

TRACEY, Hugh

Music: an introduction to music for Southern Africans

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we hear each blow separately. Our ears distinguish each blow from the next. But if we could beat so fast that our ears could no longer distinguish the blows apart from each other, then the sound would have become a musical note. Our ears cannot distinguish apart more than 32 blows per second; after that they appear as one continuous stream or note. It is like drops of water falling from a bowl. If you pour slowly the drops will fall separately; but as you pour faster the drops merge into one continuous stream. So when we speak in terms of music we say that the greatest note we can hear is a note of 32 vibrations, for that is the moment when the blows become one continuous stream. The faster the blows the smaller the note.

You can hear this for yourself by putting a bicycle upside down and making the back wheel revolve by turning the pedal with your hand. Hold a small stick against the spokes so that it hits each spoke in turn as it comes past. When the wheel is moving slowly you can hear the separate blows of the stick upon the spokes. Each blow is one vibration. But as the wheel goes faster the noise merges into a musical note which alters its pitch according to the speed of the wheel, that is, according to the number of blows or vibrations made by the stick.

Pitch, then, is the smallness or greatness of a note, which is, in fact, the speed of the blows or vibrations, slow or fast. The smallest note we can hear with our ears has as many as 17,000 vibrations per second. The smallest note sung by a woman is only about 1,000 vibrations per second.

The minstrels of all countries give names to their notes according to their pitch. When we study music we must also know the number of vibrations to each note so that we can compare them with each other.

19. *Intensity*

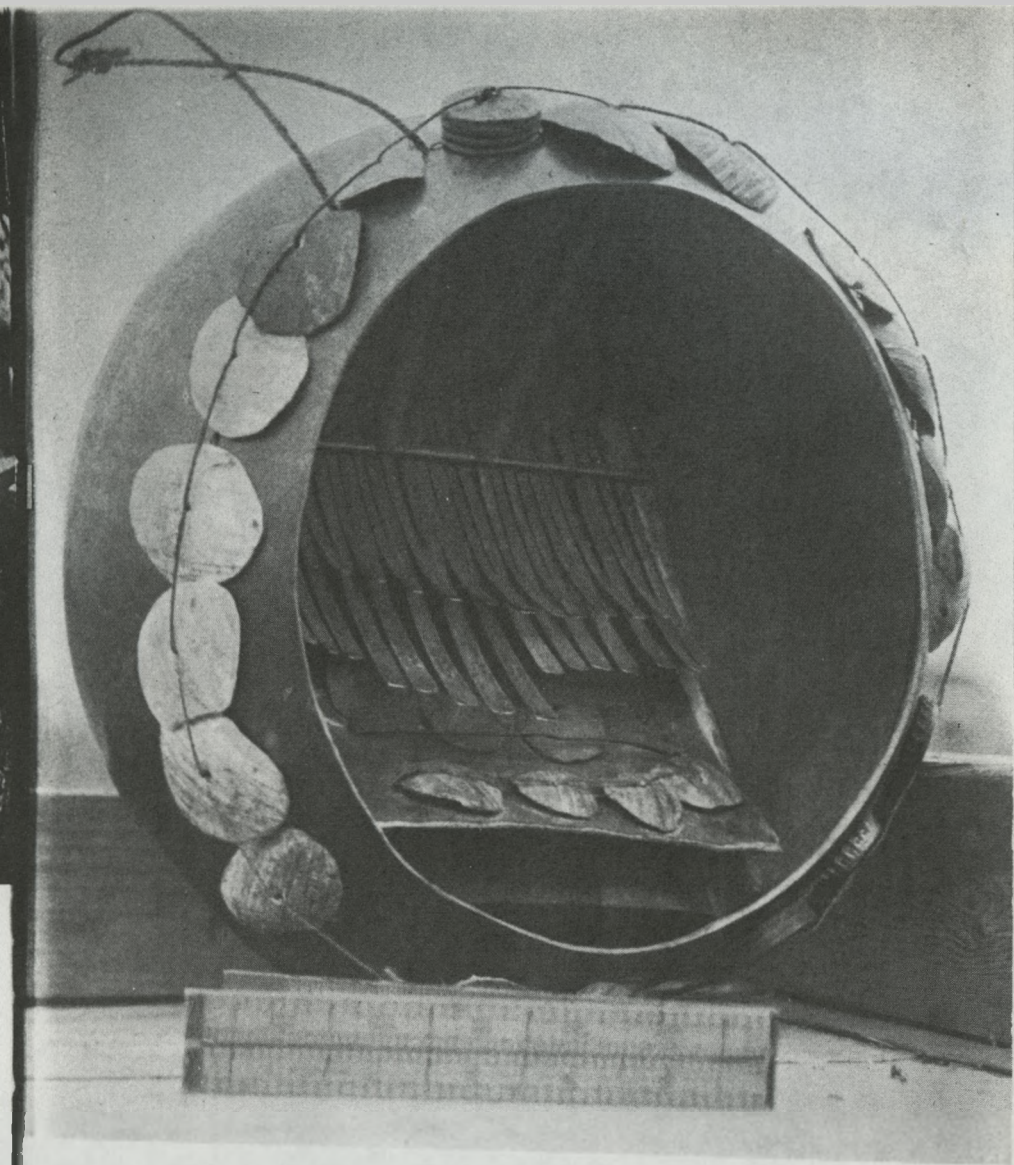
Sounds may be either loud or soft. The louder the sound the greater the energy used in making it. All sound, as we have seen comes from movement. Musical notes come from the movement to and fro of the thing which causes sound, such as the string of the bow or the key of the *Mbira*. If we use more strength to pluck the string we make a louder note because the string moves a greater distance to and fro from side to side. The greater the strength behind it, the louder the note. The amount of loudness is the intensity of a note. The big bull roars with more breath than the little calf, and so makes a louder noise.



A trio of MALIMBA, xylophones, played by Shangaan-Ndau on the banks of the Sabi River, Portuguese East Africa, near Mambone. (Photo : Author).



Two Chapi musicians, Katini and Gomukomu, both Leaders of Chapi Orchestras and composers of Timbila music (Photo : Lynn Acutt).



One of Africa's most important musical instruments, the MBIRA NJARI type from Southern Rhodesia, fixed inside its resonating DEZE or gourd with snail shell buzzers both on the DEZE and on the apron of the NJARI (Photo : Author).

PAST AND FUTURE

55. *Patronage*

It has been said that "musicians are born and not made." By this it is meant that unless a man has the desire to make music and the ability to take great pains to acquire the skill he will never be a good musician. You cannot take any child and teach him the craft of music. It is only those who have the right characteristics who will become musicians (In English they say "those who have the Gift"). The rest of us may be good listeners because we are interested, but there are others who will never be either good musicians or good listeners if they are not interested.

It is well known that some tribes are much more musical than others. Some prefer other crafts (such as carving or bead work), for music is not the only art and is not equally attractive to everyone. Some, like the little Bushmen, express their feelings in painting, and they have left all over Africa the signs of their skill in the caves and rocks where they lived like human lions among the animals of the country upon which they fed.

But the craft of music is all-absorbing to the true musician. It may even make him neglect his other work and earn a living for himself and his family by his craft only. In some languages the word for "musician" is almost the same as for "beggar," as they must depend upon upon the gifts of others. It has always been so. And in most countries the worth of musicians to the community has been fully recognised so that they are allowed to do music only and not the usual work like other people.

One great chief, long ago, in Northern Rhodesia, it is said, was so fond of music that he would maim any man who was a good musician and keep him at his court (*Zimbabwe*) so that he could not then take up any other work but his music.

In the earliest accounts of Southern Africa written by the Portuguese they tell of the chief's musicians, men who were at the Chief's kraal, who made music at all times and who went

before him on the path. Four hundred years ago there were musicians playing the *Timbila* and the *Mbira* for the chiefs. Here are a few extracts from the Portuguese books of that time :

" One of the principal officers about the king (Monomotapa) is NYANTOVO, the head musician, who has many under him, and is a great lord."*

" This Monomotapa has state music according to their (African) fashion, wherever he may be, even in open country under a tree, and more than five hundred minstrels with their captain, who take turns to keep watch outside the house where he sleeps, talking and singing jokes, and in time of war they fight and render any service."**

" The king (Monomotapa) has another class of Kaffirs who are called Marombe, which means the same as " jester." These also go round and round the royal dwelling shouting in very harsh voices many songs and discourses in praise of the king . . . When the king goes out he is surrounded and encircled by these Marombe, who recite these praises to him with loud cries, to the sound of small drums, irons [*Mbira*] and bells, which help them to make a louder noise and clamour."***

Then there was another great chief at that time called KITEWE, (Quiteve) who just lived below the mountains in what is now Portuguese East Africa, near the Buzi River.

" Kitewe also makes use of another class of Kaffirs, great musicians and dancers, who have no other office than to sit in the front room of the King's palace at the outer door, and round his dwelling, playing many different musical instruments, and singing to them a great variety of songs and discourses in praise of the King, in very high and sonorous voices."

"The best and most musical of them is called AMBIRA (*Timbila*) . . . and another musical instrument also called an AMBIRA (*Mbira*) . . . This instrument is much more musical than that made of gourds (*Timbila*) but is not so loud, and is generally played in the king's palace, for it is very soft and makes but little noise . . . When Kitewe sends ambassadors to any part, they are always accompanied by these three classes of Kaffirs . . . some playing, some shouting and others dancing . . . Kitewe always employs these in his palace as grooms of the chamber, to carry his orders, and they often serve him as couriers to certain parts of the kingdom and under this title they are well received and respected by everyone in all lands through which they pass, and are provided with free maintenance by all."†

* (Extract Asia Portuguese : Manuel de Faria e Sousa, Tome II. Part iii, Ch : XV. A.D. 1596. Page 24, Theal: Records of S. E. Africa.)

** (Da Asia, Loao de Barros. Decade I Book X ch : I, Theal: Records. P. 271.)

*** (Theal. Vol. VII. P. 202).

† Eastern Ethiopia, Friar João de Santos, 1609. Theal: Records. Vol. VII.

That is how it was nearly four hundred years ago. Nowadays the minstrels are just as important as they were then, although the chiefs are not able to keep a large number of them at their homes. In South Africa, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban each have a town orchestra which plays for the people just as the minstrels did long ago for the people of Monomotapa and Kitewe. Regiments of soldiers have bands to march before them as our minstrels did before the chiefs. And in restaurants, where Europeans eat, they often have a band to play music to them. It is the same to-day as it was hundreds of years ago, except that minstrels are now paid by all the people instead of by a few great chiefs.

Here is the modern place for African music, wherever the people gather together, in schools, in villages, in towns and in regiments, as well as in the huts at night. There is no need to play only foreign music and foreign instruments for these occasions ; African music and African Musicians are there if only the people will call for them as the great chiefs did of old. Then when the minstrels are called to do their proper work they will respond and make music with full hearts and minds in a new outpouring of our own African music.

Music all over the world needs *patronage*.

56. *The Money We can Afford*

Since the coming of the white men conditions in Africa have changed. Money has to a large extent replaced the direct exchange of goods. We can work for money and sell goods for money and buy what we want with the money we obtain. So nowadays the minstrel, if he is short of the right material, can go to the store and find what he needs if he has enough money and if the store-keeper can get it for him. In the old days, the chief would reward the minstrel by giving him food and presents and that was enough. But to-day he must buy clothes and pay taxes, even if he still gets food and presents from the people to whom he plays. Should he decide to play a foreign instrument, he must pay for it in money. Some musicians may be lucky and be able to afford many things, but most people have not enough money to buy much from the store.

If we think of our instruments in terms of money we shall see that African music can be made very cheaply. Apart from the time and labour, the *Mbira* can be made by a minstrel for about 3d. per note ; the *Timbila* (Xylophone) for about 1s. per note.

That is about 5s. to 10s. for an excellent *Mbira*, or 10s. to 16s. for a *Timbila*. Drums can be made for 5s. to 10s. each. Musical bows can be made for 1s. to 3s. each and the pipes for less than 1d. each.

But if you buy foreign instruments and learn to play foreign music it will cost very much more. The cheapest piano* will cost £1 per note and there are 88 notes. Good pianos cost from £5 to £12 per note, a whole herd of cattle for one instrument ! Banjos, Guitars and Accordions cost from £2 up to £10 at the cheapest, and then for the first two you have to buy strings to replace them when they break. Even mouth organs cost from 6s. up to £1 each for good instruments. There are no European instruments that can compare with African instruments in price, while the music of the *Mbira* and *Timbila*, the drums and the Pipes, is the finest music in Africa, as good as any we can play with the instruments of the Europeans.

57. *Misunderstanding*

When so strong a people as the Europeans come to live amongst the Bantu there are bound to be changes in the way of living on both sides, many of them to our great advantage, though some to our disadvantage. Everyone can see the immense benefits which come from the skill of the white people : tools, clothes, medicine, education . . . and these overshadow the less apparent disadvantages. But when two races meet in this way, there must be a period of adjustment when they try to understand each other, their different languages, customs, pleasures and religions.

Many Europeans who have come here are so sure that their languages, customs and pleasures are better than ours that in the kindness of their hearts, they have tried to make us share in them all. But our acceptance of too much kindness may be harmful if we begin to rely upon *them* rather than *ourselves*, and if we, for our part, fail to understand them.

So we find that foreign influence is damaging to our music for several reasons :

(a) On the European side

1. Because most European teachers do not understand any music except their own ;
2. Because they were afraid of our music, which was strange to them, and the customs with which we use music ;

* (Inferior pianos and second-hand instruments in poor condition may be a little cheaper but not satisfactory instruments.)