

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From REV. BRIAN KINGSLAKE, Discovery, Transvaal, South Africa.

As a missionary and the editor of a Hymn Book containing a collection of hymns in Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu, intended to be sung to European melodies, I feel I must take exception to some of the extreme statements made by Mr. Hugh Tracey in his otherwise excellent article on "*The Future of Music in Basutoland*", in the last issue of the journal (Vol. 2, No. 2, 1959).

He calls such hymns "sacred gibberish" and "a travesty of mispronunciation" and refers to "this nonsensical convention which makes a fool of anyone who has any pretensions of being musically sensitive."

I should agree wholeheartedly with these strictures if they were applied to hymns composed in the Sudanese languages of West Africa. Most of these languages are highly tonal, so that, in Yoruba for instance, a single word may have up to six totally different meanings according to the relative pitch of the different syllables. In printing a Yoruba text, the tone of each vowel has to be indicated by a system of accent marks. The "pitch pattern" of the sentence is vital to its meaning and, in fact, if only the pitch pattern is heard, as on the talking drum, a native can get a fairly clear idea of the meaning of the sentence. Obviously, then, to sing such a sentence to an alien pitch pattern is to destroy its meaning. Mr. Tracey quotes Professor Parrinder of Ibadan University as maintaining that there is not a single hymn-book published in an African vernacular which does not make nonsense of the words; but this is taken from an article expressly on "*Music in West African Churches*".

The Bantu languages of South Africa are not like that. It is possible for a person to learn to speak fluent Sotho without even realising that tones are involved. The only familiar instance where pitch is significant is with "oa", which when said on a relatively high pitch, means "be", but on a lower pitch means "you". Fortunately this hardly matters in a hymn, as either pronoun usually refers to the Deity. (So in the Hebrew Psalms, both "*He*" and "*Tbou*" are used indiscriminately for God, often in consecutive sentences). There are, of course, a few other cases in Sotho where sense is dependent on tone—e.g. "*ba*" on a high pitch means "*if*" or "*when*", but on a low pitch it is the negative particle—but there can be no confusion as to the meaning, which comes out from the construction of the sentence. (In English we don't confuse "knot" with "not").

Since reading Mr. Tracey's article, I have gone carefully over a number of Sotho hymns in our collection with the Rev. Obed Mooki, an acknowledged linguistic expert, and in hymn after hymn we have found not a single instance where the tonal question arises. There is no "pitch pattern". The meaning is stable, irrespective of the melody to which it is sung. There is no "travesty of mispronunciation"; and to call these Sotho hymns "sacred gibberish" is to be carried away by a witty phrase.

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From DR. THE REV. BROTHER BASIL, Roma, Basutoland.

The Journal reached me a few days ago. We are in the thick of exams and I cannot in a rushed letter give the appreciation it deserves. Your article on THE FUTURE OF MUSIC IN BASUTOLAND—I guess it is the text of your lecture in Maseru—is the kind of writing that should be written on the walls of every rectory in the territory and also memorized by all our teachers, until both sides concerned would believe they are the authors of it! I thank you with all my heart for having written it 'first'. Be sure I will use the 'fuel' it provides me with. What I thought of your reports on your recording tours I told you already, and I have time only to say, "Again, please, again."

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From REV. A. M. JONES, School of Oriental and African Studies, London W.C.1.

Thank you very much for the generous space you gave, in *African Music*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1959), to the reviews of '*Studies in African Music*'.

May I take this opportunity to draw attention to the paragraph on page 85, which runs:-

"But doubts are raised by the tonometer scale given on p. 235. The frequencies indicated for the notes D, D#, 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#, G, A, C# 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."

Your reviewer is right off the beat. They are the equal-interval "tempered" scale, as given by no less a scientist than Sir James Jeans on page 27 of his *Science and Music* (Camb. Univ. Press, 1947).

Surely it is not difficult to see that Sir James' figures are expressed to the nearest whole number. Had your reviewer used the excellent Table of Cents you published, he would have observed that if Middle C is taken as 256 v.p.s., then the two F's below it will be approximately 85.4 v.p.s. and approx. 170.8 v.p.s. respectively: to the nearest whole number, 85 and 171, as Sir James Jeans gives them; and so for all the other vibration numbers.

From DARIUS L. THIEME, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, U.S.A.

. . . I am compiling an annotated bibliography of periodical articles on African music, south of the Sahara. At present my projected completion date is December 1961. In order to get out a useful bibliography as soon as possible, I am going to briefly annotate by use of symbols. The symbols will indicate whether the article has musical notation, illustrations, the particular geographical area dealt with, whether there are footnotes or bibliographic references and whether records are mentioned or a record list is given. I would appreciate any listings members might wish to send me. I am especially weak, at present, in coverage of periodicals in languages other than English in fields other than music. I noted, for example, an excellent series of articles in the pre-World War I issues of *Anthropos*, and feel certain there are other similar articles. I plan to include all languages (alphabets other than Roman will be transliterated) and already have two references from *Sovetskaiia Muzyka*. I plan to review the Varley and Merriam entries—those which apply will be annotated and incorporated. For the time being I am including book and record reviews. If space permits, these will be included. If not, they will be added in abbreviated form as an appendix. At present I am just about through listing articles in music periodicals in Library of Congress, and have scattered entries for articles in folklore, anthropology, travel and other more general magazines.

All offers of advice will be gratefully accepted, and all references which I do not already have will be incorporated. I would be exceedingly happy if they could be sent in on 3" by 5" cards.

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(Members interested are requested to write direct to Mr. Darius L. Thieme, 3786 First Street, S.E., Washington 20 D.C., United States of America . . . *Ed.*)

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From CH. V. RYTHOVEN, W. F. Mulilansolo Mission, Isoka, N. Rhodesia.

. . . Indeed we have here an interesting region and are making a lot of popular religious music. Better say: We try out, and with success, it seems. As I wrote already the "Lenshina" African Church has created and creates still real Christian music. We just learn a lot of her, she is what they call a "Ngulu", this means mainly "a composer of the highest rank". But we are doing the same, and I got from the Chiefs here already the name of a "Ngomba" (a composer of the second rank or degree). I cannot write you anything of this music. It is something as "Mupukumo" or "Mfunkeutu" but with long devoted holds of nearly always exactly "six beats, after every short phrase". I revised all the songs I made at Lubushi Seminary and I feel they appeal enormously, so that Catholic girls from ten to fifteen miles away come in groups to the station here to learn them for five or six days. They repeat them endlessly, for hours and hours. We are here in the heart of the Bemba land, with the burial place of the Paramount Chief only twelve miles from the Mission station. I have already ordered an excellent bush-tape-recorder from Germany. It must be somewhere in Beira now.

I am enjoying the African music in the bush-villages, and it is a delight to go on safari for me. But everywhere they want also to sing for hours the adapted Church-songs at the camp fires. Really we forgot in the spreading of Christianising that the African is a man who lives with and by music.

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From J. H. KWABENA NKETIA, University College of Ghana.

. . . You may be interested to know that the Institute of African Studies . . . has now been established and I have transferred to it. I shall send you some comments on the Project you sent me. I am of course all in favour of making as wide a coverage of the music of Africa as possible on the lines you suggest, and would be willing to participate in the scheme.

I have been very busy trying to get a couple of books done. My monograph of 'Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana' is in the press. Thomas Nelson and Sons are publishing it for the University College. Longmans Green have accepted for publication the first of a series of surveys of 'African Music in Ghana'. It will be paid for by the Arts Council of Ghana. I have almost completed the first of a project series of 'Folk Songs of Ghana'. The Publications Board of the University College is waiting to consider this. I have also been asked by the Board to put together all my essays on African Music for publication.

In addition, to all these, I try to do a bit of field work for other monographs I have in mind or simply to expand my present collection. I broadcast quite often, take part now and then in Concerts of Ghana music, or give public lectures from time to time . . . There is a growing interest in the development of African music at the University College both in extracurricular programmes and in formal courses.

In April I had an unexpected invitation from the International Music Council to attend an International Congress in Teheran on the 'Preservation of tradition and learned forms of classical and folk music in the countries of the Orient and the Occident' and to read a paper on *Continuity of Traditional Instruction*. African music was an after-thought as I was the only person from Subsaharan Africa. But it was an interesting experience for me and a wonderful opportunity to meet musicologists, composers and performers from different parts of the world, some of whom I only knew by name.

From A. T. N. TRACEY, International Library of African Music, Roodepoort, Transvaal, South Africa.

Letter to the Editor of the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society.

Dear Sir,

I feel that some of the musical evidence in A. M. Jones's recent article "Indonesia and Africa: The Xylophone as a Culture-Indicator" ought to be commented on; the other non-musical evidence, convincing as it is, is not essential to his main theme.

Firstly, it must be remembered that we are dealing with peoples most of whom are extremely musically sensitive and pitch-conscious, and able to reproduce at a distance not only the degrees of their scale but also its exact pitch to an extraordinary degree of accuracy. Such peoples as the Chopi, when they leave their homes for the mines, do not normally take their xylophones with them; they make them on the mines, and with nothing more than memory, or "perfect pitch", they tune them to within one vibration per second of those at home. Others are equally fastidious in the precise tuning of their instruments. Jones's main thesis, that Siamese-Indonesian *pelog* and *slendro* tunings are "the same" as African tunings, is not borne out by the figures which he quotes himself, some of which differ from each other by such relatively large amounts as 74 cents, or three-quarters of a tempered semi-tone. To any of the musicians involved, the other scales would quite definitely feel "out of tune", and as such it is doubtful whether they can immediately be considered as "the same". Jones's theory depends on the supposed colonists, and the Africans themselves, having a particularly sensitive ear for pitch, yet the differences in the scales are easily appreciable by any musical ear. They make the whole scale sound different. Jones himself explains that the "makers had no scientific instruments by which to regulate their tuning", thus indicating that the choice of scale lies in the ear alone.

Throughout there is the assumption that the African normally uses "nature's own scale", obviously a Western scale, one whose octave has seven intervals containing five whole tones and two semitones, and that anything which differs from that is automatically unnatural or artificial and must have been "influenced" from somewhere else. This is starting from the wrong premise. Measurement of a large number of African scales, such has been made by the International Library of African Music, shows that there are a myriad of different scales in common use among Africans, of which few approach our diatonic scale, either in mood, or in the exact tuning. One of the main reasons for this is that only approximately 40% of African tribes use heptatonic scales at all, the other 60% being one third hexatonic and two thirds pentatonic, and there are a few border tribes which use more than one type of scale. (The figures are from the I.L.A.M.'s measurements of about eighty tribes in the area south of the Sudan.) However, anyone who regularly listens to any type of African music will tell you that it is all too easy to approximate one's ear to the notes one hears, imagining them to be those of our own scale. It is only when one comes to playing staff transcriptions of them on a piano, or some such fixed-note instrument, that one hears how completely wrong the tuning can sound.

Much depends on what factors are considered to decide on the choice of a scale.

Choice is the right word here, for from our evidence in Africa, scales, or tunings, are inherent in a person, and *cannot be learnt*, so that a man will naturally choose the scale that seems "right" to him whether he is judging someone else's music or making his own. There may be some cases where scales have been learnt to a tolerable degree of accuracy but then only with extreme difficulty. You only have to hear any Negro singing, whether he has been trained in Western music or not, to know immediately that he is a Negro.

Whether preference for scales arises from early training or from heredity it is almost impossible to say, but one cannot discard the possibility of it being the one or the other. Whichever it may be, the only practical way of passing on scales is by intermarriage. Therefore, Africans cannot have *memorised* Indonesian scales exactly; they would straightway have reverted to their own set of scales, or at least have co-ordinated the new scales into their own until they were almost unrecognisable—that is, unless the two scales were similar to start with. This is to judge by their reaction to both Arabic and the various types of European music which have impinged upon the continent from early times. There is no reason to suppose that Indonesian scales are any more like African scales than European ones, in fact the opposite is probably more true; and yet look what liberties they take with our scale.

Therefore, assuming Indonesian colonisation, these particular tunings must have been caused by intermarriage. Again, assuming that the choice of notes in a scale is hereditary—we do not have to, but it is convenient (also the faculties of musical ability and musical appreciation—Otto Ortmann in "*The Effects of Music*")—this particular choice will depend on a gene or a combination of genes. Now the area which is supposed to have been influenced so radically in its musical practice is a huge one, the number of peoples in it vast, and only a relatively small number of Indonesians must have been able to come over the Indian Ocean, in whatever the size of boat (unless a mass migration over a land route is envisaged; but the distribution of the xylophones and tunings does not indicate this). Does Jones suggest then that all those people whom he has quoted as using equitonal heptatonic or pentatonic scales, numbering millions, have inherited the genes from this relatively small number of people who settled around the coasts of Africa, introducing possibly rice, and other items of material culture? Music, as I have tried to point out, is not a simple item of material culture that can be bartered and taken over without any more to-do, like rice, outrigger canoes or decorative motifs, or even the instruments of music. It is a spiritual

faculty, and that is not easily transferred, as anyone can hear by listening to any "modern" African choir or jazz band.

Is it not equally possible, however, that these musical genetic traits may be shared equally by Africans and Indonesians, and date back far earlier than any possible influence from one country to the other, a possibility that Jones does not take into account? Jaap Kunst, a great supporter of diffusionism in music, takes this view, e.g. in "*A musical argument for cultural relationship between Indonesia—probably the Isle of Java—and Central Africa*",¹ and in "*The origin of the kemanak*",² and places the origin of many cultural goods which are found both in Africa, in Europe and in the East as "somewhere in the countries in or around the eastern Mediterranean, the area where once the first Great Cultures flourished".³

In what sense does Jones mean that the equitonal scale is "artificial"? By definition this means "not natural". But to several million people it is the only natural scale, and by no means all of them are able to explain their musical system as explicitly as the Chopi. Is it so "astonishing" or "staggering" to find *any* scale in the world that is not our "nature's own scale"? And that itself is not in fact so natural as it seems to us. Although founded on the simple ratios of the harmonic series, it yet needs quite a process of abstraction to reach our major scale. The South African pentatonic tribes have also, according to Kirby, evolved their scales from the harmonic series of a plucked string, and yet there are considerable variations amongst them in tuning, as well as between any of their scales and say, our Hebridean pentatonic scale. Further, although it may be a matter of opinion, one cannot without further evidence assume, following the ethnological principle, that the equitonal principle is so complex and sophisticated that it could only have originated in one part of the world. On the contrary, the principle itself is easy to grasp, and I believe it is one which any people with any degree of conscious musicality could think out. There may even be something in the construction, lay-out and appearance of a xylophone, the African instrument whose pitch is most clearly definable, which is conducive towards an equitonal tuning, in something like the same manner that flute tuning in Africa frequently depends on the symmetrical placing of the finger holes, rather than on the conscious desire of the maker to produce a known scale.

So it should not be unreasonable to assume that two peoples might evolve separately a similar equitonal principle, especially where they are both unusually musically minded, which, from the opinion of many African observers, could well apply to Africa. But, as Jones's figures adequately show, the Indonesian and the African scales are not exactly the same thing, but differ even among themselves very considerably, although one may like to classify them loosely under the heading "equitonal scales".

The Chopi, in fact, according to Jones's figures, have *improved* upon the Indonesian xylophone tunings, if it is an equitonal heptatonic scale that is wanted, to the extent that where the average error from a perfect equitonal tuning in each note of the Cambodian xylophone is about 12 cents, and that of the Javan tuning about 20 cents, the average error in the Chopi scale is a mere 4 cents.

In regard to the use of thirds in vocal music, one must not assume that because two people sing in thirds, they are necessarily connected. Here may be another example of separate development. After all, we Westerners make frequent use of thirds, and who would suggest Indonesian influence on European music? Another difficulty here is in defining the third; whether it is to be any interval of approximately 350 cents—our ear is notoriously tolerant in this respect—or the interval between any note in a scale and the second note from it. Thus some pentatonic scales have an interval between two adjacent notes which could quite easily class as a third in a heptatonic scale.

This leads on to the two types of Indonesian scale mentioned by Jones, the heptatonic *pelog*, and the pentatonic *slendro*, which are supposed to have been adopted in different parts of Africa. But why should Uganda and parts of the Congo, among others, have chosen the pentatonic xylophone to adopt while other parts chose the heptatonic xylophone? The only possible reason must be that those people who adopted each kind of xylophone must have already had a similar scale themselves, and that they chose the instrument most suited to their abilities. But in that case how were the notes of their primitive scales distributed?

Further, if, as Jones suggests, Indonesian influence has been present, not only in the tuning of xylophones, but in their presence in Africa at all, why are not all the African xylophone scales equitonal? There are many African xylophone tunings that are not approximations to equitonal scales. Jones says (p. 158) "It would of course be possible to adduce other xylophone tunings which are not so near". There is no logical reason why the tunings which Jones has chosen to give should not be an approximation towards those other tunings which are "not so near", just as much as towards an Indonesian tuning. Any conclusion based on such a minutely variable, psychological thing as tuning must be supported by more than a few examples selected seemingly at random.

This seems to be the case also with Jones's theory of "perfect pitch" on both sides of the Indian Ocean. For all the examples given, one could quote many more where equitonally tuned heptatonic xylophones have no note approaching 184 v.p.s. or where pentatonic xylophones have none approaching 270 v.p.s. In fact the I.L.A. M. has several Ganda and Nyoro xylophone tunings that have no note within as much as a semitone of the 284.5 v.p.s. quoted for one particular Ganda xylophone. Further, if the particular frequency to be chosen as featuring in a large number of scales appears as the lowest note in

¹ Proceedings of the Musical Association, Session LXII, 1936.

² *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde*, Deel 116, 2e Afh., pp. 263-9. The Hague, 1960.

³ *Ibid.* p. 269.

one, the 2nd in another, and the 4th in another, does that not indicate that that note is thought of in a quite different way in each case? We need to see examples of the actual music performed, as well as of the tuning, before we can judge. We could find thousands of instruments, not only in Africa, which use a frequency of around 184 v.p.s. but we could not then deduce a common influence.

This should not be construed as a categorical denial that there was ever any Indonesian influence in Africa; there is plenty of good evidence to the contrary. But I would suggest that such confident statements as "The consistent evidence of the musical features points to one conclusion; that Indonesian colonists settled on the East coast of Africa . . . etc." are not supported by the facts at the author's disposal.

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ERRATA

African Music, Vol. 2, No. 2, (1959) p. 40.

Owing to an editorial indiscretion the last three paragraphs of Mr. Cope's lecture "African Music" were wrongly printed. They should read:

And what of the present? In the melodic aspect of music Africa is at the stage where Europe was in the Middle Ages. Unisonic singing in parallel motion is found side by side with polyphonic singing in contrary motion. Pentatonic scales with the natural intervals of the 4th and 5th are found side by side with heptatonic scales and artificial intervals. The adoption of European scales and harmonics by the African cannot be regarded as a disaster, as it is simply a jump forward along the line of development of African music itself, in the treatment of melody. I would like to play a record to illustrate the modern stage of African music, where European harmonics are used. The guitar is so ubiquitous in Africa that it could almost be regarded now as an African instrument. This song is a quartette sung by men of the Bemba tribe of Northern Rhodesia to the accompaniment of a guitar. (26)

But in the realm of rhythm, there is a danger that the African may take over the European system of rhythm together with the rest of Western civilisation, and forget the sophisticated art of his forefathers. This is the modern version of the Central African dance—a Xhosa dance band, the "Midnight Stars". The rhythm is unisonic throughout, and notice how the words are distorted to fit the rhythm. (27) Can that compare in musicianship to this, the record I am going to play in conclusion: a Congo dance, with its well-developed polyphony of melody and rhythm, its singing and dancing, its excitement, its spirit of Africa? (28)

26. I.L.A.M. series, AMA 23.A.5.

27. " " " 27.B.3.

28. " " " 15.A.5.