THE GUITAR IMPROVISATIONS OF MWENDA JEAN BOSCO

by

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Mwenda Jean Bosco's improvised guitar songs—particularly his *Masanga*—are by this time widely known and appreciated. This has been due, initially, to the wide circulation of his records after he became one of Hugh Tracey's "discoveries" and, as a direct result of this, to his popularity as a radio personality in Central and East Africa.

This initial article has been confined to consideration of two of Bosco's earliest recorded works, *Masanga*—both in its guitar-accompanied song version and as a guitar solo—and *Bombalaka*, a guitar song. Attention will be paid to the guitar music rather than to the vocal line. A later article will provide transcriptions of ten more of his works, all of them guitar songs, and attempt a comparative treatment of his style.

Hugh Tracey reports first hearing Mwenda Jean Bosco in the streets of Jadotville, Katanga—singing to his own accompaniment—in 1949. He was a Sanga speaker, a language of the Luba group of Bantu languages, but the words of his songs are largely in Kingwana (or "Congo Swahili", a local lingua franca) with other borrowings, some French, and some as yet unidentified. His instrument was a standard steel-strung "Spanish" guitar of the type marketed far and wide through trading stores. Bosco had apparently had no musical tuition of any kind but was a self-taught guitarist of some three years' standing. Somehow, he had managed to avoid becoming a mere chord-strummer and had developed his own deft though basically simple melodic "finger style" through which he was able to express African musical ideas and not merely those of the Spanish guitar—which one knows only too well.

Happily, I was present at Hugh Tracey's lecture recital delivered to the African Music Society in Johannesburg in 1950 at which he presented the latest of his "finds" from the Congo recording tour. Bosco's guitar solo *Masanga* provoked a unanimous encore from the audience and many of us bought copies of the disc as soon as it became available.³ For his *Masanga* recording Bosco was later to gain first prize under the Osborn Awards for the best African music of the year (1952).

Not least among Bosco's claims to fame may be the fact that his *Masanga* theme from the recording was borrowed by Sir William Walton and colourfully included in his *Johannesburg Festival Overture*, which was commissioned by the Johannesburg City Council for the Johannesburg Festival, 1956.

From hearsay evidence I gather that Bosco is no longer in his native Jadotville but has moved eastwards and now possibly lives in Tanganyika. His name and his music seem to be surprisingly well known to almost every East or Central African one meets in London nowadays and one hopes some time to have more definite news of his present whereabouts and welfare. Having myself left Africa some ten years ago I regret never having been able to meet him in person.

¹ As recorded originally by Hugh Tracey, and published later by Gallotone.

^{*} Originally issued on the following Gallotone discs: Maranga (guitar song): GB 1700 T (also subsequently on Decca 1170 & 1171 (LP) in the "Music of Africa" series): Maranga (guitar solo): GB 1586 T; Mombalaba: GB 1588 T. (The last two have not, to my knowledge, been re-issued).

³ Gallotone GB 1586 T.

Regarding his tuning, any guitarist who tries playing from the transcriptions which accompany this article will, I think, confirm that Bosco has indeed used the standard Spanish tuning: E B G D A E (descending). To raise guitar pitch to a key which suits his vocal range without having to depart from his chosen fingering sequence, Bosco has resorted to the time-honoured device of tying a pencil, in lieu of a ready-made capotasta, across the fingerboard at the fifth fret, thus raising the actual pitch by a fourth —to C major for Masanga, F major for Bombalaka. This point is confirmed by the photograph of Bosco playing his instrument.

I was for a long time in two minds whether to transcribe Bosco's music at actual pitch, for the benefit of non-guitarists, or to transpose it as I have finally decided to do, as if



Mwenda Jean Bosco.

writing for a "transposing instrument", making it far more readable for the guitar, which should of course be played, as originally, with capotasta at the fifth fret.⁴

Of the guitar part in each of the pieces to be discussed here, perhaps the most interesting feature is the organic unity of its variations, from a fingering rather than a paper point of view. By maintaining a roughly constant "cycle of operations" in the left hand which is felt as the "bearings" of an underlying metrical scheme, whether or not its main beats receive accentuation (but with which the bar lines in my transcriptions correspond), Bosco chooses in truly African fashion to phrase his melodies, group his notes, and place his accents wherever he wishes with regard to these "bearings" -often skilfully disguising his underlying metrical scheme for as many as six or more bars at one stretch by cross-accentuation (see Masanga solo, bar 27 et seq.,) or juggling with a double cross-rhythm (as in bar 51 et seq.,).

The rhythmic and metrical features of Bosco's instrumental technique may prove especially interesting in the light of Kirby's claims as to the importance of standardised fingering-patterns; Jones's "off-hand technique" by which polyrhythmic drummers keep together-or rather, consistently apart-without a common stressed main beat;6 Brandel's African "hemiola";7 and of course Waterman's "African characteristics" of a "metronome sense" and "off-beat phrasing of melodic accents"8. I have myself earlier touched upon phrase displacement in song, "cadential" use of rhythmic "discord and concord", and examples of "real" as against "successive" hemiola. Though Masanga is obviously an example of a young man's free and unselfconscious

experiments at improvisation, based upon an initial theme with its rough ground-bass and some inner off-beat notes, the piece nevertheless does stand comparison with some of the aspects of the European air-and-variations form used by all our major composers from the 16th to the 19th century. An Indian colleague of mine claims to find affinities between Masanga and Indian sitar improvisation technique, but that is another story.

⁴I am indebted to the lutenist Desmond Dupre for helping me to make my mind up on this point. With apologies to non-guirar-playing readers, I think Bosco's music can be fully appreciated only by guitarists who may, I hope, be able to get the feel of his style from the transcriptions. One player I know, Andrew Tracey, had in fact got the feel of it by ear, from the recordings, and was able to supply valuable comments on the accuracy of my transcriptions. Learning to play the performer's instrument is a common ethnomusicological field technique and the universality of the guirar is in this case a dist net advantage.

⁵ "The method of fingering of some of the rudimentary stringed instruments of the Bushmen suggests that one cause at least of primitive design in music may be sought in the alternation of fingering parterns, and hints at a physiological basis for certain aspects of musical form".—P.R. Kirby: "Primitive Music", in: The New Grow's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, p.926.

⁸ A. M. Jones: "The Icida Dance Old Style", African Music Society, 1952.

⁹ Rose Brandel: "African Henoido Style", Ethnomusicology, 3.3, 1959.

⁸ R. Waterman: "African Influence on the Music of the Americas" in: Accuturation in the Americas, Chicago, 1952, p. 211 et sup.

⁹ D. Rycroft: "Tribal Style and Free Expression", African Music, 1.1., 1954, pp. 23-24.

Bosco's Variations

The basic thread of unity in diversity is well maintained in the Masanga Improvisations (guitar solo), sometimes by familiar means, elsewhere through what perhaps amounts to pure "Africanisms". Constant return to Tonic harmony every two bars—which Westerners might expect to prove unbearably monotonous—seems somehow to be adequately relieved by an abundance of melodic, and particularly rhythmic variety. Several familiar figurations like interlocking sequential thirds stand out, but these are relieved by unexpected duple/triple alterations in their grouping, and by roving accentuation. As further melodic material for development, both the ground-bass phrase and other separate inner figures, insignificant in the original statement, feature later as subjects for more emphatic treatment and elaboration.

These initially latent, unstressed figures are later given accentuation and prominence so that apparently new phrases emerge which disguise in one or other new way the underlying metrical scheme, which itself, rooted in a cycle of fingering operations, remains constant throughout. Note the relationship of the first bass solo (Masanga solo, bars 27 to 33) to the bass and inner parts of bars 3 and 4 or, more closely, to their restatement in bars 91-92. Throughout this bass solo the established fingering pattern is little altered despite the deliberate shift of accentuation.

In the second bass solo (bars 37 to 48) the interesting alternation of 2- and 3-quaver groups is a fuller exploitation of earlier groupings in the upper melody line, now applied to bass notes which do not depart far from the ground bass and its variants. It should be noted that the Tonic resolution still keeps its proper place here, on the first beat of every other bar.

It is perhaps over-harsh to dismiss the melodic figuration as "tamiliar". Sequences have indeed had honourable patronage in history. In the *Masanga* solo, the step figure F sharp-D-E-C (actual B-G-A-F) of bars 1 to 2 may legitimately have sired the staircase in bars 6 to 7, and the scale descent of bars 2 to 3 the repeated scales of 10 to 11. These melodic snakes and ladders are later replaced by see-saws and swings for the bass (21 to 33), assorted low duples and triples (37 to 48) and chordal ups and downs (51 to 57), after which the pack is reshuffled.

Use is made of such techniques in *Bombalaka* too. The short melodic phrase common to both voice and guitar from bar 21 comes as no sudden innovation. Its roots lie in the hardly noticeable offbeat figure F G-A G of bar 4 in the guitar introduction (recurring every four bars thereafter). The consistently offbeat bass notes of *Bombalaka* are an odd feature, repeated in none of his other pieces. Andrew Tracey questioned my barring here, but subsequently agreed with it. To bar them on the beat would throw the entire vocal line offbeat by a quaver, which would be far *more* out of keeping with all Bosco's other songs. Besides, harmonically these bass notes belong to the treble notes which precede them rather than those which follow.

Roots for Bosco's metrical schemes may be found in some of the tribal music of Katanga. Two dance-songs by Luba people, recorded on Gallotone GB. 1581 T, are predominantly instrumental, with a short reiterated two-part *mbira* phrase, polyrhythmic drumming, and an exactly repeated rhythmic phrase provided by rattles. The underlying metrical scheme seems to consist in an 8-quaver frame within which the grouping of rhythmic figures and distribution of accents is frequently altered. It is precisely upon this type of metrical framework that *Masanga* is based.¹⁰

Tribal group performances such as those just mentioned do not display the seeds of Bosco's melodic inventiveness, however. Exact melodic repetition seems to be widely tolerated. It is in such private solo music as African mbira playing, from many quarters,

¹⁰ Other examples of traditional Luba music are to be found on "AMA" TR-20, 25, 35, 39, 40 and 47, in the International Library of African Music's "Sound of Africa" series. Ed.

hat one quite often finds that trick of bringing an earlier offbeat figure into prominencet as a "second subject" as Bosco chooses to do.

Simple indigenous stringed instruments of different kinds are to be found variously distributed among Congo tribes. Such instruments are commonly used by solo singers for self-accompaniment. I am unable to say, however, whether Bosco had direct experience of any of these. In song accompaniments played on the musical bow, which is widely used in the eastern Congo, Northern Rhodesia, and in Southern Africa, a typical feature seems to be the playing of reiterated quavers, with varying duple/triple grouping and accentuation, throughout the piece without intermission.¹¹ This is of course a noticeable feature in Bosco's music, though it may be coincidental.

Town Influence.

Whether or not Bosco was actually born in Jadotville, he shows many of the characteristics of a townsman rather than one who is still closely bound up within a tribal society. The mixed language of his song lyrics certainly suggests his being something of a cosmopolitan. In 1949 it seems he was employed as a clerk in Jadotville and must therefore have had some formal education. As a townsman he will have been open to a variety of musical influences even if he received no direct musical tuition. Radio, records and films today leave little of the world untouched in this respect.

Numerous varieties of hybrid musical practice are nowadays typical of town life in Africa, and vernacular song styles have suffered particularly heavily from Westernisation. Vocal melody in Bosco's songs seems, to non-African ears, by far the least distinctive feature of his music. For his song melodies he seems to have drawn very little from an African heritage but rather to have adopted, wholeheartedly, some of our less worthy musical cliches.

On African ears I venture to suggest that the effect is altogether different. A common feature of town songs in Central and Southern Africa, as also of church and school music, is what one might call speech-tone emancipation: the uncritical acceptance of a new-found apparent melodic freedom which reacts against tribal musical conventions. All Bantu languages being tone languages (except Swahili), song melody has traditionally contormed, strictly or less so, with speech-tone rise and fall. Departure from this today seems to be widely welcomed as a novel and progressive experience. Bosco's songs clearly fall within this category and his choice of a form of (non-tonal) Swahili rather than his Sanga mother-tongue makes speech-tone considerations entirely unnecessary.

On the other hand, Bosco uses short phrases and a generally descending melodic line which are typically African, and introduces few if any of the rhythmic tricks and gimmicks common to Western popular music of his time. His vocal rhythmic phrasing is largely regular and even, in sharp contrast to the rhythmic interest created on the guitar. This may in fact stem from tribal practice. In the few examples of tribal music from that area which I have been able to hear, rhythmic regularity in the vocal line, contrasting with rhythmic subtleties in the accompaniment, appears to be common. The vocal and instrumental phrases of *Bombalaka* and many of his other songs show a common African characteristic—though it is not confined to Africa—of non-finality or perpetual cyclic motion. Rather than reaching a conclusive cadence of the Western type, the end of each phrase seems to demand the return of another beginning, as in the old English dance tune, Dargason.

¹¹ See: D. Rycroft op. cit.

¹² For further light on this point see: David Rycroft: "African Music in Johannesburg—African and non-African Features", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, X1, 1959, pp. 25-30.

¹⁹ Gallotone GB 1581 T, and GB 1112 T. This practice of "straight" singing, against a rhythmically more complex accompaniment, is directly the opposite of what occurs in the far south. Among the Xhosa of the Fastern Cape in particular, wide use is made of off-bear vocal phrasing and of smaller durational shifts off the beat of a "straight" clap or step (See: D. Rycroft op. cit. 2).

In his guitar playing, Bosco's simple harmonic progressions sometimes suggest familiar Western patterns but this is not always so. The use of chordal progressions by Africans is often dismissed as mere imitation. In many cases this is certainly true but from some experience of tribal music from various quarters I would endorse John Blacking's claim that simple forms of tonality-contrast—which he refers to as "root-progression"— are widespread in indigenous music, and that harmonic progression cannot be regarded as wholly unAfrican.¹⁴

Happily for Western ears, Bosco's Masanga solo largely avoids the inexorable Tonic-Subdominant-Dominant circle. After two two-bar phrases of Tonic (2nd. inversion)—Supertonic minor—Dominant—Tonic, one is prepared, if one must, to accept this as an adequate ground-bass. But it does not remain exactly so. In bars 10 and 11 (and elsewhere) he makes the successful experiment of an abrupt D minor—B flat major—C major sequence (transposed as A minor—F—G in the transcription). This is suggestive of a tribal hepta-sol modality and of "root-progression". To Western ears it comes as a pleasant surprise and brings to mind similar European experiments, particularly in the 16th. century, before our melodic niceties had been sacrificed to a closed harmonic circle.

Today, of course, some thirteen years since Bosco's Masanga performance, flat sevenths and bogus folk-modality constantly beset our ears, being one of the chosen ingredients of Western popular music since the middle '50s. But this should not deafen us to the inventiveness of Bosco's earlier experiments. His B flat-C sequence in Masanga comes close to the dual, F-G tonality of William Byrd's The Woods So Wild¹6 and, strangely, Byrd's piece "The Bells" (bars 7-8 and 15-16) bears a distinct affinity to the Masanga theme.

While several of Bosco's other songs, ¹⁸ dealt with in my second article, are seemingly based on tribal modality, hepta-fa or hepta-sol, melodic and harmonic progressions in *Bombalaka* are of less interest in this respect, for a Westerner. Though *Bombalaka* has several other points of distinction it is not in the same class as *Masanga*.

In none of the later songs does Bosco appear to reach or advance upon the standards of inventiveness and originality which he set in Masanga. One has the unhappy suspicion that his early harmonic experimentation and offbeat subtlety, which perhaps held within them the germ of an interesting new, African-based idiom, have been increasingly abandoned in favour of conformity with Western practice, no doubt with the approval of many of his African admirers. Serious African musicians would do well to consider Masanga as a successful example of twentieth-century artistry which has a truly African foundation. Perhaps Bosco has made his tull contribution and now has pots to boil. One hopes that others may be inspired to carry on.

Song text of Masanga, with attempted English translation*
Nami na Mwenda ndia yetu Jadotville;
I and Mwenda are off to Jadotville;
Endea pitie ndia yetu ya Buluo!
Mind you pass by our street, Buluo!
Endea mwambie baba Bosco anakwenda;
Go off and tell 'baba' Bosco that he's off;
Enda umwambie ("end 'omwambie") mtoto yule ya Bayeke,
Go and tell that child of the Bayeke,

¹⁴ John Blacking: "Problems of Pitch, Pattern and Harmony . . ." African Music, 2.2., 1959, p. 23.

¹⁶ In bow accompaniments to solo songs, temporary descent by a whole-tone from the "tonal centre" commonly occurs, affording tonality contrast (root-progression in Blacking's sense). (See: D. Rycroft op. cit. 1).

¹⁶ The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, Breitkopf & Hartel, 1897, No. 67.

¹⁷ Ibid. No. 69.

¹⁸ Notably: Mama Kilio-e (GB 1728); Tambala Moja (GB 1586 T); Mwami (GN 1781); and Mnkahe (GB 1789) (All recordings are on Gallotone).

^{*}For assistance with the translation I am indebted to my colleagues Dr, W. Whiteley and Mr. Joel Mbundu.

Enda umwambie mwenye singo ya upanga;
Go and tell him ——— (?) long-necked (?) chap; Enda umwambie baba Bosco wa Bayeke. Go and tell 'baba' Bosco of the Bayeke. O ilunya wee, kasiongo wetu; (?) Nami na Mwenda ndia yetu ya Bayeke; I and Mwenda are off to the Bayeke; Uende umwambie yule Bosco wa Bayeke; Go and tell that Bosco, the Muyeke; Uende umwambie yule singo ya upanga; Go and tell that long-necked (?) chap, Kanamuke kasipo na bwana tumba A girl without her man Ni kama nkinga yasipo na lapeo. Is like a bicycle without a lamp. Na ninyi mvwala mavaya nanyi mvwala sheevula. And you're wearing (clothes?) and you're wearing (?French: chevelu-long-haired?) Uende mwambie baba Bosco wa Bayeke! Go and tell 'baba' Bosco the Muyeke!

Uende mwambie yule mupiga wa za(n)ze! Go and tell that guitar-player!



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Owing to the frequency with which changes are introduced in the grouping and accentuation of notes within the 8-quaver har measure, an all-embracing g time signature has been shown here.

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