

ADVANCING INDIGENOUS CHURCH MUSIC

by

J. LENHERR

The number of publications on the use of indigenous music in Christian worship is increasing with every year. The writers are mainly missionaries or indigenous ministers of religion¹; but also well-known ethnomusicologists, such as, KUNST, JONES, and NKETIA² have written on this subject. To my knowledge, they have dealt either with the theological aspects of musical indigenization or the technical problems connected with it, or both.

In this paper I intend to discuss the potential that lies in an operational study where theoretical knowledge, gained from investigation and analysis, is put to test in the actual process of creating new indigenous music by indigenous composers. The fact that this action study has been made under field conditions³ should help to give an insight into the inter-action of some social factors affecting such a process.

The material that forms the basis of this paper is drawn from my experience as musical adviser to the Roman Catholic church in Rhodesia (1961-62; and from 1966 onwards) and in Taiwan (Formosa) (Feb.-Oct. 1965). This enables me to compare experiences made in two different cultural areas as well as in the same area after a lapse of four years.

Musical situation at the start of research*1. General conditions:*

In Taiwan, where I worked in the Taitung district, two very contrasting musical cultures were found side by side: the culture of the Taiwanese of Southern Chinese stock (Fukien), and the one of the Austronesian tribes (called Aborigines).

The musical culture of the Taiwanese showed the features of the classical South Chinese style: highly ornamented solo songs from the opera, accompanied by the traditional orchestra; all strictly melodic. Besides that, I found only some ballads in folk-style (solo songs) and a few instrumental pieces, performed by travelling musicians. The ritualistic music of the Buddhists and Taoists showed occasional traces of harmony. The classical and ritualistic style was performed by semi-professionals as well as amateurs; the folk-style in songs seemed to be family tradition.⁴

The music of the Taiwan Aborigines is not homogenous. (I worked among the Amis, Bunun, Paiwan, Puyuma, and Rukkai tribes.) There are, however, some common traits in their culture such as, predominance of vocal style, stamping rhythm, and the absence of professionals in music. (Traditional doctors have their own songs, used as part of their rites.⁵ With the exception of the Paiwan, who favour an ornamental style with practically no harmony, all the tribes know some kind of polyphony; e.g., simultaneous variation in the higher octave (Amis), Bordun technique (Puyuma, Rukkai), multi-part singing (Bunun).

¹ See current bibliographies of the *International Review of Mission*, London (since 1910) and of the *Bibliografia Missionaria*, Rome (since 1933). For historical research we have the excellent *Bibliotheca Missionum*, Freiburg (Herder), in 22 vols., with annotations and special chapters on Music.

² J. Kunst, *De Inheemsche Muziek en de Zending*, Publ. LXXII of the R. Rropical Institute, 1947.

A. M. Jones, "Hymns for the African", *Newsletter of the African Music Society*, I, No. 3, Johannesburg, 1950, 8-12.

J. H. Nketia, "The Contribution of African Culture to Christian Worship", *Internat. Review of Missions*, XLVII, London 1958, 265-78.

³ This should be done, whenever possible, in connection with laboratory research (Felix M. Keesing, *Culture Change*, Stanford, 1953, 93).

⁴ It must be noted that Taitung district is a culturally recessive area with regard to the Taiwanese since it is the last refuge for impoverished families.

⁵ For more information see, J. Lenherr, "The Musical Instruments of the Taiwan Aborigines", *The Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology*, No. 23, Academia Sinica, Nanking (Taipei 1967, 109-128).

These two cultures have been subjected twice to strong outside influences. The first period, lasting from 1895 to 1945, (when Taiwan was a Japanese colony), explains the existence of the numerous Japanese solo songs, favoured by the middle-aged among the Taiwanese and the Aborigines. The second period started after the Second World War. Western music was introduced by schools, the radio, films, and gramophone records, as well as modern music from Japan and Hong Kong. Countless loudspeakers broadcast such music together with the traditional styles over towns and villages all day long. I heard American film music played at a Taiwanese puppet play during which the feats of the heroes of the past were re-enacted. Similarly, the harvest feasts of the Aborigines, a relic of their former head-hunting ceremonies, have been invaded by cha-cha and other Western music and dance styles. The guitar, together with clarinet and saxophone, have become the favourite instruments of modern style musicians.

In Rhodesia, I have worked among the Karanga-speaking tribes of the Shona cluster (especially the Duma, Govera, and Mari tribes). The musical culture of these tribes is fairly homogenous. Firstly, they have a common stock of songs and dances. Secondly, similar techniques are used; e.g. common rhythmic patterns, harmony in fourths and fifths, yodelling style (magure), and, generally, a rather fast speed. Thirdly, there are professional mbira players and drummers who are hired for religious and other ceremonies at tribal or family level. Differences occur in the make and use of instruments or in as far as specific dances are connected with some areas more than with others.

Acculturation has worked in two stages. Up to the World War II, cultural change was brought about mainly through school and labour migration (mining). Three styles now regarded as traditional, originated from there: (1) The *Jerusarema* dance which comes from a Zionist group and has ecstatic dancing with "alleluia" shouts; (2) The *makwaya* style (from "choir"), a re-creation of Western choir style with a short leader's part but still a prevailing 8-5-4 harmony; (3) "Madambels" (from "dumbells"), a show with various numbers, involving drums and a leader with whistle who conducts the rhythmical exercises of youngsters. This was once a custom in the first Mission schools.⁶

The second stage of the acculturative process, since the Second World War, has as its agents the radio and the record industry, together with African bands in towns.⁷ The result is a pronounced difference between the music of town people and that of the adult community in tribal areas. Young people go for the new style music wherever they are in contact with the Western world. It is interesting to see that teachers and storekeepers have become the spearheads of this development in rural areas.⁸ This new style, nowadays more influenced from South Africa than from the Congo, is characterized by a rather simple structure in rhythm and part-writing, by the predominance of the Western cadence in harmony, and, again, by the use of the guitar, besides "penny-whistles", saxophones, etc. Another important feature of the new music is its disregard of semantic tone and even of linguistic accent in songs.

2. *Situation in church music:*

The existing collection of hymns, imposed on, and accepted by, the indigenous Christians was made up of Western tunes and translations of metrical hymn-texts of the same origin. The vernacular texts were set in pseudo-meter, i.e., the number of syllables per line was kept but many accents were misplaced. In addition, there was a total disregard for the semantic tone-patterns of the Shona language.

Then, there were some very popular songs, composed by missionaries with the help

⁶ A *Jerusarema* dance on *AMA Record, TR-82*, (African Music Library); examples of "madambels" *ibid.*, TR-173. The latter was a great attraction for the first white settlers when performed at Chishawasha Mission, near Salisbury.

⁷ Business tries to influence the market through these channels. Thus, a "Jim Reeves" craze was created among the Africans, and the "chimanje-manje" style introduced from South Africa. These trends are well reflected in the music reviews of African newspapers such as, *Moto*, *Gwelo*, or *Weekly Express*, Salisbury.

⁸ Teachers are good customers in record shops and, since the music syllabus is not of much help, they will introduce their favourite tunes in school.

of indigenous teachers, where text and tune agreed better but rhythm and harmony were still Western, though with a slightly indigenous flavour.

A number of psalms, composed in Gregorian style, were not too well liked by the congregation.

Attempts were made to have indigenous people compose new church tunes to given texts. In Rhodesia, where teachers had been encouraged to compose, the result was that they took over popular tunes from other Christian churches, adapting them to the new texts, and presenting them as their own creations. These songs were invariably in the choir style which was connected with school and church; a style that includes marching rhythm and Western harmony with interspersed Africanisms in rhythm and harmonic progression and an embryonic leader's part. Since the teachers rose to their present position through Mission schools, no other type of music could be expected from them.

Among the Amis tribe in Taiwan, another approach to indigenization of music was tried. The church elders were asked by a missionary to set the vernacular mass text to music. They invited well-known singers of the Christian community and discussed with them the problem. Together they decided which traditional tunes could be used for this purpose, and how they could be adapted to the text. This communal effort was very successful with shorter texts. The longer texts of the Gloria and Creed, however, with verses of different length, proved too much of a task. The musical phrases often did not correspond with those of the language; a fact which people did not like but were unable to amend later on. The new songs were accepted on the authority of the elders and their employees, and soon became very popular.

Method of approach

(1) As much music as possible was collected on tape to gain an over-all picture of the musical culture, followed, on my part, by an extensive study of the general features (techniques, forms) of the material. Anthropological and sociological studies were consulted to make sure that the material gave a true and reliable picture of the whole musical tradition with its centres of gravity.

(2) During the process of collecting, attention was paid to the selection of persons who would be able to be of any help in creating new tunes.

(3) The selection of composers depended more on their willingness and availability than on their capability since it was assumed that competition would bring about the elimination of the weakest.

(4) As to the technical questions of composition, no formal training was given to the musicians in order to leave them free in their approach. The only and serious limitation came from the liturgical tradition which has a certain amount of fixed texts. They are taken mainly from the Scripture, especially from the psalms, representing fixed poetic forms, such as responsorial and antiphonal structure, non-metrical hymnus form, etc. The composers were free to make use of any technique, form, or style, under these conditions:

The composition should be suitable for Christian worship, i.e., that it would have a real chance of being accepted by the Christian community, given a proper introduction. This point would have to be discussed by the whole group which would ultimately decide on what should be rejected or introduced.

The tunes should be genuinely indigenous, i.e., not merely a copy of a Western model.⁹

The compositions would have to provide for full participation on the part of the people which would be in line with the tradition of the Shona and the Aborigines of Taiwan; not so, however, with the Taiwanese.

⁹ This condition was necessary because Western music is at present so predominant that educated people will be tempted to follow it, if only to show their education.

The tune, to their judgement, should fit the text and express its content adequately.

The process of composing could remain purely aural as this was traditional with all these peoples, with the exception of the Classical Taiwanese style.

My own part was purely on an advisory level with group discussions on the main features of a respective tradition and suggestions as to how to solve technical problems in terms of the given culture.

(5) A careful observation was made of the reaction of the adult Christian community, the traditional jury. Since it was not feasible to employ the traditional manner of showing likes or dislikes during a liturgical performance, this became very important for us. It was registered how quickly a song was learned by a full congregation, and how often it could be heard sung outside of church, e.g., at informal gatherings of people in their homes, during work, etc. In open discussions questions were answered and critical remarks were taken note of — an important institution in Shona society.

(6) The use of the “delayed return” method, on my part, was essential for the whole project since it would enable me to see clearer what trends and factors would become predominant in the meantime, and what changes would take place in the body of the new songs, and for what reasons.

Developments and Experiences

“The difficulty of an applied study is that it focuses the attention of the investigator upon a single problem which may cause or force him to ignore others of equal interest, and it is also difficult to avoid outside control over the research project” (A. P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, 1964, 43).

In my work there was no outside interference, except the normal pressures that are connected with any operational project, e.g., emotional reactions on the part of the Mission staff, the call for speedy and practical results.

(1) The acquisition of a collection that would give a true picture of the whole musical culture of a people is not an easy task, and so most of my time was devoted to this. Although my Karanga material comprises now nearly a thousand items, it is still not as representative as the smaller collection made among the Taiwan-Aborigines. This is due, firstly, to my lack of ethnomusicological training in 1961; secondly, to the large diversity in population numbers (ca. 1m. Karanga compared with 100,000 Taiwanese in Taitung district, and between 20,000 and 1,000 for the various Aborigines tribes); thirdly, to the different demographic situation (the Karanga live rather scattered, with the exception of towns; whereas, in Taiwan, compact villages are the rule).

(2) The process of selection and elimination among the composers shows divergent patterns for the three cultural areas. In Rhodesia, there exists at present a group of five established composers (four teachers and one well-known professional mbira player) and of 10 beginners (one priest, one nun, four students, four teachers). All but one are people with secondary education; the established composers live in easily accessible places (within a radius of 200 miles), and in rural areas (composers living in towns limit their work to town style, commonly used in beerhalls and bars).

Among the Taiwanese the situation was more complicated. There was only a small Christian community. The main composer, a well-known singer of folk-songs, was illiterate. Since reading and writing are eminent values in Taiwanese society, there was not a chance that he and his songs would be accepted by the people. Thus other people of higher standing (two catechists, one student, all literate) were invited to make alterations. The new songs, then, were presented as the product of communal effort.

Among the Taiwan Aborigines the composers were more or less appointed by the elders of the Christian communities. All were well-known singers, and most of them

were catechists. There was only one teacher in this group.¹⁰ In two cases, former traditional doctors who had become Christians took an active part in composing (Amis, Paiwan); in one case, even a whole village created new tunes in a communal effort (Paiwan).

(3) The fact that we had to stick to fixed texts proved a great handicap for the older traditional musicians, since they were accustomed to pattern the words to already composed tunes, and not the other way round. But it turned out to be a blessing for the educated composers who were tempted to follow the bad examples found in old church hymns and the modern song style.

(4) Although the new compositions, made in Rhodesia or Taiwan, are stylistically worlds apart, they still show some common features:

- (a) Their style ranges from purely traditional to moderately modern (adapted town style; among the Aborigines this includes only the Japanese style).
- (b) Generally, no traditional tunes as such have been used together with liturgical texts. People found it too disturbing because of the emotional associations connected with them.
- (c) Use was made of existing musical patterns but, in most cases, the composers found it necessary to change and adjust them for liturgical purposes by mixing various patterns so as to divest patterns of unwanted connotations.

(5) The aural method of composing turned out to be very effective. A great amount of creativity was thereby achieved, especially in Rhodesia. In Taiwan, however, where a system of Tonic Sol-Fa (written with numbers) is in common use, the educated composers wrote their music down from the start. This had practical advantages for the introduction of the new songs, but the decisive factor was that it gave more status to the composer and his work. By contrast, there was none of the Shona composers who was able to write down his own music.¹¹ They were therefore given tape recorders to make their composing independent from factors as, e.g., the availability of a choir.

(6) The process by which the new music was accepted by the people proved to be very complex. Firstly, the old church songs were a firmly established tradition, strengthened by religious beliefs and emotions. Being Western in style, it had, at the same time, a greater appeal to the educated. The new songs, however, succeeded thanks to the emotions created by nationalism in Rhodesia, and by the struggle for self-preservation on the part of the Taiwanese and Aborigines in Chinese-dominated Taiwan.

Secondly, questions of prestige and status became very important, e.g., the standing of the composer in the community, the first presentation of the new tune to the people (was it well performed, written down or even published in print or on records?).¹²

Thirdly, the practical problems of an effective and fast propagation and dissemination which could create an emotionally favourable movement among the people were of considerable importance.

The new music was easily introduced to the Taiwan Aborigines where the community accepted the songs on the authority of the church elders.

Among the Taiwanese, the question of prestige was very crucial. Therefore, we decided to invite the best amateur orchestra in town (non-Christians of high standing who specialized in the classical style) to play the new music; a fact that influenced greatly its acceptance on the part of the Christians.

¹⁰ There were very few Aborigines who had been able to go through higher schools, and even fewer who had been clever enough to hold their own against the Taiwanese and Chinese in schools run by the Government.

¹¹ One reason for this may be the fact that in Rhodesia music reading and writing is taught on Western models (choir style). Consequently, a composer is lost if he wants to put his traditional music on paper. By contrast, there is a great amount of indigenous music (Taiwanese and Aboriginal) published in print.

¹² Good performance has always been the touchstone for the success of a traditional composer. Radio and records, however, have conditioned people to certain ideals in sound reproduction (echo effects; sentimental changes in speed, etc.) which often make for a critical reception of something new.

In Rhodesia, the new music encountered strong opposition from educated Africans when it was presented at a course in 1962. But open discussions and the publication of some tunes in print softened their attitude. In rural areas, however, the new songs spread fast, although, as a feedback from the Western style hymn, they were first sung in slow speed.

(7) When I revisited Rhodesia in 1966 four developments that had taken place during my absence were clearly recognizable:

- (a) The cause of the indigenous church music had been taken up by educated and illiterate Christians alike and made their own.
- (b) The body of ca. 40 new church songs composed in 1962, although at first badly distorted partly because of insufficient introduction, had become established tradition in liturgy. Practical use had added Western harmonies to parts of songs, and brought about an occasional employment of instruments (drums, rattles, mbira). Even dancing to such tunes could be encountered among Christians when they were sung outside the church building.
- (c) The main composer had established himself within the church community, even outside of the district. This was due to courses conducted by him, at which people got to know him personally, as well as to the publication of some of his tunes on a record.¹³ Other good composers, who were not given this chance, failed to come through in public, but recently some of their works have been published on records.¹⁴
- (d) Songs, composed between 1962 and 1966, show greater sophistication in musical structure and trends towards town style.

Conclusions

Applied studies give the opportunity of observing the emergence of a new tradition, and thereby bring to light the factors involved in the process of musical innovation and acculturation. In addition, problems of musical variability and improvisatory technique may come nearer to satisfying explanation. The following conclusions are meant to be merely tentative, showing the complexity of these problems.

(1) In oral tradition, the process of composing tends to continue right into the performance. It needs a number of public performances until the composer himself will stick to some fixed patterns which mark the completion of the process. It seems as if the fact, that a composition has been published in print or on a record, does not influence this process for the composer.¹⁵

(2) As long as a new style has not yet become a tradition according to public opinion, it will be interpreted in terms of already existing traditions. This will vary according to the structure of the performing group and the preferences of style on the part of its leader. Young people will add modern fads to any song whereas a rural adult community will be more conservative. Thus, the first performances will bring about an innumerable variety of versions so that in some of them the original form will be unrecognizable.

(3) Once a song has gained its final form, in the judgement of the composer, and is established in a fixed tradition, it will be subject to variations within the limits of present-day practice. Various factors appear to influence this process:

- (a) If the technique of variation is an essential part of a musical tradition, versions will be numerous (thus variation occurs more frequently in Shona music than in Taiwanese or Aboriginal tradition).

¹³ *Misra Shona 1*, by Stephen M. Fonde, Mambo Press, Gwelo.

¹⁴ *Mambo Records*, Nos. 1-5, Shona Liturgical Series, Nos. 4 and 5 of which are analytical for teaching purposes.

Mambo Records, Nos. 6 and 7, Shona Catechetical Series. All published by Mambo Press, Gwelo. The last two records present Gospel stories in traditional style, composed and played by the famous mbira player, Simon Mashoko.

¹⁵ In cases, where we made the mistake of publishing a composition too soon, the composer showed astonishment, implying even that somewhere a mistake in recording or notation must have been made, but they never accepted the earlier version as the right one.

- (b) Variation as a technique seems to be connected more with music of fine texture and fast speed (Shona) than with one of rough-hewn lines and pounding rhythm (Taiwan-Aborigines).¹⁶
- (c) The process of socialization has a great influence on the variability of a music (how effectively music is introduced; amount and quality of training; means of propagation: practice, radio, records, print).
- (d) If a culture is in a stage of transition, an interplay between old and new style will cause a greater amount of diversification. Traditional songs get new functions, and new ones are interpreted in terms of the old style.¹⁷
- (e) The structure of the performing community accounts for many alterations in a style. This is clearly shown in Rhodesia, where the Christian community cuts across the tribal boundaries of the Shona-speaking people. Linguistic and musical dialects make their influence felt, causing changes in rhythm and tune as a precondition for the acceptance of a song in a given area.
- (f) Finally, the demographic situation will affect a tradition. People living close to each other will have more uniformity in their traditions (Taiwan Aborigines) than people living far apart (Shona).

(4) Improvisation can be understood either as a necessary stage in the process of composing or as a technique used in performance. The latter, is dependent on how much it is stressed in a given tradition. Although communal improvisation occurs (e.g. Shona traditional band and threshing songs), it is mostly done in the solo parts of a musical piece (leader and yodelling parts of the Shona; solo voice in the higher octave among the Taiwan Amis). The observation of the improvisatory patterns which composers use in successive performances of their own creations and of their reaction to how their music is performed by others, make it possible to define the laws and limits of this practice within a given tradition.

(5) Finally, in a time when many musical cultures under study are in a stage of transition the factors influencing the emergence of a new composer-musician have become more numerous. Thus any composer who wants to rise above local fame has to perform in front of as many people as possible (the traditional way), as well as to feature in radio programmes with his works, and have them published on records and/or in print (the modern ways).¹⁸

Applied studies in ethnomusicology appear to present an advantage to the researcher, which he would not have otherwise, namely, a clear "*terminus a quo*", a starting point from where developments begin to take place, in which process the interplay of the various factors can be closely observed.¹⁹ Such studies would, to my mind, be most needed in the educational field since in many non-Western countries — certainly in Rhodesia and Taiwan — the music taught in school is divorced from the living tradition of the people.

¹⁶ It is interesting to observe, too, that among the Shona People small performing groups are the rule (ca. 30 persons), forming a closed circle in dancing, whereas these groups are larger among Taiwan Aborigines (up to 100 participants), dancing in a semi-circle.

¹⁷ E.g. on *AMA TR-81* a popular war song is used for boxing; and church hymns and school songs are ridiculed by a mbira-player. I recall an incident where a professional musician spoke about the performance of a certain young musician. He said, "He is playing the guitar on his mbira", i.e. using the guitar style.

¹⁸ I am frequently urged by educated Africans to release new compositions in notation, although there are very few who will be able to read them. On the other hand, people in Taiwan call for the publishing of records, preferably with nice covers, although they have got their music printed.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Bascom, "The Main Problems of Stability and Change in Tradition", *Journal of the Internat. Folk Music Council*, XI, London, 1959, 11.