

African Music in South Africa.

[1940s?]

The object of this paper is to make a plea for greater study of African Music than has hitherto been common among those interested in one way or another in the "Dark Continent". A few records will be used to illustrate what the writer considers are the characteristic features of African Music and African singing. The objection will probably be raised by some of you after you have heard the records that they show considerable Western influence and that they therefore do not represent typical African Music. In this connection it is well to remember that the white himself is responsible for the fact that it is almost impossible to find any native songs in South Africa which do not show some resemblance to Western music. But even so such records are not completely disqualified for use in such a lecture as this, for what I am concerned to do is not to trace Western influences in these songs, but to point out to you what features of African Music they illustrate, for I am fully convinced, from my experience that even when Africans are singing a completely Western song, they often do so in a distinct manner and with a distinct African interpretation so that even white people who are quite familiar with the music cannot recognise it in its distorted form. And I believe that the way in which a people sing has much to do with the nature of their music.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that more harm has been done in South Africa--with the best intentions of course--to African forms of recreation than to perhaps any other sphere of their life. In their earnest zeal to uproot all that was savage and barbaric in the African life, the settler and the missionary alike stamped out or discouraged everything which they considered immoral or inconsistent with their new teaching or which interfered with their opening up of the country for development. Forms of recreation had to give way to new ideas of work or religious belief. Thus in the very laudable desire to improve the African's status in various directions more pressing than forms of recreation, one of the most fundamental aspects of his life suffered eclipse, the coming together of young and old to participate in singing and dancing and other ceremonial functions. Today one of the commonest criticisms of African boys and girls, for example in our boarding schools, is that they are too dull and will not readily take part in games. One of the most trying jobs in such schools is to be games-master. Unless games and music are definitely included in the Time-Table they are not ready to take part in them, except for just a few. The reason for this is probably the fact that many of our present day pupils are in the third generation of Christian upbringing or white contact. Years before them their grandparents and parents were being taught how to work and stop playing. While they may have learnt the lesson of the dignity of labour in a rather imperfect way, still they have also begun to teach their children that play is silver but work is golden. And as African song was almost inextricably interwoven with play, dancing, story-telling, witchcraft, hunting, fighting, wherever these forms of activity disappeared, music followed the same course. Most of the songs that have disappeared are those that dealt with the most colourful aspects of African life--songs sung at initiation and other ceremonial functions--and what

and what we have left are some of the monotonous work songs and lullabies, e.g. Bidla Pum'Ehlatini pr Tula Mntwana and the only colourful songs that have been retained are the war-songs which are often heard at war-dances held for the entertainment of distinguished visitors like the Prince of Wales or the Governor-General or American tourists. These can hardly be adequately produced in gramophone records. They have to be seen as well as heard in order to be fully appreciated. Thus in Southern Africa at least it is today very difficult to find anything original in African music. Most folk songs have undergone changes either in their words or in the situation under which they are sung in order not to offend the susceptibilities of Christian parents and this has affected the structure of African songs. In taking away action and dance you took away what had given form and added to the rhythm of the song, and being compelled to sing western music especially in the form of hymns requiring much solemnity and decorum has not tended to the preservation of African music or to its development along African lines. Fortunately the African manner of singing still remains.

Aluza The Nature of African Music. In dealing with the nature of African music we have to bear in mind what has perhaps been implied by what has been said thus far, namely, African music cannot be described apart from the forms of African activity in which it plays a part. Music qua music does not exist in Africa in the way in which it does in other countries. To a certain extent, of course, all music is created for a certain situation, but in African music it is perhaps true to say that the song is created by rather than for the situation. Western dance music, for example, comes before the dance and can perhaps be enjoyed apart from the dance. But in Africa you have to see the dance, take part in it, hear the clapping of hands and the whistling and the shouting, feel the rhythm of it before you can appreciate the song which accompanies it. e.g. the song "Asihambe siye kaya" or better still the record in which and his singers bring into a dance song a little of the whistling, clapping of hands, etc. that would normally accompany. Note that the whistling effect is produced by means of a whistle. Even the piano here is distorted in order to try to fit it into African rhythm. Someone speaks in praise of the dancer. In true African singing the speech would not interrupt the singing but would be heard in the midst of the singing, while other appreciative spirits would be moving round the dancer doing such things as "ukusenga", ukutshayelela", respectively milking and sweeping, while she would be holding up her hands in the form of the horns of a cow, etc. All this accounts for the fact that Africans find it very painful to sing any kind of song, from hymns downwards or upwards if you like without making some movement of the body. Another important point is the fact that singing in Africa always involves groups. Solo singing unaccompanied by a chorus of some sort does not appeal to the African in the way that concerted performance does. More than that. In a situation that calls for music it is often difficult for the observer to distinguish the performers from the audience. Everybody seems to have something to do. Even in so-called enlightened African circles in a concert the poor Chairman has continually to remind the audience that they have

have come to listen to the performers. The casual onlooker would go away with the impression the African audience was a disorderly crowd but the real thing to understand is that there is such a vital emotional connection between the performers and the audience that it imposes a severe strain on the latter to be merely passive listeners. It is merely their way of showing appreciation that keeps breaking through the new conventional forms of entertainment. Appreciation in Africa is ~~shown~~ during the performance and not afterwards and not merely by clapping of hands but means of ejaculations and exclamations sounding above the music or even the giving of presents to a particularly successful performer. Thus African Music is performed not so much for the delectation of a so-called audience but is participated in by a group as a whole, just as in the divination of the witchdoctor, this practical psychologist makes use of the contributory actions of the people to give him a clue of the cause of the trouble he is divining.

Harmony
Another characteristic feature of African music is the almost inevitable tendency for a group of singers to divide themselves up into smaller groups singing different melodies which they attempt to harmonise. Actually the harmony may be very bad or very simple--e.g. thirds and fifths, when examined according to the rules of harmony, but there is an irresistible desire on the part of the African to sing in parts. This desire may be dangerous, as for example when the native teacher makes little children sing in four parts when they ought to be singing in unison or simple two-part melodies, not infrequently on account of pressure from the children themselves. Africans have observed that white people like singing in unison and they invariably attribute that to the white man's sheer inability to sing, perhaps not without some justification. Take any group of Africans, teach them a simple melody and then ask them to divide themselves into parts and sing in harmony. Try the same experiment with a corresponding group of white people and compare the results. They will probably surprise you. The African ~~composition~~ composer will have to take account of this love of harmony on the part of those for he is catering--the more parts he can introduce into his music the more successful he will be. This will necessitate careful training in the rules of harmony, although he will have to be on his guard against supposing that unless his music conforms to the universal laws of harmony, it is bad music. In this connection much more needs to be done in African schools than has yet been attempted.

Rhythm
Apart from the question of harmony, we may find that African rhythm needs study. Take one of the records made by Mr Hugh Tracy. When you hear a record like this, it is not sufficient merely to dismiss it as bad music or bad rhythm according to certain standards, but rather to accept it as a new phenomenon in music the study of which might reveal something which ought to be added to our present knowledge of music.

Notation
African music is largely unwritten and that raises the problem of the adequacy of present forms of musical notation for African music. It is ~~probable~~ probable that just as we are finding we require new characters to represent sounds existing in African languages, we may have to devise new characters in writing down African music as sung and enjoyed by Africans.

With regard to the nature of African music and African singing we must bear in mind the tonal quality of the African languages. In listening to Africans singing, you will find that they are able to get in glides between one note and another which might be difficult in languages which do not possess such long vowels and such variations in tone e.g. record "Wa Baleka" by Caluza. Sometimes when Africans sing ~~xxx~~ western songs it is difficult for the Westerner who knows the song to recognise it because of the unconscious effort of the singers to produce the western words in an ~~xxxxxx~~ way more in accordance with articulation in their languages. e.g. "Stars shall never be beaten".

Trends In African Music.

(a) a revival of interest in the collection of the remaining examples of African songs in an attempt to preserve them. This purely antiquarian interest must be combined with practical measures for the development of African music.

(b) An increase in the number of Africans who are trying their hand at composition. While these compositions may not be good, it is interesting to remember that there is a greater interest in writing songs than in writing books in the vernacular for example, although greater attention has been paid in schools to teaching the African how to write essays well while music has been woefully neglected.

(c) the growth of musical associations is also worthy of note, e.g. AB.M.A., Transvaal Nantu Eisteddfod; Kokozela, Mompoti, Nyati, Caluza, etc. The first tendency of these Associations was to sing Western music, but the place of African music in their programme is steadily on the increase. Their conductors usually compose African songs for them to sing, and that is a development which ought to be encouraged.

(d) The recording of songs sung by Africans is proceeding at a very rapid rate. Gramophone companies are finding a rich market among Africans both for their instruments and their records. The danger in this development lies in the fact these companies have no aesthetic interest or scientific interest in this matter and they may be perpetuating undesirable tendencies in African music.

Conclusion. It seems to me that the educationist and the missionary in Africa have a big job to do in this direction. It is time he realised that music ought to play a greater part in the curriculum of the school and in the social activities of the community, for we are perpetually being reminded in these days that the African school must be a community. The school must stop being a kind of "kill-joy" centre, especially in the rural areas. The Spencerian theory that music, dancing etc should be relegated to the leisure-part of education, if it implies that the leisure-part of education is the least important will not do for Africa. And giving music the worst periods in the school time-table, e.g. the last on Friday afternoon, will not permit our pupils to get any thing of permanent value out of it. Again more attention needs to be paid to the creative side of music in African schools. There is much spontaneous singing among children during their recess periods, when going away from and coming to school and their ability in this direction could be capitalised. What has been done by progressive schools in America and elsewhere in stimulating children to create as well as to perform music could be repeated in Africa by teachers of the right kind.

The anthropologist may here find also a rich field for his science.

Golden Age
Producers
Classical Age
Bakula, Caluza,
Tyangashe

Musical
ability of
Africans

African

See notes

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The existence of mechanical devices such as the gramophone and the sound film may enable him to give us African music in its original setting and so give colour and life to his descriptions of various aspects of primitive life. He can preserve for us some of the emotional reactions of the people during crises in their social life and so show better than the written page can ever do the sources of the richness and the fullness, the balance and the satisfaction that the African finds in life. In music the African finds not only enjoyment but also consolation in troubles both out of his own internal life and out of juxtaposition with white people, just as the Negro found in his spirituals a way of escape from the drudgery and the persecution and the drabness of his ordinary life in the time of slavery. You can never utterly destroy the hopes of a people who can sing and that is one reason why the African is able to survive even such things as restrictive legislation, civilised labour policies, etc.