

MUSICAL APPRECIATION IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

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by

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Forty or fifty years ago, few people were prepared to take the music of Africa seriously. It was usually dismissed as rather quaint and savage, to be grown out of as soon as possible. Education, they considered, would soon put that right! I rather think they would have classified African music, had they taken the trouble to do so, in much the same terms as Thomas Hobbes' description of the life of man "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." During the last twenty years, through the endeavours of a few, all too few, interested persons working in isolation from each other, an altogether different picture has been brought into focus.

Together we have established the fact that far from being just quaint and savage, the musical arts of Africa provide a channel, a veritable fiord, into the heart of African spiritualities which may yet provide a key to much of their distinctive character. Whether it will remain distinctive in a positive or negative way is another matter, and depends entirely upon Africans themselves however much they may shelve the responsibility.

The facts which have been collected are part of the tangible side of the subject; we have already discovered much of *how* they make music.

The analysis and interpretation of what we have discovered (if we can rid ourselves of preconceived ideas inherent in our own national styles of music), may yet reveal something of the equally important, subjective attitudes to their arts . . . *why* they make music of this kind.

The first cliché to be shunned at all costs is the one about music as a single international art. Although it is certainly a world-wide phenomenon, it is not and never has been a universal language. Come to Africa and experience the babel of musical dialects from one end of the continent to the other, and you will hear for yourself.

Admittedly some nations, especially in the West, have developed part of their musics into towering mansions of classical proportions. Others, still in the preliterate folk music stage, appear to have lagged behind in their huts. It was Thoreau, I think, who said "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer."

I this is so, what is the secret, the rhythm of this mysterious drummer to which they march? In other words, what constitutes their appreciation of music? In what way does it differ from the appreciation of those of us who follow our own drummer?

Many ethnologists have stated categorically that they have found that Africans have difficulty in discussing their culture in aesthetic terms. By that I take it to mean that they think an African would find it difficult to discuss his art in terms of absolute qualities such as "truth", "beauty", "ugliness" and so on. With us, it is common practice to talk about "the beauty of a melody", and to give a tune a name as if it was an object. This is called characterisation of music or conceptual thought about music. To us the phrase "a pleasant tune" is perfectly natural and understandable. Not so to the African, in my experience. In his own language the literal translation would be "a pleasing tune" not a pleasant one. His interpretation would be dynamic, indicating the function of the melody; ours is aesthetic, indicating its quality.

As for naming a tune or song, it is rare in my experience to find an African composer naming his tunes. I usually have to use the first phrase of the lyric as a title for identification purposes. This phenomenon is interesting as it throws light on the definition of musical appreciation in the minds of Africans.

As far as I know, it is impossible at this stage of our knowledge of the subject to set out a satisfactory exposition of the theory of musical appreciation among all Africans. This is not only because of lack of evidence, but rather because Africans themselves are so heterogeneous, so unlike each other from tribe to tribe, that what holds good for one tribe with great musical ability may be quite the reverse with their neighbouring tribe with little or no musical sense of any significance. So in laying out a general theory of musical appreciation among some Africans I have known well, I do not for a moment claim more than it warrants, that it may be an outline which may be found to apply generally among tribes of similar musical ability and perhaps prove far too advanced for others without their degree of sensibility.

Several years ago Dr. C. S. Meyers in his book "The Psychology of Musical Appreciation" claimed that "characterisation of music [that is giving a tune a name, or calling it a happy, sad, cheerful tune and so on] is but a persistence of the primitive and deeply rooted tendency of mankind to personify all natural objects, whether animate or inanimate, and to regard them as independent entities, wholly apart from their practical value or their import to or effect upon the listener". "It is indeed", wrote Dr. Meyers, "through this detachment from the human self of art-material and of its immediate experience, and through its contemplation for its own sake, that awareness of beauty becomes possible."

I expect most of us would agree that we Westerners have a tendency to personify pieces of music and credit them with an existence of their own with qualities which allow us to postulate a kind of essential oil, an attar of music, with the perfume of beauty. But is Dr. Meyers correct in suggesting that this "is but a persistence of the primitive and deeply rooted tendency to personify all natural objects, animate or inanimate"? I doubt it. In my discussions with African musicians in several parts of Africa, I have detected a chain of association (I would not call it reasoning) which indicates that they do not characterise or personify the music itself which they look upon only as a means to an end.

Their conversations on music suggested a pattern in my mind which helped me to account for the apparent contradiction between the seeming lack of aesthetic terms in African languages claimed by ethnologists on the one hand, and the assertion by Dr. Meyers that the characterisation of music was common to all mankind on the other.

I do not suggest that any African musician actually visualises such a pattern — he might have one of his own. It is only a rather convenient way of trying to classify my own impressions I have formed on the subject.

The pattern is laid out in this form

PERSON	MEANS		PERSON
MUSICIAN	CAUSE	EFFECT	AUDIENCE
Entity Spirit Character Souls Skill	Correct type of Music	Interest through appropriate Mood	Character Souls Response Entity Spirit
INTENTION	PURPOSE and DIRECTION		EMOTIONAL RESULT
PERSONIFIED	NOT PERSONIFIED		PERSONIFIED

PATTERN I

Both the musician and his audience are persons, each with an identity or spirit, and a character or soul. In some tribes such as the Karanga of Rhodesia, they speak about multiple souls, the *Mashawi*, the recognition of a more complex character.

Between the two persons lies a gap, that blank in their reasoning between cause and effect which can only be crossed by the force of artistry or by some magical agency. For the musician to "get across" to his listener to cause him to react emotionally, he must have both the intention and the skill to do so through the means of his music.

The music is of no use at all if it is not able to cross the gap, stimulate the correct type of interest through the receptive mood and so gain a response in the appropriate soul of the listener. The awakened soul stirs the emotions of the listener so that he responds in concord with the musician.

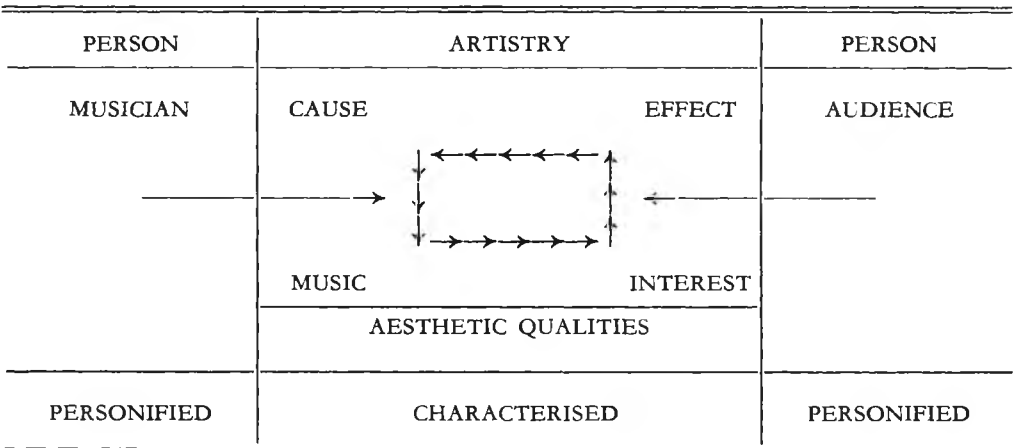
Both the skilful soul of the musician and the responsive soul of the listener are concepts which Jung would have called "autonomous complexes" and, as such, are personified as detached entities, facets of character.

In between these two souls lies the realm of artistic activity consisting of cause and effect. The artistic cause must have sufficient potential to flash across the gap like an electric spark and so stimulate sufficient interest without which the soul of the listener cannot expect to respond.

The whole process is described in terms of power, or force, a dynamic action, which is not personified. The music is not looked upon as a thing but rather a means of force. If it has force enough of the right kind, then it should produce the right effect.

Here, in this direction, I believe, lies the difference between African and Western thinking matters of musical appreciation. While most Westerners would agree with Dr. Meyers and characterise the music itself in such a way that we can distill and savour its aesthetic virtues, African musicians would side with Sir Herbert Read who once described Beauty in the arts as "suitability for purpose" a dynamic rather than an aesthetic interpretation.

A second pattern to illustrate the difference might look something like this . . .



PATTERN II

The Westerner does not seem to postulate a gap between musician and listener. We appear to have discounted the magic and rationalised our thinking into more prosaic channels, though on occasion we are still impressed with the "wizardry" of a virtuoso. The direction of interest, both on the part of the performer and the audience, seems to

point inwards towards the music itself and the interest it generates, attention circulating between the two, the ideal incubator for such expressions as "Art for art's sake."

Reverting to the first pattern for a moment, this diagram may throw a little light on the manner of thinking in other than musical directions. It is common knowledge that most Africans do not believe that death can be brought about by natural causes alone, but rather by personal intervention. Since they would not normally characterise the means of death, such as sickness or violence, they place the blame on some person or spirit of a person which initiated the intention of killing or causing the death of the individual. For Africans it is not enough to say that the impersonal tools of death were to blame; it must be a personified being who had the intention or spiritual force to set the tools in action. It also seems likely that the magical gap between cause and effect is part of the mental block which makes so many Africans reluctant to study mathematics and subjects dependant upon mathematics.

Association of Music with Spiritual Concepts

The part which music plays in African worship is most important for not only is the music a means of religious contemplation, as with us, but is also a means of producing the ecstasy of self-induced trance. Perhaps still more important is the part played by religious dance music.

In the last four hundred years or so Christians have tended to disapprove of religious dancing, though I have myself seen the Christian dancing by fourteen small pages before the High Altar in the great cathedral of Seville. For some deeply rooted reason we now discourage movement in our devotions and believe in what I would call "the sanctity of immobility". Not so the African, for whom the dance can be a reverent discipline.

The tendency to move and sway to the music has constantly worried missionaries both in Africa and among the Negroes in the southern States of America where during the last century it was strongly discouraged by white Americans. However, Separatist Christian churches in both continents when free of European mentors still follow their natural bent and have reintroduced religious dances, none more formalised than the independent sect in Natal among the Zulu, who firmly believe in the cathartic virtue of the formal religious dance.

Enthusiasm for the essentially African practice of dancing to express any deep emotion, such as dancing for personal sorrow or bereavement as well as for joy, does not usually extend to religious music associated with Christianity on account of Western disapproval — but, from my own observation, it is never far below the surface.

Referring back to the pattern again, it will be noticed that stress is laid upon the use of the correct type of music in order to obtain the correct type of result. Of recent years missionary bodies have been experimenting with applying African types of music set to Christian hymns and masses, and have met with considerable hostility, especially from established African Christian families who complain that their own folk song styles are strongly associated with their specific purposes and with what they have been taught to look upon as the inferior indigenous beliefs, and not with the stronger Christianity, introduced by foreigners. In fact, effective association with the stronger spiritual force demands musical association with the styles of music introduced by the same strong minded persons, the foreigners. The mistake here has often been the attempt to take a well known secular folk song and set it as a hymn, instead of creating a new indigenous form free of mundane associations. (We have been able to do so with "Greensleeves" on occasion, but we liked the tune for its own sake.) Here we see the edge of a deeply rooted bias which effectively blocks aesthetic contemplation, in preference for the dynamic, if magical, association with what they consider to be the stronger force, spiritual or temporal.

It seems clear that this form of interpretation is not only valid for art subjects, but can be detected as an underlying principal in African politics as well. To understand

Africa, you cannot afford to overlook how Africa understands itself, and that you will find in its arts.

The Art of Aural Composition

To persons brought up in our conventional tradition it seems difficult to imagine the art of composition apart from pen and paper. I am often asked when playing over one of my recordings, "Who wrote the music?" No one has ever written a genuine piece of African folk music. For centuries the whole process has been aural. Of recent years some have set them down after a fashion, generally regardless of the modal implications involved, transposing them to the nearest key to which they were accustomed at home. The result is rather like persistently writing down a tune in the major when it should be in the minor key.

When today we go out and record an item of African music we are witnessing a performance of music which has not in the whole course of its existence been harassed or dragooned by what modern educationists would call "visual aids". It is today's music today, and no one can say if it will ever be produced in exactly the same way again. As Percy Scholes remarked in his *Oxford Companion to Music*, "the immense majority of all music put forth has been not so much composed as remembered."

Folk song also falls under another kind of discipline. It requires the immediate response of the folk around to participate in a form which they can manage. This sets an effective brake upon innovations which are too far fetched or *avant garde* for the participants to respond. Again and again in my recordings you will hear the leader turn to his friends on having set the style of his solo part, and say (in his own language) "you sing 'so-and-so'," whereupon they will fit in a complex chorus as if they had had long rehearsals behind them. Their rehearsals in reality had been generations of remembered music. Time and again when this has happened to me I have been delighted to witness a musical device so right within its context that the authenticity of its modality could not be doubted for a moment.

During this century African authenticity has been seriously, if not mortally, damaged by the introduction of possibly the worst of all European musical clichés, one that Percy Scholes himself described to me as having done more damage to the art of music than anything else the world over . . . the three common chords — tonic, dominant and sub-dominant. This device, taught and drummed into the heads of every elementary school child in English-speaking Africa is so damaging that only the millstone treatment would be adequate punishment for those painfully earnest Philistines who introduced it, and the criminally ignorant music teachers who still perpetuate it.

All that can be said for their product is that its dominance has proved malignant beyond their wildest dreams.

How do African composers set about composing a new song or new instrumental pieces? Far too little is yet known about the subject, but most of the evidence I have collected points towards a word basis for most new melodies, a universal characteristic for all folk musics. In the case of a song the word base must naturally make sense and comprise the lyric itself; but for instrumental music it could equally well be a set of nonsense syllables. A brilliant harpist in Uganda once demonstrated this to me on his instrument. A great many choruses have been set to nonsense phrases equivalent to our mediaeval "Hey, nonny nonny", "to keep the song running", as they would say. One Chopi composer, I asked, told me that what he did when he wanted a new song was to go along and lie in the grass near a field where the women were working. Then, he said, sooner or later, you would be bound to hear a woman say something which was so poetic that it would give you just the phrase you wanted as a start for your new song.

The only comment I could think of for this idyllic scene was something about a greenwood tree, "Come hither, come hither, come hither", but he would never have heard of Shakespeare.

Other instrumental composers have told me they frequently thought of a new melody in their dreams, woke up and at once put in onto their instrument before going off to sleep again. If you did not do that, they said, and get it into your hands you would lose it by the morning. This is rather rare, I think, and indicates a high degree of musicality, where the conditioned reflex of the hands substituted for both words and writing.

Foreign Intrusion

The effects of foreign intrusion into Africa can be heard in every town and school in the continent. It would be extraordinary if it were not so for all literate forms of education have been introduced into Africa by outsiders who, with few exceptions, set no store by African styles of music which they frankly despised, disparaged or ignored altogether. The devotional music taught to African converts in the 16th and 17th century appears to have made little lasting impression, partly, no doubt, because the Mass performed in Catholic missions of the time was likely to have been Folk Mass or Low Mass most of which was said, not sung, and what was sung would have been in Latin and not in an African vernacular subject to the semantic rules of African languages. For this very reason perhaps the most successful of the modern African Masses, the *Missa Luba*, from Southern Congo, is sung in Latin, a dead language in which correct pronunciation is anyone's guess. The harmonies of the great unaccompanied choral Masses of the period are likely to have been far beyond the capacity of the local congregations and so passed them by.

It was the advent of the evangelical missions beginning with the Livingstone era, with their already century-old legacy of Wesleyan hymns, which made the greatest inroads into musical practice among their converts. Associated with the stronger force in the dominating and often noble personalities of the missionaries proclaiming their deity, as undoubtedly as the hymns would have been, the foreign music took root. It was new, it gave higher social status, it came with the blessings of literacy and with medicine, in fact everything which spelt greater comfort and ease. At first the improved status was associated with conversion to Christianity on the credit side and disparagement of everything heathen, and, as it happened, most things of indigenous origin also, on the debit side. Participation in industry and the civil services removed the exclusively religious connotation of status and opened the doors to bourgeois urban influences in which imitation of the foreign European is still the hallmark of social success.

It was into this atmosphere of attempted assimilation in dress, social habits and ambitions that the doubtful benison of gramophone records, films and radio intruded. Imitations of imitations of jazz proliferated, largely because improvisation and strongly modal or "out of tune" performances were not only tolerated, but encouraged, as it was in what they imagined to be the best foreign tradition.

With their inability to evaluate aesthetically or in technical terms the music so produced, the present generation of literate composers found themselves in a musical straight-jacket of their own making. They were cut off from their folk music foundations by social prejudice and yet unable to grasp the full implications of their imitation of western styles which in towns, at least, was making them some kind of a living by their playing in dance bands. Not all their compositions were poor, by any means; many were so unconsciously African that they had positive virtue by mistake.

The confusion has been worse confounded by a host of well meaning philanthropists who would pick on any young man of musical talent and bundle him out of the country to go through the mill of some western College of Music, there to be disciplined, cut to size, tinned and labelled as one of their standard products. With all originality steamed out of them, and with little or no improvement in their attitude towards the logic of their own musical heritage, they would then apply mandatory sanctions against their own folk musicians and turn their attention to composing "Tone Poems" for performance by the B.B.C. on their Third Programme, where they would be sure of

minimal reception, but maximum flattery in accordance with Commonwealth protocol.

The search for that mythical creature, the great African symphonic composer, has become for some of our American friends a new kind of "The Hunting of the Snark", where, you may remember, "they sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care" and "charmed it with smiles and soap."

That was the desperate situation until a few years ago when a strange thing happened. On the stage, and in certain overseas exhibitions, New York and London included, only the folk musicians were invited to perform, to the delight of the audiences who could detect an air of authenticity and integrity in these hitherto tabooed performances and far preferred them to the anaemic carbon copies of American jazz, "spirituals" and pseudo-African musical revues.

In addition, the first full time music department for indigenous music was set up in the University of Ghana, a Rockefeller supported lectureship of music was started in Uganda at Makerere, and the subject of African music was caught up in the general revival of interest in world folk musics in several widely separated places. A few musicians and singers from Africa made a name for themselves in night clubs by singing, not so much "pop" songs of American Negro entertainers, but the songs their mothers taught them.

This is the unenviable situation in which educated African musicians find themselves today. Society demands that their choirs shall sing Handel's "Messiah" or "The Dream of Gerontius" once a year; the entertainment business is looking for romantic African talent which must be as good as the calypso singers of the Carribean and is not; cultural societies and the B.B.C. still yearn after tone poems as an infallible sign of 20th Century maturity, and nobody except their most indefatigable supporters likes the result.

Conclusion

What then is the answer? I can only suggest a few pointers. Non-African music performed by Africans should be removed from the list of specially protected cultural occupations and allowed to find its own level through the box office. In other words, music should be treated as music and not as a social step ladder. The taboo against association with preliterate or heathen folk composers must somehow be lifted, however difficult, and an educational drive introduced to give scientific backing to the verities of their national heritage. In other words, without for a moment decrying the positive commonsense in their dynamic attitude towards music appreciation (which every professional musician knows is essential to his own success as a public performer), African educationists must somehow overcome their ingrained tendency to over-value association with the stronger cultural force and encourage an aesthetic approach to their indigenous music through detailed knowledge. Such a policy would gradually lead to the establishment of a well founded classical tradition and at the same time resolve many of their pathological reservations in several walks of life where self confidence is called for. Self confidence in African musicians, I have found, can be greatly improved by your learning to play an African instrument yourself and by joining in with them having first taken the trouble to learn the piece by heart properly.

All these suggestions may be excellent in their own way and yet prove almost impossible to carry out in the face of inverted racialism which tenaciously clings to the idea that in cultural matters the more Africans are like Westerners and the less like themselves the better they will be. This concept has dominated British political practice and attitudes in Africa during the past twenty years.

It may well be necessary to ignore as far as possible the entrenched activities of the "Tonic and Dominant" school of thought and launch out independently on a really practical scheme to complete the essential field research which still remains to be done and, from the data collected, to write the text-books on the theory and practice of

African national musics as they have evolved up to the present day. This should, in time effectively remove that magical gap between cause and effect in their philosophy.

In this advance we look to the Universities, especially those with African Studies Departments, both within Africa and outside, in Britain, Europe and America to take their share of the responsibility. To make a breakthrough in the *familiar* medium of African music in this way, may well lead to a new capacity for analytic study in the *less familiar* subjects connected with pure mathematics, engineering, accountancy, technology and the exact sciences, for which so few African students now present themselves as candidates. In other words, it would amount to an important advance in higher education in Africa.

There need be no fear that indigenous African music is not sufficiently complex to warrant a place in formal schooling, provided it is studied on a sufficiently wide territorial basis. Our present anxiety is rather the reverse — that it might prove to be too complex for the average pupil who might soon find himself out of his depth unless the synthesis achieved by the text-book writers is clearly based on established African principles of music-making.

Patriotic and nostalgic considerations apart, there should always be room in formal education for a study of one's own national music, and today more so than ever, with radio entertainment making unparalleled demands upon musicians, and "majority rule" in music threatening to make Americans of us all.

The Potential Status of African Music

What of the future?

Naturally enough, the future of African music depends primarily upon two things — the music of the immediate past and the artistic integrity of present day musicians. As an aural art it has clearly performed a satisfactory function in the social life of preliterate Africa or it would not have survived. It was essentially practical in its range and scope, making use of instruments which could be constructed out of materials to hand, and in every way reflecting the musical ability and ingenuity of the local communities, neither more nor less. It increased the meaning of life to millions of African people over the centuries by enhancing the emotional impact of social occasions. It stood the test of time and helped to provide continuity of philosophy and the integration of social and moral standards. It is, therefore, a reasonably true mirror of the mental and spiritual status of its progenitors. That was the state of affairs in the "halcyon days" of inter-tribal warfare, cannibalism and endemic famine, before peace and education was thrust upon them by the intrusive whites.

Peace and education, between them, have created problems of their own in music as much as in social adjustments. The saddest aspect of this problem for musicians is the firm African belief that by imitating the music and habits of whites the result will magically bring the same social rewards as if they were whites. Many of them tragically believe in the potency of a certificate or of a university degree to leap that magical gap between cause and effect and in itself, without further effort, provide an Aladdin's reward. And if it fails to do so, to bring a well paid job or the spontaneous applause of the audience, it frequently ends in blank envy and the jealousy of frustration. The magic they had been led to believe in had let them down and the blame, they consider must be placed, not on themselves, but on the white man or woman who had not handed on enough force or "mana" for them to achieve success.

In some circles it is not considered tactful to mention such things, but in Africa we live with the reality and must seek a solution. If African music is to continue its therapeutic work for African society, which so many of us hope it will, then honest analysis of first principles in the art, freed from magical obstruction, must precede any synthesis of character which will match up to the rigours of modern politics and technology.

An effective study of the art of indigenous music which is still so active a part of African life, may well lead the way to the solution of so many other educational questions which entail an ability to follow a problem through to its logical conclusion.

The significance of African music, therefore, is firstly that it is African with all the tangible and intangible features which that word entails; and, secondly, that its study and practice provide an ideal opportunity for thought and innate ingenuity which will not only bring cultural maturity in their train, but will provide well merited recognition by the musical world outside which Africans badly need in order to catch up with the twentieth Century.

Here then is the gap in our cultural map of Africa marked "Musica Incognita", just as real and just as much a challenge to us today as the topographical gap that faced David Livingstone.