

ZULU MALE TRADITIONAL SINGING

by

DAVID RYCROFT

The following is an extract from a paper read, with recorded illustrations, at a joint meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute and the British Institute of Recorded Sound, held at 38 Russell Square, London, W.C.1. on May 23rd, 1957, and is reprinted by kind permission of the British Institute of Recorded Sound.

One of the oddest and loudest forms of African noise to be heard nightly in some of the larger South African towns is described by its makers as 'Zulu Male Traditional Singing'. This is their polite (and inaccurate) description of it when speaking to non-Zulus. Such singing, by small, all male, choirs and the restrained kind of strutting dance or slouch which goes with it is, however, a new tradition, if the term 'traditional' is to be allowed. Amongst the singers themselves it is called 'Bombing', a term coined during the war, as they felt it was just that kind of noise.

The conductor demands of each of his seven or eight choristers an unflinching, hypnotic gaze, and executes vigorous and precisely timed signals, both manual and vocal, for the attack of each choral yell. Explosive fortissimo chords result. Their harmonic structure is largely open fourths and fifths, upper parts being rendered in ear-splitting coloratura falsetto.¹ While barbarous to European ears, Zulu tribal elders of the older generation find such 'town music' equally foreign by their standards.

Many forms of truly indigenous music and dancing are still performed in towns by so-called migrant labourers. Of the thousands of men who come to town from country areas to take up temporary unskilled employment, many are housed in mining, industrial and municipal compounds and hostels. Here, members of one or another tribe who still retain a common connection with their particular tribal culture naturally tend to meet together after working hours, and real traditional music and dancing as often as not materialise quite spontaneously.

Continued residence in town, however, and the independence from tribal authority and custom which it confers, brings, in its turn, the urge to conform with those new patterns of behaviour and taste demanded of a townsman by public opinion. In African town society, musical taste can no longer be dictated either by tribal elders or by a welfare officer. For Zulu and Swazi men of little or no education who are newly weaned from country loyalties, 'Bombing' is one of the marks of conspicuous townmanship.

Any evening of the week in Johannesburg, small groups of Bombing enthusiasts are to be heard rehearsing in hostel rooms, on balconies, in back yards or in the servant's quarters at the top of luxury blocks of flats (nicknamed 'locations in the sky'). These singers feel themselves to be a new 'smarter set'. Though barely literate, they have been too long in town to stoop to tribal dancing for recreation. For them, like the better educated participants in school and public music festivals, it must be choir singing, and the choir should have an impressive name. 'Hamlet's Male Voice Choir' would seem to suggest the height of gentility—until heard. Other actual names of some prominent Bombing choirs are the Newcastle Humming Bees, the Evening Birds, the Morning Tigers, the Brave Lions, the Violet Rays, the Million Brothers, the Super Dynamos, the Zululand Home Defenders, and even the American Home Defenders. Another has a rather sadder title, The Cycle Lost Brothers.

Many of these choirs have some distinctive uniform of their own, to be worn upon

¹ Among commercial recordings of Zulu and Swazi 'Bombing' Gallotone GE 1040 provides a spirited example: "*Sengikumbula u6a6a*" 'Now we remember our father.'

special occasions. This may be a 'zoot-suit' jacket with odd coloured pockets, specially tailored to knee length and worn with stove-pipe trousers, or a college blazer with an ornate meaningless badge. Accessories such as lion-skin caps, watch (or bath-plug) chains worn at the droop, and two-tone patent leather shoes are fashionable. Brightly patterned socks and incandescent suspenders must naturally be worn with short trousers if they are to be appreciated.

The special occasions for which full dress is required are choir competitions, held regularly on Saturday nights in every available hall or schoolroom in the back streets. One hall in great demand is that of the Polly Street Adult Education Centre, 3 Polly Street, Johannesburg. It lies next to what was until recently an open plot of ground where illicit liquor brewers plied their trade, while gangsters lurked in the Polly Street shadows to waylay consumers on their unsteady route home. Police raids were frequent here, and the place was referred to by Africans as 'Kwa Magaba ngejubane'—the place where one sipped and then fled.

The adjacent hall, with a Saturday night Zulu competition in progress, thus offered welcome shelter to drunks who either could stagger no farther or were sober enough to remember to avoid gangsters or police. Such members of the audience often started arguments and brawls, but, as no-one can shout louder than a Bombing choir in full yell, competitions were never actually interrupted.

Rather than themselves standing at the door to issue tickets, or entrusting another with money, the organisers of the competitions preferred to allow free access to all until the hall was full, and thereafter, at about 11 p.m., to collect halfcrowns from the assembled audience in the manner of a bus conductor. As a token of payment, everyone received the imprint of a rubber stamp on the back of his hand, bearing the legend 'Zulu Male Traditional Choirs' in deep purple. Bombing continued without intermission until about 5 or 6 a.m., but, long before the end, half the audience were generally nodding or snoring in their seats, many with one hand carefully supported by the other so as to ensure that their receipt imprint did not get rubbed off.

Often as many as twenty-five choirs took part in the competition, numbered slips being drawn out of a hat to decide their order of appearance. Whenever the next choir was called to the stage, something similar to a rugby scrum was to be seen taking place at the back of the hall. This was merely the next choir, whose members were making sure of their notes, in close consultation with their conductor.

The fact that they had been summoned to the stage by the bull-necked announcer, who preceded his "kwaya numba four, pliss!" with a loud blast across the top of an empty lemonade bottle, did not mean that the previous choir had finished their item. Only physical displacement could get them to vacate the stage. Having struck up their tune successfully at the back of the hall, the new choir would file down the aisle and up onto the stage, singing all the while, until the previous choir were finally displaced both physically and musically—though they generally carried their song back into the hall with them as they left, rather than admit defeat.

On alternate Saturday nights the competitions were not for Bombing but for 'Music'. This is less popular than Bombing and consists in imitating, by ear, the type of more serious choir singing performed in schools and festivals. Uninhibited Zulu versions of this Tonic-Sol-Fa music, which they cannot read, are often rather more exciting than was originally intended by its studious African composers who tend to be obsessed with our Victorian drawing room style of quartet music. In Zulu performances, staid four-square metre and harmony can never proceed for very long without a tremendous crescendo and some real spirited Zulu yelling.²

The question of adjudication at Zulu male choir competitions is considered to be

² An example of what the Zulus call 'Music' is to be heard on Gallotone GE 1035, side B.

a most serious one, particularly as the entrance fee paid by each choir is often thirty shillings or more. Feelings run so high on this matter that Zulu choirs will never accept the judgement of an African. Even an African with an academic degree might have a distant cousin in one of the choirs and could not therefore be considered an impartial witness. Consequently representatives from all competing choirs set off together in a shabby fleet of taxis in search of a suitable judge. This is timed to coincide with closing time for European bars and saloons in the city, outside which there is always to be found one or another agreeable whiteskinned character who can be persuaded not to go straight home at the proffered standard fee of two pounds. Sometimes it is necessary for him to be propped up and kept awake in the hall, but it is only really important that he shall be able to state the number of one choir as winner, at the conclusion, a little before dawn perhaps. His decision is quite final and there is no possibility of appeal.

The winners generally receive a cash prize, which amounts to a proportion of the takings after the organisers have deducted an unstated amount for themselves and for expenses. On one occasion the first prize was a live goat. It was killed, cooked and eaten on the spot for Sunday breakfast. When literacy classes were resumed the next day in the classroom adjoining the hall, students were aware of a strange smell. It was to a desk in this room that the animal had been tethered while awaiting the result of the competition. The committee in charge of the Adult Education Centre was thereafter forced to revise the rules relating to hire of the premises.

'Zulu Male Traditional Singing' reflects the musical practice of only one small section of African town society. Musical taste in town is closely correlated with economic, social and educational standing.

Whereas migrant, occasional, townsmen retain tribal musical styles or develop new hybrid tribal forms, such as Zulu 'Bombing', after longer residence in town, the so-called semi-skilled workers who constitute the largest section of permanent African townsmen show little or no distinction in their musical preferences, whatever their own particular tribal extraction. The school, the cinema, and portable gramophone, the radio, and the church—including the innumerable African separatist sects with their varied forms of worship—all these play a large part in the moulding of musical taste and practice. Active music-making is, however, still engaged in by a far higher percentage of Africans than of white South Africans.

Hundreds of church, school and independent choirs are to be found in African urban areas, and competitive music festivals are most enthusiastically supported. At the tenth annual 'Johannesburg Bantu Music Festival' held last year, some 4,500 competitors took part. In addition to choirs and vocal soloists, many of the 84 separate sections of the competition cater for such participants as brass bands, jazz groups, crooners, and instrumental soloists of all kinds, as well as providing for dramatic sketches, puppet shows, ballroom and even ballet dancing.

Jazz is extremely popular among African townsmen, and so-called African 'jive' has universal appeal. A truly distinctive style of Johannesburg African jazz has not yet asserted itself, but may well do so in the near future. Several 'numbers' by Johannesburg jazzmen have already been re-arranged and recorded by such artists as Louis Armstrong.

Members of the new African Middle class—school teachers, social workers, business and professional men—have various higher musical preferences, mostly in the direction of Western choral, classical or light music. There are even some connoisseurs among them who have come down to our own level and do nothing beyond collecting classical gramophone records.
