

REVIEWS

**THE SOUL OF MBIRA TWENTY YEARS ON:
A RETROSPECT**PART 1 *by* Keith Goddard, Kunzwana Trust, Harare

THE SOUL OF MBIRA: MUSIC AND TRADITIONS OF THE SHONA PEOPLE OF ZIMBABWE, by Paul Berliner, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1994 (first published Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1978), 312pp, illustrations, transcriptions, appendices, index.

...In memory of Mondreck Muchena, the gentle giant of *mbira* who died of AIDS on Heroes Day, 1995, a few months after his 1994 European tour as a member of Mhuri yekwaRwizi....

Reading a book about the lives and work of strangers from a different culture and then re-reading it ten years on, you are likely to learn something of the progress of your own personal understanding of people; by reading the same book and in the intervening ten years getting to know these people and their work thoroughly gives you added insight into the representation of the characters and even the person who wrote the book.

The groundwork for *The soul of mbira* first appeared as a Ph.D thesis in 1974; it was later expanded and published in hardback in 1978 and released in paperback format in 1981 with an addendum on how to construct a *karimba*. The book has sold a small number of copies steadily over the years. It was remaindered by the University of California Press in 1992 after which the University of Chicago released a reprint of the paperback version in 1993. Although a few copies have filtered into Zimbabwe and there is a copy of the thesis deposited in the National Archives in Harare, the book has never been formally published or distributed in this country.

I¹ first came across *The soul of mbira* when I was at Durham University in England studying for a bachelor's degree in European art music. The resident lecturer in Ethnomusicology, Dr. Robert Provine, aware of my national origins, asked if I

¹ When describing the personal account of my involvement with *The Soul of Mbira* it seems appropriate to employ the first person singular. I was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in 1960, educated in white schools in Harare and I received a classical music training through the Zimbabwe College of Music in Harare. I went to Durham University, UK, in 1979 for a B.Mus. degree and returned there in 1985 for a Masters degree in composition. I was taught nothing of African music or culture as a child; the Smith regime did not so much discredit African culture and values as it simply ignored them or made them out to be of little interest or importance.

knew anything about *mbira*.² I said that I had heard of the instrument but that, to my mind, it was primitive and had probably died out long back. Dr. Provine then informed me of the existence of a book and a couple of records that had recently been accessed in the music department library. I was amazed to find a 312-page book with musical transcriptions and two records filled with music by living exponents of Zimbabwean *mbira*, one with the same name as the book, *The soul of mbira*, the other called *Shona mbira music*.

The book affected me profoundly. I realised that there was a world of fascinating music I knew nothing about right on my doorstep at home. What astounded me most was the sophisticated syntax for this musical language and in particular a syntax based on principles entirely different from those I had learned for western music.

In 1982 I left university, came back to Zimbabwe and immediately looked for a *mbira* teacher. I was given the address of someone in Highfields, a township of Harare³ and one Saturday afternoon, very nervous, I drove out into the townships for the first time. The Salisbury map was totally inadequate and I got very lost and had to ask the way but I got to my lesson in the end.

I went back to university in England in 1985 and although I had studied composition, I spent much of my time continuing with my *mbira* studies through learning to play the transcriptions in Berliner's book and listening to the recordings.

In the summer of 1986 I was in Zimbabwe at the time Berliner was here assisting with the setting up of an ethnomusicology programme at the Zimbabwe College of Music and I acted as his taxi driver meeting most of the musicians that were mentioned in *The soul of mbira*.

I finished my MA in 1987 and came home for good. I taught classical piano to keep myself alive but my main interest was meeting and learning from musicians in Zimbabwe, in particular those of *The soul of mbira*. Through them and others I met, I started to arrange projects and research trips. I was still feeling my way, not sure of what I was supposed to be doing with this music or how to do it, but I knew that it was helping me to feel more Zimbabwean.

In 1987 Hakurotwi Mude, Ephat Mujuru, Mondreck Muchena, Ephraim Mutemasango⁴ and I toured the schools in an attempt to spread the word about *mbira* and in 1988 we held a workshop at the Zimbabwe College of Music for music teachers.

Naturally, the story of my connection with *mbira* is only part of a chain. Many, including Berliner, came to *mbira* through Dumisani Maraire, a prodigiously talented

² *Mbira* is a plural term in Shona which is used to describe the keys so the word is used here to refer to the singular as well as the plural. Dr. Provine asked me if I knew anything about **the** *mbira* but, in Zimbabwe, players of the instrument usually drop the article when speaking in English. For example, they talk about playing *mbira* rather than playing **the** *mbira* and they often use just the word *mbira* to refer to the whole concept and practice of the art.

³ To avoid confusion, the present place names in Zimbabwe are used throughout, hence Salisbury is referred to as Harare.

⁴ Members of the group 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' featured in *The Soul of Mbira*.

student who went to America with Robert Kauffman in the 1960s. In his book, Berliner comments that "while Americans appreciate what little exposure they have had to westernised mbira through popular recordings, they have little knowledge of the authentic African instruments from which the commercial items are derived."⁵ Maraire's influence on Americans has changed all that. These days, the Pacific North West is home to a myriad *mbira* players and marimba groups (see below) and the quality of the marimba playing in some cases far outstrips that of some marimba groups in Zimbabwe, in particular those which, in deference to the tourist market, draw on a common soup kitchen of popular tunes for their repertoires.

The west-coast Americans came to Shona music through the marimba and *karimba*⁶ lessons of Maraire and the interest has continued to grow. Many of these musicians have since started to learn *mbira dzavadzimu* and pass on their interest to others. One American, Claire Jones, spent a number of years in Zimbabwe studying and playing *mbira dzavadzimu*. Jones accompanied Maraire in the early eighties on one of his marimba tours to Africa and she stayed on in Zimbabwe as a science teacher. When she left five years later, she had written a book on Zimbabwean musical instruments⁷ and was a professional player of *mbira dzavadzimu* performing at *mapira*⁸ as a regular member of the group Mhuri yekwaMuchena led by the late Mondreck Muchena, who was also a member of Mhuri yekwaRwizi.

Some of Maraire's students have made it across the world to Zimbabwe; most remain where they are, blending what they have learned of Shona tradition and Maraire's philosophy with their own west-coast spirituality and mysticism.

Berliner's way of promoting *mbira* in the world, which also provided a means of thanking the musicians for their contribution to his research, involved taking 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' to England and Italy in 1984 on a tour organised by Arts Worldwide, a then new company which promoted world music.⁹ Mhuri yekwaRwizi opened the first Arts Worldwide season. The musicians on this trip were Hakurotwi Mude, the late Mondreck Muchena, Cosmas Magaya, Luken Kwari, Ephraim Mutemasango and Paul Berliner himself. Berliner fully admits that he achieved recognition for his work through these musicians so it was only right that, in return, he help increase their reputation in the world.

The reviews of the tour make interesting reading; they give the impression of awe and wonderment but also slight bewilderment. To begin with, Berliner acted as

⁵ *The Soul of Mbira* p.xiii.

⁶ *Karimba*: although pupils of Maraire refer to this instrument as 'nyunga nyunga', the terms in general use in Zimbabwe are *karimba* and *kangombio*.

⁷ Claire Jones: *Making music*, Academic Books. (Ed: reviewed in this issue)

⁸ *Mapira* is the plural of *bira*: an all-night (*pungwe*) ceremony for calling on the ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*).

⁹ 'World music': a term coined at a meeting in a London pub in the early eighties by Anne Hunt, Ian Anderson and others whose interests lay in the promotion of styles other than the standard commercial rock, pop, disco and country and western. The group spent the entire evening trying to find a suitable, all-encompassing term to describe the music they were marketing but were unable to come up with anything. As last orders were called, someone suggested 'world music', until something better could be found. The term has stuck, if somewhat uneasily, ever since.

interpreter, which the British public generally accepted, but there were times when his participation sparked antagonism from British blacks who felt that the group should be allowed to speak for itself. The point was taken and it was decided thereafter that Cosmas Magaya should act as spokesman.

The musicians themselves were unfamiliar with the cold-climate culture of Britain and at the start they were unsure of what to do. At the opening concert in the Bloomsbury Theatre, London, "the performance began twenty minutes late with no explanation given and for much of that time the audience was left in darkness staring at an empty stage..."¹⁰ Apparently nobody had explained to the musicians that when the lights went down they were supposed to go on and perform!

In 1988 Mhuri yekwaRwizi asked if I could arrange foreign tours for them in 1990. I worked again through Arts Worldwide (which had now become World Circuit Arts) on a tour intended as a celebration of the tenth anniversary of Zimbabwean independence, though it was naïve of me to think that the general British population would rush out in droves to express solidarity with musicians from their former colony. Nevertheless, the audiences, though mostly small, showed genuine interest and appreciation.

On this tour the *mbira* group was accompanied by a Ndebele dance troupe, Black Umfolosi, who have since developed their own international career and who, at the time of writing, are on their fifth world tour. It was a three-week trip and the money was small but the group felt it had moved forward artistically.

Things were different this time; the musicians were now much more experienced as concert performers; I led some of the workshop sessions and Cosmas provided the explanations during the performances.

In 1990 *The soul of mbira* caught the attention of the British documentary film maker Jeremy Marre, who was directing and producing a series on improvisation based around Derek Bailey's book *Improvisation*.¹¹ The twenty-minute sequence on Zimbabwe in Programme V: 'Nothin' premeditated' included the work of Chawasarira and his children's *karimba* group,¹² the filming of a *bira* with Mondreck Muchena and Sydney Maratu and a beer-hall sequence featuring the playing of Beauler Dyoko and Gora.

In 1991 I formed Kunzwana Trust, a small organisation dedicated to promoting the work of Zimbabwean artists and instrument makers.

Although the members of Mhuri yekwaRwizi are central to the book, there are number of other players mentioned; in particular, the Mujuru family is represented by Ephat and his grandfather, Muchatera Mujuru. Since the book was published, Ephat Mujuru has established an international career for himself. He first visited

¹⁰ Andrew Clements, "Music from Zimbabwe", Financial Times, London, 27.9.1983.

¹¹ *Improvisation: its nature and practice* by Derek Bailey, Moorland Publishing, in association with Incus Records Great Britain, 1980.

¹² Although he was unknown to Berliner during his research in Zimbabwe, Chaka Chawasarira's contribution to *karimba* and *matepe* music and his work with children have been significant.

America at the invitation of Paul Berliner and he later took up a residency at the University of Washington in the USA for four years. Today he leads a band in Zimbabwe called Spirit of the People through which he adapts *mbira* to modern electro-acoustic instruments. Mujuru is also a frequent visitor to the USA as a solo *mbira* player.

Maraire is frequently quoted. He now holds a doctorate in ethnomusicology from the University of Washington and is employed in the Department of African Languages at the University of Zimbabwe. He is also academic advisor to and teacher on the ethnomusicology programme of the Zimbabwe College of Music.

Another of the large-scale personalities of the book, the *njari* player Simon Mashoko, still lives at Beardmore mine near Great Zimbabwe. Formerly a lay-preacher in the Catholic church, he is retired and living on a small church pension. Berliner made available a generous royalty payment to him from *The soul of mbira* sales in 1993 but this still did not go very far to relieving his situation. He still makes *mbira* and some of these are bought by the Kutsinhira Center in the USA and sold to their members.

Beauler Dyoko who received a footnote acknowledgment in the book¹³ lives in a shack at the back of someone's house in St Mary's Chitungwiza. Popular in the sixties, she has been staging something of a comeback in recent years and she was the focal point of a Ph.D dissertation by Angela Impey.¹⁴ Although she still plays in the traditional manner, Dyoko now often combines *mbira* with band instruments and she frequently teams up with popular groups like 'The real sounds' and Jonah Sithole who provide backing for her *mbira* playing.

There have been some questions about why so few female musicians are mentioned in the work. Berliner says his research findings at the time indicated that *mbira* playing was largely a male domain (pers. comm. 1994) and that "I chose to use the masculine pronoun throughout this work because in my research of Shona *mbira* music I have found that the players, with few exceptions, are men. One noted exception to this rule is a popular recording artist, Antonia Diogo (Bula)...¹⁵

Although the balance between male and female in the music industry is still weighted heavily in favour of men, women are now provided with a great deal more opportunity for self-expression. I have asked a number of men what their view is of women playing *mbira*. Their answers range from a belief that women have never been deprived of the opportunity to play *mbira* (it's just that they have never wanted to play), to an opposite view that it is inappropriate for women to play *mbira*, their role is to play *hosho* (rattles) and sing.

I have met a few young female *mbira* players who play simply for pleasure but these days there are a growing number of women who are able to forge successful

¹³ P.17. Note that her name was given as Antonia Diogo (Bula).

¹⁴ Angela Impey, 'They want us with salt and onions: women in the Zimbabwean music industry', unpubl., 1992.

¹⁵ *The Soul of Mbira* p.17, footnote.

careers for themselves as *mbira* artists (singers and/or players) and who are protected and positively encouraged by a small, enlightened corner of the music industry which sanctions their efforts and which can provide social, moral and legal arguments for their acceptance.

The list of female artists includes amongst others Irene Chigamba, Stella Chiweshe, Beauler Dyoko, Chi Maraire and Taruwona Mushure.

The most daring artistically of today's *mbira* artists is probably Taruwona Mushure. She has recognised a connection between the blues and *mbira* and she terms her style 'mbira blues'. She sings in a tuneful, slightly mournful, ballad style and she superimposes these lines onto the traditional *mbira* texture provided by The Mujuru Boys, a branch of the famous Mujuru family. The ensemble is uncorrupted by western additions; the group consists simply of two *mbira*, *hosho*, *ngoma* (African drums) and voices. Her work has come under criticism, in particular from Zimbabwean men, because she sings to *mbira* in English, which many feel is disrespectful to the tradition. Taruwona also uses the medium of *mbira* to speak forcibly about the plight of women in Zimbabwe.

Besides the changing role of women in Zimbabwean society since the mid-seventies, there has been enormous social upheaval in this country since *The soul of mbira* was written. In 1974, when the first version appeared as PhD thesis, the country was called Rhodesia. In the same year George Maxwell Jackson published a report for the National Arts Foundation of Rhodesia (of which all the members were white) called 'The land is bright'. Although segments of the report talk about Kwanongoma College and African arts, most of the text is taken up with discussions on the development of theatres, orchestras and operatic companies. Even so, simply a suggestion that the African arts should be treated with some measure of dignity and recognition led to the document being considered politically subversive and Jackson was forced to resign, leaving the country in 1975.

Berliner's and Jackson's books have entirely different aims: one is a report about the state of the arts in Rhodesia, the other an ethnomusicological study of *mbira* in Zimbabwe, but although both men were collecting information about the arts in the same country at the same time, the result is two books which give the appearance of having been written in parallel universes.

By coincidence I finished re-reading *The soul of mbira* on 16 April 1994 at 10.30pm, sitting in front of the television watching Thomas Mapfumo, the "Chimurenga Guru" of *mbira*, performing live at the Sheraton Conference Centre in Harare. The concert had followed the launching of Zimbabwe's new national anthem written by Prof. Solomon Mutsvairo, Chairman of the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe¹⁶ with music by Cde Fred Chamundega. Beauler Dyoko was the principal *mbira* artist featured at the national anthem ceremony. Nine days later, the last country in Africa to achieve majority rule was to go to the polls to choose a black government led by Nelson Mandela.

¹⁶ Collectors of memorabilia may be interested to know that the President mentioned during his speech that he had sung in Prof. Mutsvairo's choir when the two were at university together in South Africa.

In spite of the interest being shown in the music of Zimbabweans outside the country and the acceptance of *mbira* as a significant feature of the country's cultural identity, little has changed for the musicians themselves. Although Zimbabwe is now independent and there is official government support for traditions of *mbira*, the economic situation and social status of most players has not changed significantly. Musicians are now invited to play on state occasions but it is clear that in upwardly mobile quarters, *mbira* is still often equated with past poverty, lack of social progress, outdated traditions, devil worship and primitivism.

A player can earn about Z\$70.00 (US\$8.75) playing all night at a *bira* but the money may come in too infrequently to sustain a family and so most full-time musicians look to Europe and America to help them out economically where they know there is growing interest in their music and where they can command professional fees and be given fair deals.

The great success story in the last decade, however, is the rise of the *mbira* superstars: musicians like Mapfumo and Chiweshe have reputations which far outstrip those of any other *mbira* players or singers, dead or alive. There is little doubt that they have succeeded in moving *mbira* out of the village into the international arena of fame and stardom.

Chiweshe started out as a village girl. Her uncle, Gwanzura Gwenzi Gumboreshumba, well known twenty years ago as a *mbira* player and story teller who has since given up playing himself, introduced Chiweshe to *mbira* and through sheer determined effort and force of personality she has dragged herself away from village poverty to become one of the most successful exponents of a non-western instrument in the world today.

Over the years, Chiweshe has added electrical amplification to her *mbira*, standardised its tuning to a western tempered scale and imported marimbas, bass and rhythm guitars, *hosho* (gourd hand rattles), African drums and a drum kit into her work. Her mode of dress reflects North African styles. Some of her songs are adaptations and arrangements of the standard *mbira dzavadzimu* repertoire; others are modern compositions with new music composed for the instrument. In addition, Chiweshe has built an awe-inspiring stage personality around the persona of a Shona medium.

Mapfumo has come from the other side. His performing career is a metaphor for his own search for a personal and political identity. He started out in 1961 joining a group called The Cyclones. In 1962 he sang cover songs of Elvis and Little Richard in a group called Mazutu. In 1972 he became part of another band called The Hallelujah Chicken-Run Band which sang songs in Shona. In 1976 he joined the Acid Band and began to sing revolutionary songs like *Tumira Vana Kuhondo* (Send your children to war) and he says he learned how to smoke pot at this stage but denies that he has ever been influenced by Rastafarianism.¹⁷ In the late seventies he founded the Blacks Unlimited with Jonah Sithole and started to adapt the sound of *mbira* to his work.

¹⁷ From Zindi, Fred, *Roots rocking in Zimbabwe*, Mambo Press, Gweru 1985, p.31.

As his technique of arrangement has developed and he has been encouraged by his audiences off critics to incorporate more of his country's traditions into his music, Mapfumo has, in some compositions, pruned his instrumentation to the point where the edge between pure tradition and popular music has become blurred. Today, the upwardly mobile will pay proportionally higher prices to attend Mapfumo gigs in night clubs and concert halls and die-hard traditionalists like Mude, far from being offended by this modernisation of tradition, are instead deeply appreciative of Mapfumo's work.

In some of his latest expressions, Mapfumo uses a bare minimum of two *mbira*, *hosho*, bass guitar and drum kit. His vocal lines over the years have become less melodic, less continuous and more like those of *mbira* singers who pick out tonal patterns from the combination of lines the instruments are playing.

The tremendous respect Mapfumo and Chiweshe have earned for themselves and their music in Europe and America is a constant challenge to the opinions of Zimbabweans but the general feeling remains that while it is socially acceptable to listen to *mbira*, few in the progressive classes would like their daughter to marry a professional *mbira* player. In short, the position of the music in society has changed but the position of the musicians has not.

Nevertheless, the music itself is in a state of constant flux. Yes, the old ways remain: Cosmas Magaya and Mude have made it their life's work to preserve and maintain the music as it was performed in the past. But since independence there have emerged newer, younger groups and styles which distort, alter, experiment and develop. Younger players, like Champion Chingodza, play the old classics in the old way but they have also been influenced by and developed new ways of playing. There are also solo performers like Forward Kwenda, a young virtuoso player who has developed a personal solo style of '*kushaura kutsinhira*'¹⁸ combinations which are fast, complex and densely woven and which require great stamina and skill to perform. Judging from the descriptions in *The soul of mbira*, these are styles which Berliner refers to as *majimba*, a word coined from the description of young rebels in the war.

Mbira dzavadzimu is no longer simply used for playing the old classics. Younger players play *jiti*,¹⁹ which does not follow the classical dyadic harmonic sequence of I-III-VI, I-IV-VI, II-IV-VI, I-III-V. This modern style, of which Master Chivero is a famous exponent, uses the ubiquitous I-IV-I-V pattern over four phrases in a square

¹⁸ There are generally two distinct *mbira* parts which make up a complete texture in classical *mbira*, *kushaura*, often played by newer, less experienced (perhaps less talented) players, which contain the basic pattern and identity marks of a piece and which can be developed using a number of generally standardised variation techniques, and *kutsinhira*. *Kutsinhira* parts are either exact copies of *kushaura* or, more frequently, they are parts which give room for more complex forms of variation. Generally speaking, *kutsinhira* emphasises the bass line more clearly. Some talented players are able to combine both *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* into one solo version.

¹⁹ *Jiti* started as a popular music style with fast drumming and western-based harmonies performed by younger people often at the edge of ceremonies which they were not permitted to attend. The term has now been extended to include modern styles of *mbira*. It is interesting to note that *jiti* superseded *pfonda*, a previous popular style, which indicates that Zimbabwe has its own natural traditions of changing popular music trends distinct from those influenced by the west.

quadruple metre with syncopated rhythms and triadic harmonies. It can be played on one acoustic *mbira* but often the instrument is electrically amplified and accompanied by big band instruments. Little of the syntax relevant to the classical way is relevant to this newer style.

Jiti is not discussed by Berliner, simply, one assumes, because it was not there at the time the research was being done. What has always been slightly puzzling is the lack of mention of anything to do with *magandanga* tuning. Berliner says that he never heard mention of it during the time of his fieldwork in the 1970s and Andrew Tracey, whose family has been familiar with Zimbabwean *mbira* since the 1920s, had also never heard about it until he came to Zimbabwe at the end of 1988.

Magandanga (a word used during the war to refer to renegades) is a recent mode which has appeared on *mbira dzavadzimu* and which is now spreading to other versions of *mbira*.²⁰ Another term in use is *mavhembe* (referring to a singer who cannot hold a tune) which is a softer word that is less likely to offend. Nobody knows for certain from the tuning came though the evidence points to Gora, nickname for the veteran singer, *mbira* player and maker Thomas Wadharwa. In *magandanga*,²¹ the second, third and sixth of the scale are significantly lowered beyond what might be acceptable as simply a variation in tuning. The effect is to change the central pitch or home note of a piece so that, for example, the home note of "Nyamaropa" shifts to a third below (or a sixth above) from where it would normally sit in 'standard' tuning.

One feature which has recently aroused my curiosity is the changing repertoire of players. Even within a classical repertoire, there are indications of changing trends and fashions. There are the standard classics like "Nyamaropa", "Nhemamusasa" and "Mahororo" but it would be interesting to discover what exactly is the core repertoire and which other pieces are subject to changing fashions and taste.

The general understanding is the composition of pieces for *mbira dzavadzimu* is finished, that the possibilities for the repertoire have been exhausted. This certainly Chawasarira's view, which is one of the reasons why he concentrates much of his attention on the *karimba* where he feels unconstrained to compose freely. He also spends time rearranging the music of *mbira dzavadzimu* for *matepe*, another type of *mbira*.

Chigamba, on the other hand, who is another distinguished *mbira* player and maker, does believe that it is possible still to compose music for *mbira dzavadzimu*. His instruments consist of more than the usual 22 keys found on most *mbira dzavadzimu* today and he has composed numerous new pieces based, for the most part, on the structural principles of the classical *mbira* repertoire.

The question now, twenty years after the first thesis was completed, is how well

²⁰ Chawasarira has adopted *magandanga* to *matepe* and *karimba*.

²¹ It has been suggested by Andrew Tracey that *magandanga* could only have been invented under the influence of western tempered tuning in many spheres of Shona society (pers. comm.). In my opinion it has a particular psycho-acoustical property, that of giving the aural impression of the home note being moved a third lower, comparable in western music to a minor scale.

the book has weathered the passage of time. Berliner admits himself that there are a number of words and phrases that he would wish to change which, to modern ears, might sound outmoded and a few facts that he would wish to correct and which could be dealt with in one swift editorial sweep. For example, on p.18, the Kalanga are referred to as Shona which they are not (like the Valley Tonga, they are both culturally **and** linguistically distinct from the Shona) and tribal trust lands are now referred to as communal lands or rural areas.

There is one irritating outdated form of syntax — the use of 'an' mbira instead of 'a' mbira. The latter is now in standard use in line with a ruling made by the University of Zimbabwe Department of African Languages that a single vowel should precede any Shona word beginning with the consonant /m/ or /n/. Berliner says he does not believe that this was in use during his research years.

One of the more difficult challenges of ethnomusicological research, to my mind, is defining the exact semantic fields of particular words used in a culture and being able to find equivalents for them in a language foreign to that culture. For example, the word '*mbira*' in Shona is plural, even when referring to a single instrument, but has to be rendered in the singular in English when referring to one instrument, to avoid confusion. 'Mbira' also refers to the metal tongues of the instrument for which the nearest English equivalent is the unsatisfactory word 'keys'. 'Mbira' also refers to the philosophy and law surrounding the instrument. The title *The Soul of Mbira* seems to encapsulate all these meanings in a single phrase.

There are areas where the book touches on themes which arouse one's curiosity which naturally could be expanded into self-contained areas of research in themselves. There is nothing more exciting in the field of academic research than a book which raises as many questions as it answers. One area of particular interest is *kutsinhira* playing, the second part of any *mbira* piece, which is generally played by a more experienced musician and which provides opportunities for the display of virtuosity and extended imagination. In my experience, it has generally been the *kutsinhira* players who define musically the difference between the prosaic and the sublime. *Kutsinhira* is often more of a process of improvisation than a pre-composed part and, as Berliner says, "great musicians have the skill, upon hearing a *kushaura* part of a piece for the first time, to improvise an interwoven *kutsinhira* part, successfully accompanying the first player." (p.152). The main body of *The Soul of Mbira* text is 245 pages and so there are many themes which are touched upon which open up further opportunities for research and *kutsinhira* styles would definitely be one of those.

Berliner refers to the then recent trend of abandoning guitars in favour of *mbira* (p.27). I am aware of one *mbira* maker, Chris Mhlanga, who used to play guitar but who now only makes and plays *mbira*, but most of the other musicians known to me, Sydney Maratu in particular, play both the guitar and *mbira* and their aim is "to put *mbira* onto guitar". The modern tendency is to fuse and blend rather than separate. In my experience, it is the dream of most young *mbira* players, such as Champion Chingodza, to learn to play guitar or keyboards in order to extend the language of *mbira* and increase the popularity of their music.

Some have queried the use of the term *mbira dzavadzimu* (literally *mbira* of the ancestral spirits). The argument is that *mbira dzavadzimu* should be employed as a general description for any *mbira* in Zimbabwe used for sacred purposes. Alternatives have been proposed like *nhare* (referring to the iron used for the forging of the keys) and *mbira huru* (large *mbira*). In fact, the term *mbira dzavadzimu* is widespread in Zimbabwe and it seems to be accepted now that it arose from a need to make a distinction between a particular instrument called *mbira*, and the class of instruments of which it was a member which was called by the same name. Perhaps the best and fullest description is that made by Bandambira and quoted by Berliner in his book. Bandambira referred to the instrument as "*mbira huru dzavadzimu*" (large *mbira* of the ancestral spirits").²²

Despite these controversies which surround the book, what is made abundantly clear from the introduction and the body of the text is Berliner's painful efforts to avoid cultural distortions. As he says:

"in an attempt to portray the music in a manner true to its own tradition, I have, therefore, wherever possible employed concepts and categories taken from the Shona musicians themselves and their repertoires. In so doing I hope to have minimized the kinds of inadvertent distortions that can result when African music has imposed on it Western concepts having little to do with the way in which Africans view their own art."²³

Through these words Berliner is espousing objectivity and the minimising of cultural interference but, nevertheless, he is not afraid to allow his sympathies to show through phrases like "the profound nature of the traditions". I also think that his musical background and the music that is closest to his heart often show through in his writing. He is a Chicago jazzman fully conversant with the blues and jazz²⁴ and I cannot help feeling that either consciously or unconsciously the soul of the blues, to his mind, refers back directly to the soul of *mbira*. There are some good reasons for making limited comparisons: a major theme of the blues is social deprivation and there is an underlying repeated harmonic sequence or harmonic frame which supports the theme and its variations according to a number of principles laid down as being within the style. The same harmonic sequence (with only minor variations) is found throughout the repertoire. In both these areas, there are parallels to be made with *mbira*: *mbira* texts often directly refer to social conditions (although the texts are often in deep Shona and the meaning may be obscure) and again there is a set harmonic sequence²⁵ which runs through a large part of the *mbira* classical²⁶ repertoire.

There have been comments that Berliner's sympathies extend too far and that he is even trying to preserve the name of a group which to all extents and purposes no

²² *The Soul of Mbira* p.33/4,

²³ *Ibid.* p.53.

²⁴ Berliner recently completed a book, the product of fifteen years study, entitled *Thinking in jazz: the infinite art of improvisation*, University of Chicago Press 1994.

²⁵ See Andrew Tracey, "The matepe mbira music of Rhodesia", *African Music* 4/4, 1970, for an explanation of the Shona harmonic system as it relates to *mbira*.

²⁶ The term 'classical' is used here of traditions which are considered profound examples of artistic expression which are preserved and protected as part of the general cultural heritage more-or-less in their original form.

longer properly exists. The impression given in *The Soul of Mbira* is that 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' is a group like any other which plays together and which has a minimum consistent membership. In fact 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' (the family of Rwizi, a place in the Mhondoro communal land) is more of an idea centred round Mude and, to some extent, maybe even Berliner himself. Questions have been asked about the validity and honesty of promoting a group internationally which contains members who have not played or recorded together under that name for decades and who may indeed have gone off and formed other groups.

In Berliner's defence, one can say that before all this modern-day promotion and commotion, a *mbira* group drew its membership from within the extended family. The group provided the music for the family ceremonies and general entertainment in the village and sometimes they would be hired out to other villages and families who did not have the luxury of resident *mbira* players. I have never been exactly sure when the term 'Mhuri yekwa...' (the family of...) was introduced to denote a specific *mbira* group but my instinct says that it became a substantive idea only when it became necessary commercially to find a term to distinguish one group from another.

There is no doubt that Mude is still the central figure of 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' and when he performs it is generally under the name of 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' no matter who is playing with him, even if all the other players at the time are unrelated to his extended family. Sydney Maratu reports the story of when he and Ephant Mujuru played with Mude for Zimbabwe Television and repeated the same piece in the recording studio for the Gramma Recording Company. For the television version they identified themselves as 'Mhuri yekwaMujuru'; for the recording session they called themselves 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi'. This suggests that the preservation of the names was important; the fact that both groups had the same players was secondary and the fact that the central personalities of each group were present at both sessions made this compromise necessary.²⁷

Some of the players maintain loose ties with 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' like Cosmas Magaya who worked in Victoria Falls, Hwange and Masvingo for a number of years and now has a store in Mhondoro, about 150km south of Harare. He plays with Mude when he is in town. Luken Pasipamire (who now refers to himself as Kwari) lives in Bulawayo. Ephraim Mutemasango lives in Harare and he too sometimes plays with Mude. 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' could therefore be described as a loose configuration rather than a fixed entity with Mude as the common denominator.

I do not believe that the group was ever professional in the sense of all the members being full-time musicians. Each member has always had another trade: Mude as self-employed upholsterer, Muchena as shoe maker for the orthopaedic centre of the hospital, Mutemasango as an industrial worker, Magaya and Kwari as employees of the Dairy Marketing Board. The members would come together to record and they played together at *mapira* in different parts of the country but they were never full-time professionals in the sense that a group like 'Mhuri yekwaDyoko'

²⁷ To expand on naming, the Shona and the Zambezi Valley Tonga both have traditions where the names of drums can change according to the dance, despite the fact that they are the same drums. This indicates a different view of naming from the western requirement to standardise everything under one name.

is today. In this sense, perhaps 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' is even more traditionally-based than we think.

In one sense, foreign travel has also been a threat to their identity. To begin with, there is always the problem of pronunciation. When the group went to England in 1990 they were labelled *The Rwizis* because it was felt that none of the radio DJs would play the music of a group whose name they could not pronounce. The group did not like it. As a way to resolve this, it was proposed that the 1995 tour be called *The Soul of Mbira Tour* in the hope that those who could would use the name of the group and those who could not would have a term respected by the members of the group and with which they were well acquainted. In another sense, these foreign tours help to bring the members of the group back together and give them a sense of identity and purpose. Berliner describes it as being roughly equivalent to the reunion-band phenomenon in the United States where disbanded groups get back together after a number of years to record an album or undertake a tour (pers. comm. 1994). For the tour to Europe, all the members of the original group came back together and rehearsed solidly in the two weeks leading up to the tour.

On the 1984 tour, there were questions as to why the group had no women in it; in 1990, Mondreck Muchena's wife Francesca (known to most people as Mai Muchena) joined the tour as a member of the group. Sydney Maratu was also co-opted as a group member. In 1994 Beauler Dyoko, a woman from an entirely different tradition of *mbira dzavadzimu*, was with them, though, in this instance, she joined as a soloist in her own right. The inclusion of one woman on each tour might be interpreted as tokenism; as a promoter I have always encouraged the inclusion of women to prove that *mbira* is not exclusively a male domain.

The fact that 'Mhuri yekwaRwizi' is now more of an idea and may not exist in the same form as it did in the sixties and early seventies obviously does not detract from the value of a book which focuses on them. In fact, Berliner is considering returning to Zimbabwe to continue his research with the original group members and others, now it is twenty years on, in order to record developments in the lives of the players and to conduct further research into the syntax of patterning found in *mbira* and in particular in *kutsinhira* playing. His research would no doubt further discredit that useless idea that 'traditional' musics are static and unchanging.

The *mbira* world continues to expand and change. The Ethnomusicology Programme of the Zimbabwe College of Music has a bi-annual intake of 20 music teachers every two years. Besides their academic studies in ethnomusicology, all are required to learn the basic principles of *mbira* playing. In time, the learning of *mbira* should become a regular feature of the musical curriculum in every Zimbabwean school.

In the post-modern world which recognises the multiplicity of truth, the contemporary music scene continues to open its ears to non-western musics. In the past this has, at times, led to the plundering and exploitation of cultures for self-

aggrandisement,²⁸ but the trend nowadays is to provide space for so-called western composers and performers to co-operate with musicians from outside European culture, allowing both the original music and the western commentaries upon it to exist as equal partners, side by side. As the 'world music' market becomes saturated and commercialised, the contemporary music scene opens useful doorways for non-commercial musics from other cultures to move into new and adventurous markets.

As an example, in May 1996, De Ijsbreker, the Dutch Contemporary Music Centre in Amsterdam, devoted an entire week-long exhibition to *mbira*. Thirty musicians, including Chaka Chawasarira and his Zengea Children's Ensemble, Beauler Dyoko and the Black Souls and Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited, were invited to Amsterdam to perform in concerts around the city. Distinguished academics, including Paul Berliner and Gerhard Kubik, delivered lectures on *mbira* music. A major element of the festival was a composition project which involved the commissioning of three works from Peter van Bergen and the Ensemble Loos, Ron Ford and Maarten Altena and his ensemble. These composers co-operated with Chawasarira and his group to produce three distinctly different contemporary commentaries on *mbira*...

Three months later, Peter van Bergen married one of Chawasarira's daughters!

In an attempt to broaden their audiences and cater for non-western tastes, the international classical music scene has been experimenting nervously with the possibility of incorporating the more established traditions of music from other cultures into their programming. In August 1996 the *mbira* group Mhuri yekwa-Chigamba, led by Irene Chigamba and her father, Tute, played at a distinguished classical music festival in Lucerne. The performance took place immediately after a programme of Brahms' orchestral music with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Claudio Abbado. The Mhuri yekwa-Chigamba performance, a sixty minute programme tacked on to the end of the evening, presented *mbira* as pure music divorced from displays of 'ethnic culture', although the critic still complained that it was still too much of an ethnic display.

The American Shona-music scene in the Pacific Northwest is flourishing and the steady stream of students from the United States to Zimbabwe is proof that many marimba players are now turning their attention to learning *mbira dzavadzimu*. With the heavy demand for instruments from USA and elsewhere *mbira* makers like Tute Chigamba are overburdened with regular orders of up to fifty instruments at a time.²⁹ Knowing the price that a *mbira* can fetch in the USA, Zimbabwean makers are now learning to charge higher prices for their instruments: one can now expect to pay US\$200 for a Frederick Mujuru *mbira* (although his brother Sam produces similar

²⁸ The famous case in the *mbira* world is "Mbira" for two harpsichords by Kevin Volans. Volans copyrighted this work as his own and built a significant reputation for himself on the basis of this and other works which borrowed directly from the Zimbabwean *mbira* repertoire. "Mbira" is a direct copy of transcriptions of "Nyamaropa" made by Andrew Tracey. After a lengthy battle, Volans agreed to approach his publishers, have the copyright cancelled and put the work into the public domain.

²⁹ Although it would be a simple matter and a great deal cheaper for Americans to build their own instruments, most prefer to order from Zimbabwean *mbira* makers for ethical reasons and are prepared to wait for up to a year for delivery.

instruments for half the amount). Chigamba continues to undercharge for his instruments saying that he needs to keep in mind the Zimbabwean *mbira* player who cannot afford such high prices.³⁰

Seattle has a thriving Shona music community and every year in the city there is a festival of Zimbabwean music which has grown so fast that it has become increasingly harder to manage on a voluntary basis. A major information node of Zimbabwean music is the magazine *Dandemutande* (spiderweb) run by Paul Novitski in Seattle, which keeps everyone up to date with the Shona music scene throughout the world.³¹ Many people now maintain contact through the internet: Solomon Murungu, a Zimbabwean player living in Chicago, developed a *mbira* homepage in the early days of cybernet, and the Kunzwana homepage went on line in the first week of February 1997.³²

The state of Oregon also boasts a growing Zimbabwean music community; Portland has a thriving marimba group, 'Boka', and Eugene is home to the Kutsinhira Center set up for purposes of providing a service to those interested in learning about Zimbabwean *mbira* music.

In California, Erica Kundidzora is one of the best known *mbira* teachers to conduct regular classes in the Bay area of San Francisco. Zimbabwean players are now finding it easier to filter into the American scene, and Americans are being exposed to a broader cross-section of Zimbabwean artists. Forward Kwenda was brought to the USA by Kundidzora, Chris Mhlanga toured at the invitation of researcher Tom Turino, and Sydney Maratu is now touring for six months performing and conducting workshops.

The British scene is growing. The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London has a *mbira* programme run by Chartwell Dutiro and the number of players in the south of England is growing. Kunzwana now receives frequent orders for instruments from UK, Germany and Brazil.

Although the focus in Zimbabwe remains firmly on the Shona *mbira*, other minority cultures are beginning to attract attention. In 1997, exactly 40 years after Hugh Tracey spent ten days in the Zambezi Valley recording Tonga music before the people were moved to make way for Kariba Dam, thirty Tonga musicians will visit the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare in August and then spend six weeks in Austria and Belgium on both the World Music and the Contemporary Music circuits. Built into the exercise is a composition project involving Zimbabwean (including Tonga) composers and Austrian creative artists such as Lukas Ligeti.

* * * * *

³⁰ Nevertheless, he increased the price of his *mbira dzavadzimu* from \$200 to the fairer price of \$500 in January 1997.

³¹ Address: 1711 E. Spruce St, Seattle, Washington 98122-5728, USA, Tel: 206-323.6592, Fax: 206-329.9355. E-mail: <dandemutan@aol.com>, Web page: <<http://WWW.rootsworld.com/rw/dandemutande/>>

³² <<http://www.servus.at/argezim>>