

## HYMNS OF THE WABVUWI

by

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The *Wabvuwi*, a Methodist laymen's organisation in Southern Rhodesia, has developed an interesting style of singing that is becoming increasingly popular in the African churches. The songs are based on European hymns, but the style is purely African. The rhythmic vitality and the interweaving of contrapuntal harmonies make this music sufficiently interesting for careful analysis and for observation of an important direction in which some African church music is moving.

*Wabvuwi* (meaning "Fishermen") originated about 1940 as a result of the influence of a similar group for women, known as the *Rukwadzano*, organised eight years earlier. Both groups are highly evangelistic and have high standards of ethical behaviour as prerequisites for membership. Candidates serve as novices for two years before becoming full members. During this time they must prove their willingness to leave their jobs at any time they feel led to render some service. They have often been instrumental in recruiting church members and even in starting new churches. They meet together regularly to pray extemporaneously and to give spontaneous expressions of their faith. Frequently they burst into song during these meetings, and it is these songs particularly that have made the *Wabvuwi* well known in Southern Rhodesia.

There are only four *Wabvuwi* songs, but the number of versions of each of these songs is limitless. Each leader has his own style and his own words. The origin of the music is rather obscure, but it seems that most of the songs have originated from European hymns. The melodic contour, the harmonic suggestions, and the general theme of the text serve as a point of departure for a thoroughly African musical development.

## THE MUSIC

Hymn 95, "*Nditarire no kufara*", in the British Methodist *NDZIYO*, serves as the basis for two of the *Wabvuwi* songs. Following is the original tune and parts of the two resulting *Wabvuwi* tunes.

Fig. 1. "*Nditarire no Kufara*", No. 95 in the British Methodist *Ndziyo*Fig. 2. "*Nditarire no Kufara*"—*Wabvuwi*Fig. 3. "*Pamberi Masoja*"—*Wabvuwi*

Both of the *Wabvuwi* tunes have a wider range and more variety than the original. "*Pamberi Masoja*" also has an extended development of the middle section of the hymn:

Fig. 4. "*Pamberi Masoja*", middle section

This variant is repeated over and over after the first part of the song has been sung several times. It is from this section that the song gets its name, "*Pamberi Masoja*". It is also in this section of the song that most of the improvisation takes place, both in the text and the music.

"*Chisarira*" is the only one of the four songs that did not originate from a European hymn. Rev. Kawadza, a district superintendent at Mrewa, composed it and used it to illustrate a sermon about Noah and the Ark. In the middle of the sermon he began singing "*Chisarira mumwoyo*" (To remain behind in the heart).



Fig. 5. "*Chisarira mumwoyo*"

The melody to "*Ruponeso*" is not so much in the African idiom as the others:



Fig. 6. "*Ruponeso*"

The original tune of this song appeared in the early version of the American Methodist *NGOMA*, and in the Anglican hymn book, but the original bears little relationship to the above tune. It reached its present form in about 1918.

The harmony used in these songs is quite intriguing. Each song has its own harmonic motif which serves as a constantly recurring ostinato. The motif in itself is not always too interesting, since it often merely outlines a simple chord, such as the one in "*Nditarire*":

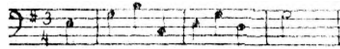


Fig. 7.

However, its relationship to the major melodic line is quite unusual:



Fig. 8. "*Nditarire no Kufara*".

Notice how the accents of the two parts cause the bar lines to occur at different places.

In "*Chisarira*" there are two ostinato figures which bear a relation to each other harmonically, but which are used in complete independence and in rhythmic crossing with each other:

The musical score for "Chisarira mumwoyo" consists of three staves. The top staff is labeled "Melody" and features a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 12/8 time signature. It contains a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The middle and bottom staves are both labeled "Ostinato" and feature a bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. They contain a repetitive rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Fig. 9. "Chisarira mumwoyo".

This is similar to the two or more simultaneous ostinato figures used on the *mbira* and other African instruments. In fact, the ostinato figures in *Wabvuwi* music are sung in an instrumental manner. Only the leader sings words; the chorus imitates instrumental sounds. If the group is very large, and if the singers are inspired to sing, they may add many more repetitive figures to the intricate contrapuntal fabric.

The relationship of the voices in these songs is more contrapuntal than harmonic. Even though the individual voices outline chords, their relationship to each other is quite independent. This is in marked contrast to the European hymns where each melody note brings a new chord.

All of the songs except "*Ruponeso*" have an introduction which is sung by the leader, who is later joined by the chorus singing its ostinato figures. Each leader has his own unique type of introduction, and this gives the group an indication of the type of rhythm they must use for his particular version of the song. The rhythmic patterns in some of the introductory phrases are quite unique, such as this one for "*Chisarira*":

The musical score for "Chisarira" introductory phrase 1 is a single staff in bass clef, one flat key signature, and 12/8 time signature. It shows a sequence of notes: a quarter note, followed by eighth notes, and then a quarter note.

Fig. 10. "Chisarira", introductory phrase 1.

To show how another leader would begin the same song, here is another introduction:

The musical score for "Chisarira" introductory phrase 2 is a single staff in bass clef, one flat key signature, and 12/8 time signature. It shows a sequence of notes with accents, including a quarter note followed by eighth notes.

Fig. 11. "Chisarira", introductory phrase 2.

In "*Nditarire*" the introduction crosses with the chorus ostinato figure in an interesting manner;

## Introduction.

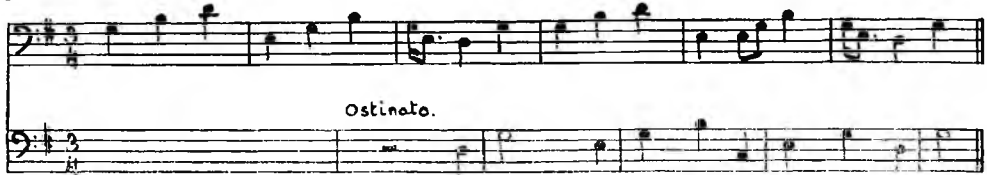


Fig. 12. "Nditarire", introduction and ostinato.

The D-G (V-I) that the leader sings in bar 3 serves as an indication for the group to begin. Notice how the harmonies of the two parts overlap.

## TEXTS

The texts vary according to the particular leader and according to the particular situation. They seem to begin, however, with the words of the original hymn. One version of "Pamberi Masoja" begins in the middle of the first verse of the original hymn and continues to the end of the hymn. The leader then continues with his own version as follows:

Pamberi masoja	Forward soldiers
Izwai mambo wangu	Hear my King
Pamberi masoja	Forward soldiers
Ndakaizwa ndiri kumunda, vakomana	I heard it when I was in the field, boys
Nagwindiri ndakasiya	And at the sound of it I left the hoe.
Pamberi masoja	Forward soldiers
Kuzi baba wangu pfene vakomana	It is said my father, monkey (totem), boys
Zvakaitwa ndiri kumunda masoja	It was done when I was in the field, boys
Pakasungwa ngeutare vakomana	It has been tied by iron, boys
Pakasungwa ngeutare	It has been tied by iron
Taramba unodza woye masoja	We refuse to see one returning, soldiers
Pamberi masoja	Forward soldiers
Izwai mambo	Hear the King
Kuzi tiri masoja	It is said we are soldiers
Uyai muone masoja	Come and see, soldiers
Izwai mambo	Hear the King
Uyai muone masoja	Come and see, soldiers
Ndazwa izwi remujana	I hear the word of the shepherd
Izwai mambo wangu	Hear my King
Toita izvo munoda tenzi wangu, mambo.	We will do what you like, my Lord, King.

As is usual in African songs, the words often have implied meanings that a literal translation cannot give. The line, "It is said my father, monkey", refers to the totem of the singer. One explanation for its inclusion in this song is to identify the singer by his totem. The frequent refrain "Izwai Mambo" (Hear the King) is similar to other songs where the chorus repeats a constant refrain. In this case the leader sings his own refrain, since the group is busy on the instrumental-like ostinato.

"Ruponeso" has a limitless number of verses. They are very easily moulded and added to fit the occasion. Sometimes a verse has only one word repeated over and over, such as "Ruponeso" (Salvation) or "Tinomotenda" (We thank you).

## SUMMARY

There are several ways in which *Wabvuwi* music falls into the main stream of African music, even though its origins are in European style: (1) It follows the African style of having a leader and a chorus. (2) The chorus sings at least one and sometimes several repetitive ostinato figures. (3) The rhythms and harmonies cross each other with the resulting bar lines occurring at different places. (4) The harmonic relationship of the various parts is more contrapuntal than homophonic. (5) Both music and text follow a general pattern but are largely improvised. (6) Each leader has his own particular style.

It seems that *Wabvuwi* music gives an indication to one direction in which future church music in Africa is moving. Just as those who live in the cities are taking European instruments, e.g. the guitar and concertina, and are adapting them to the African idiom, so European hymns are also being taken and Africanised versions are being made. If the result is always as effective as it has been with *Wabvuwi* music, there is more to be gained than lost in the process.

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#### OBITUARY

DR. AGNES WINIFRED HOERNLÉ.

In the death this year on March 17th, 1961, of Dr. Winifred Hoernlé the African Music Society lost not only one of its Founders but one of the best and wisest of all its friends. A unique person with a gift for understanding human problems, she leaves behind her a keen sense of the irreplaceable. Her academic achievements in Anthropology are well known throughout Africa and members of the Society who met her in University, in her many social service activities or in her home will agree that we have all been the better for having known her and for having shared in some of her aspirations.