, Father Jones described his attempts to record African rhythms by electrical means, and the present work appears to be a development of that experiment, with the modern advantage of better equipment. Such a scientific approach to the preparation of notation is most praiseworthy, although the new scores available do not necessarily invalidate the accuracy of earlier scores written without the benefit of electrical equipment. Father Jones is not forgetful of the subjective factor which dominates folk music, but possibly

³ p. 200.

⁴ Cf. *Musica Africana*, Fr. F. Giorgiotti, reviewed elsewhere in this Journal. Also his description of a melody with a tritone, p. 90.

⁵ This reviewer has obtained, without tonometer, quite satisfactory results, by having the speech-tone line graded on ordinary graph paper, before attempting to set words to music. The lines thus obtained from two helpers, at times miles apart, show only negligible differences. But this does not solve another prickly problem: to find a rhythm suitable to religious music as understood by Africans.

⁶ On p. 261, what the author thinks "is just another case of adaptation from European practice" could rather be the effect of the strong pull exerted by the alto sequence, if the alto really sings F \sharp -G; even as it is, the tenor could be right at this point with the ninth note of the fundamental C. But in my opinion, far from being an adaptation it is purely African practice. When the cantor sings the first phrase he puts the chorus in a definite *mode*, not in a key, and the chorus stays in the same *mode* throughout the song. What name the African would give to this mode is immaterial, but we would say it is in key G. The fault is then in the song which tends to waver from one *mode* to another, while the chorus is trying to stick to its mode, thus singing D which is the dominant of G. This might explain also what we usually attribute to the inability of the African to modulate, when all he is trying to do is curb his mode to fit our keys.

⁷ p. 258.

he allows the confidence acquired from his scientific approach to impart a certain boldness both to his statements and to his disposal of the views of others. To speak of the "obvious inaccuracies" of others in the writing of any folk music is to invite question; nevertheless the author's forthright style is most refreshing. One cannot agree, however, with his easy dismissal of almost all other attempts to transcribe African music as "nothing less than a travesty of the real African musical system". Errors there have been, and there will be, but the author's own well-supported theories are not advanced by detracting from the results recorded by the work of others in this difficult yet fascinating field of study.

To make available the full scores of the music of African dances and songs is a mighty advance. There remains the problem of making the scores into live music for the listener. The attached performance scores are readable, but doubtfully playable. A possible solution might be to relate a series of records with pocket scores. Slight variations between the record and the transcription need not detract from the value of such transcriptions. In the world of art music there is a wide range in the available recordings of standard works, and much more latitude must be allowed in folk music.

Probably never before has so much intricate detail been publicly offered in the varied aspects of African music, including African songs, dances, dress, musical instruments and customs affecting folk art.

Interested musicians who have been unwilling to concede any unusual musical merit to the African drum should study this book. Those who have questioned the claims made by African musicologists that performance on these hand-made instruments is technically in advance of the efforts of art music percussionists will find much convincing evidence of the skill and thought which goes into a performance by a group of African drummers.

Father Jones' research into the basic elements of African rhythms is most thought-provoking. Of hand-clapping accompaniment to song he says: "The claps carry no accent in the African mind. They serve as a yard-stick, a kind of metronome which exists behind the music . . . They do not impart any rhythm to the melody itself. The rhythm of the melody is derived partly from the rhythm of the words."

It will be readily agreed that rhythmic regularity can be present in music without mathematical divisions of time or machine-like recurrence of stress. If the rhythm of the melody is derived partly from the rhythm of the words, it is reasonable to expect that variations may be occasioned by external factors not altogether controlled by the mental processes of the performer. These might include the movements or steps of the dancer, or even the physical efforts of the drummers. Intricate rhythmic patterns are only partially explained by the African musician's acquired skill in setting duple against triple rhythms and vice versa.

The recurring references to Mr. Tay confirm the impression that he is an outstanding African musician. It may be objected that in quoting him freely on matters where opinion might reasonably be divided there is a certain loss of authority. This appears to us to be inevitable at this stage, but is worth noting, in the hope that subsequent confirmation by further competent musicians may be possible.

Similarly the score shows Mr. Tay's "spontaneity within limits". Future scores may therefore show variation, but that need not detract from the conclusions drawn, providing these conclusions are based on general principles and are not dependent upon variable details.

4. I have already reviewed this book at length in *African Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, so that only a few general remarks are included here.

The publication of a book on African music by such an authority as A. M. Jones, and for the considerable price of seven guineas, leads one to expect a summary of the present position of research in African music which could serve as a reliable and comprehensive introduction to the subject, as well as new and significant contributions made by the author himself. Instead of this, we have a work which is unscientific both in spirit and execution, and which does not really take us any further in our understanding of African music than the excellent studies previously made by the author.

A. M. Jones ignores or dismisses summarily the work of other scholars, especially that of von Hornbostel and Schneider, and in fact we are advised to listen to nobody but the author himself; no bibliography is given, since all other published material is "either wrong or else contributes little or nothing of constructive value". In a work which sets out to be scientific, such a cavalier attitude simply will not do, especially when accompanied by a tedious and often polemical text which could have been edited down to half its length. The musical transcriptions in Vol. II are equally long-winded; if the number of pages of repeated notes was reduced they would be easier to read, and there would be room for over a hundred songs and a convincing quantitative analysis, instead of the mere handful of transcriptions which we are offered and asked to accept as typical of the whole Ewe musical tradition.

We are asked by the author to take rather too much on trust. The "Studies in African Music" are mostly studies of a mere fraction of African music, that of the Ewe of Ghana; but a few similarities between the drumming of the Ewe and of the Lala of Northern Rhodesia is considered enough evidence to justify the conclusion (in Chapter 8) that "musically, a large part of West Africa forms an indivisible whole with Bantu Africa". In Chapter 9 we are asked to believe in the homogeneity of African music, on the basis

of a cursory survey of less than a twentieth of the musical styles of the continent, excluding those of North Africa. We are asked to accept work done in England, with a selection of gramophone records and a single Ewe informant, as evidence on which to base a description and analysis of the whole Ewe musical tradition.

When the work of another Ewe musician is consulted, the author frankly admits (p. 234) that she does not sing the same song in the same way as his London informant, Mr. Tay; so that one cannot help wondering to what extent hundreds of other Ewe musicians agree with Mr. Tay.

In all probability, A. M. Jones is right in what he says about African music in general and Ewe music in particular, but we need much more evidence to be convinced. We would like, for instance, to see photographs of the Ewe dancing, playing and singing, as well as the series of posed pictures of Mr. Tay with drums and other things; we would like the opinion of other Ewe on their music, and an analysis of several different performances of the same song. Would people accept unquestioningly a description of Western music and its techniques given by one orchestral conductor or concert pianist? On matters of technique alone, quite apart from the more complex problems of interpretation, it would be hard to find two musicians who were in absolute agreement. A. M. Jones scuttles all his arguments against Hornbostel and others by doing the fieldwork for his book in London and not in Africa.

Many students of African music have been stimulated by the quality of A. M. Jones' previous work and by the audacity of even his rashest generalisations, which can be valuable as theories to be tested in the field. We hoped that when he wrote a full-scale book, it would be a detailed study of the music of the people he knew in Northern Rhodesia and at least a development of his earlier theories, rather than a mere re-fight of old battles.