

TOWARDS A SOLUTION OF AFRICAN MUSIC PROBLEMS ¹

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE WORK OF FATHER GIORGIETTI.

by

DR. THE REV. BROTHER BASIL

In the Zande country of Southern Sudan, Father Filiberto Giorgietti, F.S.C.J. is affectionately known as "*Gaani Bayongo*", which means "Our Troubadour". This is no mere gesture. It is rather the concretion of a rare accomplishment: Father Giorgietti has assimilated the complexities of an art which best defines the soul of the ever-singing Zande people to the point of being integrated within their community as their most articulate spokesman. It is also the result of over thirty years of assiduous work *in situ* of an accomplished musician and composer who is also a linguist and ethnologist. For African music, the end result appears in a considerable number of works already published, the more important of which shall be reviewed here.

I. "MUSICA AFRICANA"²

This is one of his latest works, but it is impossible to appraise Fr. Giorgietti's over-all contribution to African music without a fair comprehension of this challenging book. In six chapters written in a simple, direct style and with a profusion of examples that should satisfy even the non-initiated, the author's approach and treatment of his subject is totally different from what has been written so far in the field. Stressing the necessity of studying and judging African music with an African mentality, innate or acquired, and rejecting Western concepts as being foreign and a hindrance to African music, his position is clear when he states, "I have not the pretention of offering a complete treatise or of posing as a master of African music technique, for I consider myself but a student in the Conservatory of Music of Nature".³ His research work dealt with the music of Southern Sudanese, Nilotic and Bantu tribes, and he bases his findings on the harmonics as detected in the percussion of the wooden drum or "wooden bell" of the Azande.

The author has tried to use a vocabulary as close as can be to our Western definitions, but words now take new meanings or connotations hitherto unfamiliar to us, and this is demonstrated by an abundance of musical examples, making it the most challenging aspect of the work.

The whole African musical system is derived from:—

(a) *Simple Chords, based on G without accidental* instead of C. These chords give rise to four modes: the *Tonal Major*, the *Lyrical Major*, the *Pathetic Minor* and the *Absolute Minor*, and to four scales: G, A, B and C, each scale within a *modal group* of three, the *acoustic*, the *diatonic by steps* and the *diatonic by intervals*. To make it clearer to a Western mind: any note may be the fundamental of four modes, e.g. C tonal, with one flat; C lyrical, without accidental; C pathetic, with three flats; C minor, with four flats.

(b) *Concentrated or Acoustic Chords*, still based on C without accidental, formed by the superposition of the modal chords onto the simple chords.

(c) The tonal system, derived from the concentrated or acoustic chords, is in

¹ This article was suggested to, and accepted in principle by the Hon. Secretary as long ago as 1957; thus it cannot be construed in any way as a counterpart of the appraisal of the Rev. Jones' work.

² *Sua Tecnica e Acustica*, 1957. Italian text with 80 examples, one chart and four ill., 132 pp., about 9 x 12, £1, Editrice Nigrizia Via Meloncello 3/3, Bologna, Italy.

³ p. 14.

reality a group of *three tonal systems*, those of G, C, and D, each formed of four tones in progression of a minor third within its own mode, giving rise to: (i) *basic* or *fundamental chords*, e.g. G-B-D-F, and (ii) *correlated chords*, e.g. A-C-E-G. Hence the scale is not pentatonic but diatonic.

(It is remarkable that these *simple chords* are also used in the accompaniment of Gregorian Chant, and that *all African music related to the simple chords* can also fit perfectly, showing its frequent and undeniable affinity with the six plagal Gregorian modes. For instance, a typical African tune is based upon a simple chord, but it may start with any note of the chord, thus start with the tonic, also end with the tonic, and thus give to the Western ear the impression of ending on a different chord.)

The majority of the examples have an 'accompaniment' deriving from the *drum complexes*, but several also feature other instruments, e.g. the piano-harp *mikanga* or *sanzu* (*mbira*), the small harp *kundi*, the xylophone *kpaningba*, all of the Azande, and the *rongo* or xylophone of the Ndogo.

This occupies the greater portion of the book. But there is much more to it, and among other topics illustrated by typical examples mention should be made of the importance given to the problem of adaptations, a field in which the author is an expert in his own right. Little is said, however, about the rhythms of the drum, and although the last chapter is devoted to the wooden drum, we are referred to an earlier work, "*Note di Musica Zande*".⁴ There is no index, and in a book otherwise so legible with its well-aided typography this is a considerable omission. Fr. Giorgiotti is the first to admit that "much still remains to fathom and discover".⁵ One may not agree with all findings; nevertheless it would be sheer temerity to dismiss them *a priori* on any ground whatsoever, for I am afraid we might well be forced to revise some of our entrenched positions, maybe start on a new road altogether because our own positions are badly pounded and shaken. But that should be amply rewarding.

II. MASSES

Two Masses, "*MISSA ZANDE*" and "*MISSA ZANDE PRO DEFUNCTIS*",⁶ on the Latin text, for soli and chorus in unison, in staff notation, have been offered to the European market. Were it not for their appellation they could be mistaken for any odd product of our times or for another anonymous X-century author, while a gregorianist would be puzzled yet delighted. The fact is that Zande themes are pervading all through, and locally they are sung in the vernacular accompanied by drums and bugle; further, if a demonstration were ever needed to show the affinity of African music with Gregorian chant, Fr. Giorgiotti's Masses would be it. Strange enough, the Offertory of *Missa pro defunctis* is in 2/8, probably a concession to the Western congregation which, one visualizes readily, would sweat it out, while the African congregation just wouldn't mind. Drums and bugle aside, my opinion is that these Masses could be introduced almost anywhere on the continent, with possible slight variations necessitated by the local language.

III. ZANDE HYMNAL

Fr. Giorgiotti's latest published work, "*Ani Tambwa Mbori*" (*Laudemus Deum*),⁷ is to my knowledge the first hymnal ever published that is congenial to the African people it is purported to serve. The 72 hymns offered are following a plan familiar to

⁴ *Editrice Nigrizia*, 1951, 41-.

⁵ p. 16. On p. 19 this reviewer is made guilty of tampering with one of the author's original transcriptions, but the author has written since to put the blame where it belongs, on the engraver on wood whose work could not be corrected once it was produced.

Cuique suum.

⁶ *Editrice Nigrizia*, 1958, 1/- and 1/6d.

such publications, but they could be grouped into four different sections thus:—

(a) Adaptations of Zande or related tribes' folk songs; in a limited number, since tunes that can be adapted to the service of the Church are rare finds in the bush.

(b) Gregorian tunes: only three of them, and used as introduction or theme on which the hymn is elaborated on a Zande text.

(c) Hymns on a Latin text: twelve in all, for special occasions required by the liturgy, otherwise falling into section (a) and having their counterpart in the vernacular when the liturgy allows.

(d) Works of the author: they form the greater portion of the hymns; some of them are elaborating on a short African theme, but the majority are of his composition. Here Fr. Giorgiotti shows his real skill, when it can be said that for once the collusion of the ethnologist and the poet, the linguist and the musician, happened under the same hat with success. The ethnologist and the musician made a judicious choice of the local themes or songs for adaptations. The poet wrote the words—the Zande text is all his, often with a Latin translation. The linguist and the musician collaborated to preserve the speech-tone line and give that 'flavour' typically African which this reviewer was unable to detect in any of the numerous hymn books he has seen above and below the equator, these past twenty-five years. The African himself would be deceived: for an example taken at random, compare the *Lamentations* "*Bia Kpara Yezu*" of pp. 34-7 with "*Ako Yezu*" (*O Iesu dulcis*) of p.14. You will agree on the former as the work of an African, and you are wrong, while the latter, still haunting me ever since I heard it casually from the heart of Fr. Giorgiotti's congregation in the early 30's, is but the repetition in the usual manner of a simple Zande theme.⁸ Finally, the musician brought in his knowledge in a way that is consistent both with African music requirements and the theory developed in his "*Musica Africana*" reviewed above.

IV. ADAPTATIONS

The following are some of the more elaborate adaptations by Fr. Giorgiotti, mostly on Zande themes and folk songs, all of them with typical *drum chord accompaniments* or other instruments.

1. *Kundi sa Natale* or *Christmas Harp*, a pastorale based on a popular Zande folk song.
2. *Ra Natale*, a Christmas cantata in unison, also used during a danced Christmas play.
3. *Canto Natalizja Zande*, a Zande Christmas carol.
4. *Yambio Yambio*, a nostalgic song, composed in one night for an English friend at the occasion of his departure, on Zande themes set in a Western fashion to Zande words by the author.
5. *Ninna Ninna Zande*, Zande themes set to Italian words in accordance with, and development of a Zande song, has a Stravinskyesque effect with its piano accompaniment featuring *drum chords*.⁹

To conclude this sketchy panorama, we ought to thank Father Giorgiotti for his arduous, incessant, unselfish efforts towards a better understanding of, and a return to genuine African Music and the African mentality. Besides having to work under climatic conditions very few of us will ever experience, it might also be remarked here that Father knew all the time that the devil is black, but that the devil is not a Black Man.

⁷ *Editrice Nigrizia*, 1959, 100 pp., paper back, no indication of price.

⁸ This hymn was first reproduced in my book "*Aux Rythmes des Tambours*", 1946, p. 151, and presented as "a model of good taste".

⁹ All published by *Editrice Nigrizia*, at the following prices: 1. 4/-; 2. 6/-; 3. 1/6; 4. 4/-; 5. 3/-; 6. 3/-.