

---

---

## MODERN TRENDS IN GHANA MUSIC

by

J. H. NKETIA

The student of African musical practice in changing Africa is often haunted by a feeling of urgency. He must hasten to collect examples of the variety of musical types cultivated in a given area "before they are lost forever". Wherever he goes, he does not content himself with what he gets in the towns: he visits places where the forces of acculturation are least evident, making a careful selection of the available material in order that he might take back recordings of "authentic" African music for preservation and study.

This feeling is justifiable not only on account of the accelerated pace of change in Africa but also because the dynamic agents of musical change are foreign, powerful and greatly alluring. They have been so in Ghana. The importance of the approach and the methods used, therefore, cannot be disputed even if they appear to be guided by a museum-cultural outlook, for it is only through systematic collection, study and documentation of this material that the evolution of African music can be adequately studied in the future.

But the importance of the work of the student of African music does not lie only in the future. The material can be a source of inspiration to creative musicians within and outside Africa. Far too often modern African musicians look too far afield for such inspiration when there is abundant material waiting at their door-steps. Such collections and studies can have repercussions on present day trends in our musical practice. The African musician who is leading his people towards new goals needs to be thoroughly acquainted with the cultural values of his own society. By disseminating a knowledge of authentic African music, the emerging African may be enabled to appreciate the value of his heritage and build on it for the future.

In studying African music, however, we cannot afford to be completely oblivious to the factors that are affecting it for good or ill, for the African and his culture no longer enjoy the isolation of the past. The presence of change impresses itself on the field worker, however devoted he might be to the cause of indigenous African music. It might arouse his sympathy for the African who is striving to adapt himself to new musical ideas, or it might make him contemptuous of the innovations he meets. The feeling of admiration which the complex rhythms of drums engender in him might turn into disgust at the sight of the guitar or the saxophone. The African tune which fascinates him by its peculiar tonal organization and rhythmic phrasing might be looked down upon by him or at best considered highly amusing if it was no longer sung in unison, in strict parallel thirds or organum in fourths or fifths.

In whatever way we judge these innovations, we cannot ignore the fact that they are the "growing pains" of a new era, a new phase in the evolution of African music which merits some notice, and perhaps sympathetic understanding of the peculiar situation in which the African now finds himself. In Ghana, and I believe in other places, new composite musical traditions are emerging from the contact of indigenous African music on the one hand, and on the other, the music imported from Europe and the other side of the Atlantic—musical traditions wedged, as it were, between two cultures, musical traditions embodying the reactions of culture contact, the tendencies to conservatism and change expressing themselves in the rejection, adoption and adaptation of non-African musical forms.

While the composite musical traditions which have already emerged are *transitional* and cannot yet be regarded as *mature* traditions, they are interesting from various

points of view. They tend to be identified with new social institutions and their verbal content often gives interesting indications of the values that have come to be accepted or questioned in modern life. They are certainly not faced by any serious threat of decline or neglect by urban and rural communities in Ghana for whom they provide a new form of social music. They are popular and greatly commercialized.<sup>1</sup>

A study of the music of these new traditions might be of theoretical interest. It might enable us to determine more definitely what constitutes the "African approach" to music, or what Hugh Tracey describes as "the African mentality behind the trappings of adopted art forms".<sup>2</sup> It might enable us to see what elements are so vital to the African's approach to music that they get perpetuated in the new traditions, what elements are modified, what elements are left out, and so on. A study of the selection and adaptation taking place in modern music might provide objective tests for our theories or at any rate show how much emphasis should be given to various aspects of African music which we seek to describe. All these presuppose a knowledge of indigenous African music, which I believe must always be our starting point in African musical research.

A study of transitional music might also have useful practical results. It might enable modern musicians to see what they are doing and perhaps do it better. It might even help in establishing a closer bond between the old and the new.

With the foregoing observations in mind, I would now like to draw attention to the transitional forms in Ghana and the way they have been evolving as new traditions in our musical life. I shall limit myself mainly to the factors of change and the trends along which the traditions are developing.

In Ghana two new musical traditions have emerged as a result of the forces of acculturation out of which Ghana herself has been born. The first which has developed gradually over the past sixty years or more is fairly well standardized and is popularly known by the English title of High Life, a title which reflects the early attitude of people to it as a new but somewhat insidious form of social music. Though based on gay rhythms of African foundation, it began from the inspiration of Western band music which was admired for its noisy splendour, and later the ballroom at which thoughtful Africans never looked favourably. These incorporated percussion and movement, and suggested a new line for creating a gay type of African music which would be markedly different from the lighter type of traditional music.

Like band music used for parades, the High Life grew up as "street music". Wherever it was played, players and dancers moved slowly along from one end of the street to another. This attracted young people by its novelty and always drew spectators. As street music people danced to it individually and freely as we still do, moving in regular forward or sideways steps, each foot doing two consecutive beats while the body and the hands swayed rhythmically. It was a simple dance and lacked the artistic routine of our traditional dances. It has continued to remain so, though various styles of movement become fashionable from time to time.

When the High Life developed into a standardized item for the ballroom, dancing partners for this particular dance soon became an intolerable formality. The tradition soon grew of partners freely breaking up as they still do in order that they may each "enjoy the rhythm better" in the true African fashion.

The High Life has continued to remain in vogue as a new popular music in modern Ghana. Nowadays its development depends largely on town bands: instrumental

<sup>1</sup> See NKETIA, J. H. "The Gramophone and Contemporary African Music in the Gold Coast", *proceedings of Conference of West African Institute of Social and Economic Research*, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> African Music Society Newsletter, Volume 1 No. 5.

dance bands which specialize in music other than the High Life, and vocal dance bands supported by guitar or accordion and percussion. There are over twenty such bands in Accra alone, though they are by no means equally popular.

The growth of High Life bands has not followed the same pattern. Differences will be found according to the educational background of members of the band, their ability to assimilate new ideas, and so on. There are also environmental factors. Musicians in the municipalities are developing along different lines from those in towns and villages. Moreover opportunities for performing and the conditions under which they perform tend to be different.

For urban bands, the setting is frequently the ballroom the wedding reception,, the café or night club. For town musicians the setting is the occasional dance in town or dances in other towns to which they may be invited, while village bands find their setting in the street: Theirs is to perambulate the street with their High Life which often attracts crowds of appreciative dancers who follow them round every corner. All these differences are reflected in the music of the different bands who show varying degrees of polish and discipline. Many bands, particularly vocal bands, compose their own High Life songs. These songs, especially those of popular bands get quickly known through the radio and the commercial disc.

Different types of High Life music are now being developed. There are two standard forms of Ghanaian creation: the High Life of fast tempo which is the normal one, and the slow High Life popularly referred to as Blues, merely because of its tempo, for it is always blues without the blue notes, and is often different in rhythmical conception.

The association of the High Life with the Ballroom and Western musical instruments has tended to make Western harmonic usages the ideal which many musicians aim at. Already certain chord formations have become characteristic and many musicians go beyond the common chords. A lot of experimentation is going on, but the characteristic song style of the High Life, its basic rhythm and phrase lengths, its percussion and style of dancing have continued to be maintained.

The High Life is essentially vocal music. Even when played by instruments there must always be a vocal interlude. The songs are sung in our language, and are based on a variety of subjects. There are topical songs, songs about individuals, moral songs, songs about death, political songs, and so on. The tunes are often catchy, sentimental or gay but simple enough in outline to be readily grasped by the ordinary man about town.

Although the development of the High Life began along the coast of Southern Ghana, it is today found in the greater part of the country as the one type of African music which is not tribal in idiom, for as far as traditional music is concerned Ghanaians are separated by differences in musical idiom, differences which make it difficult for the Akan to appreciate Aᵛᵛ (Ewe) music or for the Grunsi to appreciate the music of the Dagbani.

The musical importance of the High Life in Ghana, therefore, is that it is inter-tribal, and standardized as a song type. It serves as a new type of folk music which may be heard on the lips of the breadseller, the workman as well as the professional musician, a new type of folk music that may be known even to people who are not regular visitors to places of dancing.

The second type of new African music in Ghana emerged much later than the High Life. Unlike the High Life which is orientated to the place of dancing, the second type of tradition is orientated to the concert hall, the Church (as a place for performing music), and educational institutions. The musical types are not as formally standardized as the High Life although they are unmistakable from any other type of Ghana music. They

are more serious in outlook, more elaborate in structure and on the whole tend to be less popularly known.

Composers of this type of music look to traditional music for inspiration and sometimes for their song motifs. For their gay, lively pieces, some of them even draw on the High Life form, for the attitude of Ghanaians to the High Life is that it is a new addition to our folk music. Because folk music is their starting point, many of our composers are serious students of Ghana music who collect traditional folk songs, learn to drum and play African musical instruments in order that the new music which they create may reflect quite clearly the African tradition from which they spring.

The father of this tradition is Ephraim Amu who started to re-create traditional music in the 1920's when as a teacher of music he suddenly became alive to the need for studying our music, and for re-creating it so that in time it might replace the Western hymn and serve the new musical needs which have arisen through the adoption of Western institutions. The publication of his original compositions of "Twenty Five African Songs" in 1933 by Sheldon Press set the pattern for a new African music which has been followed by many literate and semi-literate composers ever since. The introduction to the songs consists of 80 progressive "Exercises" in the reading of African rhythm, exercises based on a very close analysis of unilineal rhythms as he then understood them. The notation which he used has continued to be used by other musicians in much the same form or with a few modifications. Besides paving the way for a new type of music, therefore, he has also helped in establishing a tradition of written African music in Ghana.

Ephraim Amu's style and the theoretical considerations which guided his compositions thirty years ago have of course changed a great deal. His later works which are more complex have yet to be published. They are broadcast on the radio and are heard at special concerts. They exhibit the same African features which he and other Ghanaian musicians believe must be maintained: the characteristic African ways of forming rhythms and rhythm patterns, responsorial patterns, tonal and rhythmic correlations between words and melody, and for the area now being served by this new music, the use of two and three part forms, judicious use of thirds where parts break into two, and so on. Ephraim Amu believes, like other Ghanaians, that the African can learn from the West in matters of harmony and counterpoint, provided the characteristic tonal organization of our melodies, cadential patterns, etc. are maintained. This, of course, sets a limitation on the type of harmonies one could use in order to retain the African flavour which is often looked for in these new songs.

Amu's interest is not only in vocal music but also in instrumental African music. At the School of Music of which he is head, drumming is compulsory for all students. He has even succeeded in getting it approved as a subject for certificate examinations in music by Examining Bodies overseas. Many of his past students have taken this examination.

Unlike other musicians who do not mind using foreign instruments, Amu believes in the development of our own instruments. He has continued to develop our end blown flutes—to increase their pitch ranges, vary their sizes, fit them with improved mouth pieces. He makes these instruments himself and writes music for ensembles of them which are played by his music students at the College of Technology. He believes, and I think quite rightly, that the peculiar African charm of the music of our end blown flutes would be lost if we were to abandon our African instrument for the Western flute.

Following Amu other musicians have sought to write new African music for use in Church by church choirs, music for use in schools and music for the concert hall. Not enough music has been written. The question of African hymns for the Church is still an unfulfilled hope of the future. Not all the composers have succeeded in blending

African and Western forms, but there is a genuine interest among this group in preserving the folk music tradition and in recreating it for the new forms of social life and the institutions which have emerged through our contact with the West.

In contemporary life, the new traditions that are being created and the old tradition exist side by side along with imported music from Europe and the other side of the Atlantic. All these traditions are contextually distributed in such a way as to make them complementary. Different institutions make use of different musical traditions. The institution of Government still carries under its wings the Western military band and a National Anthem in the idiom of Western music, while the institution of chiefship maintains the African drum orchestra and continues to flourish its traditional fanfares of ivory horns.

Cafés, night clubs, ballrooms make use of varieties of the new Ghana music as well as African derived music, while old style music continues to be used at African ritual and ceremonies.

Whatever may be said about the quality of the new music that is being created or the efforts of musicians to find an answer to the problem of social change, there can be no doubt of the social importance of the experiments that are being made, experiments which need to be guided if they are to prove worthy of the new African.

---

## MUSICAL MEMORIES OF NIGERIA

by

THE REV. BRIAN KINGSLAKE

*"The women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing . . . with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of music"* (I Samuel, 18:6).

I was sent out to Nigeria in 1945/6 to inspect and report on the New Church Mission, of which I was secretary in England. It was run by an African Superintendent, who took me around. I had no car, because they were difficult to come by, so soon after the war; anyway, most of our mission stations were far away from motor roads. The villages all over the country are linked together by a network of ancient narrow footpaths worn deep in the sandy soil, with elephant grass, bamboo clumps, or the high green wall of the forest on both sides. For miles we would foot it along these paths, preceded by a dozen porters carrying our baggage on their heads. Sometimes I would travel by bicycle taxi: you sit sideways on a padded carrier, while the taxi-driver pedals. ("First class" he pushes you up the hills; "second class" you get off with him and walk.) For longer journeys I sat in the cab of transport lorries full of sacks of cocoa beans, with twenty black passengers sitting inside on the sacks. In the mangrove creeks of the Niger Delta, we travelled for hundreds of miles in the mission dug-out canoe: two deck chairs under an awning, with paddlers or "pullers" at stem and stern.

Was I lonely, away from all white contacts for six months? No; because I keenly shared the two main folk-interests of the country, Religion and Music. Every Nigerian gets a kick out of music, and puts a kick into it! In Lagos, the mere quantity of sound rising up to heaven is terrific—one needs ear plugs! And anywhere in the whole country, at any time of day or night, if you listen you can hear singing and the thudding of drums. Your lorry passes through a village at night; by the roadside little palm-oil