

## THE STATE OF FOLK MUSIC IN BANTU AFRICA

*A brief survey delivered to the International Folk Music Council, on behalf of the African Music Society by*

HUGH TRACEY (Hon. Secretary, African Music Society)  
at Biarritz, July 14th, 1953.

WE Europeans are at a great disadvantage in talking about African music. Unlike most other members of this Conference we do not represent or discuss our own music but that of a people radically unlike ourselves among whom we live. It is only because we have found that the African is pathetically incapable of defending his own culture and indeed is largely indifferent to its fate that we, who subscribe wholeheartedly to the ideals of our International Council, are attempting to tide over the period during which irreparable damage can be done and until Africans themselves will be capable of appearing at our conferences as well-informed representatives of their own peoples.

### THREE FACETS OF BANTU MUSIC.

Africa, south of the equator, is a fine country for music. It contains a population of about sixty million Bantu peoples. They are said to have spread themselves across the continent from the region of the great lakes, migrating and fighting their way into their various corners, defending themselves and their few patches of arable land as best they could from their fellow wanderers until they achieved some kind of equilibrium.

After a few hundred years of comparative isolation the famous explorers of the last century opened up the continent to commercial, religious, mineral and agricultural enterprises, each of which has affected the lives and consequently the music of the indigenous peoples. But the invasion is by no means complete and to-day we have three facets of Bantu music side by side: *the original folk music*, which is still the music of the great majority, and is far more active than some would have us believe; *music in decay*, eclipsed both by foreign prejudice and by indigenous gullibility; and thirdly, *music in reconstruction*, a state of affairs in which the melting pot is throwing up new forms of music, good, bad and indifferent, all of them strongly coloured by intrinsically African characteristics. All three stages should be borne in mind when contemplating Bantu music.

To take them in order—first the folk music.

### FOLK MUSIC.

All the many Bantu musics, like the tribes themselves, share a common heritage, but each has developed its own individuality in strict segregation from the rest of the race. This is what makes the study of Bantu music so fascinating.

Before white people arrived in the interior of Africa the tribes were in a continual state of mutual hostility and it was unwise if not fatal for a member of any one tribe to wander outside his own territory unarmed. Lines of communication were limited to internal footpaths and a few navigable rivers. The stronger tribes claimed the fertile valleys and plains, the weaker were crowded up into the hills or to the edge of the deserts. Here, of course, environment played its part in determining the kind of musical instruments the tribe would be able to play.

The tropical forests of the Congo basin, for example, produced great trees ideal for drum making. The open grazing grounds of Natal, on the other hand, ensured that the Zulu tribe should play no drums whatever. The lakes and rivers provided the lowland peoples with reeds for their pipe ensembles, while the bamboo forests of the mountains gave the highlanders their flutes. The wide treeless plains almost invariably produced unaccompanied singing, while the woods bred men who delighted in great ensembles of drums or xylophones. The bush country, which is neither forest nor open savannah,

gave rise to a wide variety of lesser instruments, the musical bows and zithers, the clappers, bells and lutes.

Look at the vegetation and you may guess what kind of instruments the people be playing, but it will give you no indication of how they will be playing them, for dependent upon another factor, language. All Bantu musics are closely associated the tonality of the spoken languages, of which there are over a hundred and groups. These languages and their associated musics have become so diverse that various tribal styles of music are as easily distinguishable as, shall we say, the folk musics of Europe, though on a far smaller scale, for the average size of a language group would only contain about half a million people.

There is one characteristic all African musics share in common: practicality. Music of pre-literate peoples is not always artistic, maybe, but it is invariably practical. Every piece of folk music works for its living. However aesthetically pleasing it has been in its day, once its keen edge is blunted and it no longer achieves its purpose whether it be the direction of thought into spiritual channels or feet into dance, it is abandoned by the rising generation and lost irrevocably in the wilderness of memory.

We may, with justification, make a few other generalisations about Bantu music and musicians.

None of them have an "altitude" conception of pitch. They do not speak, do, about *high* and *low* notes. They have, rather, a "magnitude" conception of pitch. Treble notes are "*small*" and bass notes "*great*."

The most common structure of a song is antiphonal, with a strong preference for declining melodies, so much so that if you hear any song with more than four consecutive notes rising in pitch you may rightly suspect foreign influence. The Bemba of Northern Rhodesia provides one of the few exceptions to this rule.

The modality of the various folk musics is quite distinctive. We have found that the majority of tribes prefer one or other of the many pentatonic scales, a few prefer hexatonic, while the most musically developed use heptatonic scales. Few, if any, of these Bantu scales (and I have measured several thousand of them) remotely correspond to our European tempered scale. The interval of an octave is respected, but few use the true fourth or true fifth except when playing those instruments which are pendant upon the harmonic series. In no case have I found the established use of octaves, and intervals as small as a semitone are rare.

One could continue this list further, but these physical phenomena which reflect their unconscious preferences of style are perhaps not so important as the implications of their music.

Everyone has heard that the history of primitive peoples is largely contained in their songs and legends. This may be true up to a point. The living rather than the dead is the chief concern of the Bantu composers. The creative folk composer is the representative piece for his less articulate countrymen. If they agree with what he expresses, it becomes their own voice also. They may add or subtract, apply local colour to his own theme, but through the stimulus of oral propagation, which invites anyone to contribute his share, we find local repertoires of songs which prove to be the most authentic and genuine reflection of the lives and outlook of the whole district. In them they express their beliefs, their sense of duty and tribal morality, their ambitions, disappointments and triumphs—in fact, everything that really matters to them.

For the general majority of Bantu people, songs take the place of, shall we say, the correspondence columns of our newspapers and are the chief means of moulding public opinion. You can say in song or verse what you could not say in prose without offence. Here, then, we find the artist and musician playing his essential part in the integration of society. He is the jester who reflects the opinions of the "right thinking" man or woman, the arbiter of the decencies and the opponent of excesses in c.

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One could continue this list further, but these physical phenomena which truly reflect their unconscious preferences of style are perhaps not so important as the social implications of their music.

Everyone has heard that the history of primitive peoples is largely contained in their songs and legends. This may be true up to a point. The living rather than the dead are the chief concern of the Bantu composers. The creative folk composer is the mouth-piece for his less articulate countrymen. If they agree with what he expresses, it becomes their own voice also. They may add or subtract, apply local colour to his original theme, but through the stimulus of oral propagation, which invites anyone to contribute his share, we find local repertoires of songs which prove to be the most authentic and genuine reflection of the lives and outlook of the whole district. In them they express their beliefs, their sense of duty and tribal morality, their ambitions, disappointments and triumphs—in fact, everything that really matters to them.

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commoner—in other words, the upholder of the spirit of continuity and solidarity in tribal or social life.

For his songs to be effective there must also be continuity of artistic style—a continuity or gradual proceeding of symbolism through which the common people may participate without hesitation. In this way they feel they are taking part in the intangible realities which give meaning to the rest of life, compensate for distress and, indeed, create that sense of well-being without which life at any economic level is not worth while.

It is, surely, the quality of this artistic symbolism which determines the degree of *culture*. On the other hand, it is care and preservation of cultural symbols which determines the degree of *civilisation*. Many of our Bantu are cultured but few would yet qualify for the right to be called civilised by these standards.

The preoccupation of our International Folk Music Council one believes to be just that: to assure continuity for all effective cultures in a changing world and thus directly to contribute to the well-being of society.

This brings us to the second aspect of Bantu music in our time, that of music in decay.

#### MUSIC IN DECAY.

Left to itself, there is no reason to suppose that Bantu music would have either progressed or declined. It would merely have proceeded in step with its creators, reflecting their actual mental state and their capacity for this form of art.

But once the floodgates of western and other foreign intrusions had been opened, there was an immediate change for the worse. The Bantu bends to every wind that whistles and, lacking that sense of proportion which creates a civilisation, his whole culture was exposed and vulnerable to attack by determined proselytisers, both progressists and priests. These two, with the highest and most impeccable motives, paved the way for the merchant, the employer of labour, the creator of towns and mixed communities, the educators or those who cared little for the intrinsic African. He was to be made better spiritually or better economically, better educated or better clothed. His culture did not matter; it was, they considered, beneath contempt. He was in future to be useful, civilised and saved.

With what result? Wherever this process has most succeeded there is a sorry state of affairs. Original forms of music and dancing give place to imitations of foreign styles, the arts lose their meaning and their contribution to social integration is wasted. Taste is destroyed and licence extolled. Violence is the quality in a "cowboy" film which is most admired and the songs of the bawdy house eclipse all others. They have sales value.

Nor is it the merchant only who undermines the function of folk culture. Social workers, teachers and missionaries unwittingly create new complications in order, they think, to induce moral or spiritual virtue through the ancient device of associating what to them are uplifting strains of music with each new lesson in ethics.

Sinner and saint go hand in hand to destroy a continent's taste in music, and the victim heartily enjoys them both, adding unexpected little quirks of his own: a brand of stark realism to his new love songs and a shuffling of the feet in the hymns not written into the original text. He surprises and alarms his mentors who indeed have started something which neither has the power to curb.

Now comes the third stage.

#### MUSIC IN RECONSTRUCTION.

In those parts of the country most affected, the old songs have gone. They are considered to be socially inferior, out of date, heathen and primitive. "New style," "cowboy," "jive" is the new mental level of the emancipated. Hymns for work songs, Victorian quartets for choirs, everything made simple with tonic solfa.

But that is not the whole picture. Reaction sets in. The minds which gave rise to the old styles of performance, the old and more responsible ways of using music as a social corrective gradually creep in again. They are hardly recognisable at first but little by little they make their presence felt. The three common chords have created a dead level of mediocrity in nearly every song, religious or secular, but strange things are happening to the rhythms. Musical monotony is coming into its own again as their secret dynamo against drudgery; preference is being given unconsciously to those foreign tunes with some element of Africa in their parentage. Morality songs in spite of their four-part harmonies are sung in the old modes; social solidarity creeps back as the main theme of singing groups and, for those with cash to spare, the guitar takes over the accompaniment with drums and rattles as before and a kind of Bantu *calypso* is the response to this now universal instrument.

The continuity of their musical symbolism remains broken, but the old mentality is beginning to reassert itself and to grope for new clothes which will fit once more. This is the stage of present-day popular music in the towns. Much of the old styles of music has gone but much still remains. Whole tribes have lost what music they had and can only regain a Bantu culture if they can bring themselves to think inter-tribally—a difficult proposition for tribesmen who have received nothing but hostility from their fellow Bantu all down the centuries. The white man has been their only friend, a friend who, from their point of view, has been regrettably friendly with all the other tribes also.

#### CONCLUSION.

There is nothing new in all this which has not been foreseen and discussed a hundred times by members of our International Folk Music Council. I report what must be to most of us an inevitable situation, where ignorance of the function of music in society is allowed to impose itself upon a simple people unfitted to counteract the attack made upon its intangibles by so overwhelmingly successful a material civilisation. The Bantu has yet to learn that although you may acquire a civilisation you can only inherit a culture.

These being the facts of the situation, we, in the African Music Society, must needs devise some means of protecting Bantu and other African folk musics until the indigenous people themselves have developed that civilised ability to treasure what is theirs by birthright.

We propose to do so by the establishment of an inter-territorial Library of African Music to which all the countries south of the Sahara will be asked to contribute and from which they will be able to obtain copies of Africa's best recordings from all over the continent. In this way we may bridge the gap between the first stage of folk music and the third of social reconstruction.

By capturing something of the vitality of present-day folk composers in our recordings we may yet fire the imagination of those African musicians who will help their people to stand up to the vicissitudes of the industrial revolution which is sweeping across the continent.

At present, research work in Bantu music is almost exclusively undertaken by foreigners and until Africans have made their choice between the gay creative personality of their own music or the drab proletarian grey in imitation of others, there will be little chance of Africans themselves making any serious contribution to the deliberations and achievements of our International Folk Music Council.

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