

Sant' Ana Afonso

Music in Mozambique Renewal in a Traditional Context

A few years ago, during a conference convened by the Cultural Secretariat to discuss international contemporary music, a student remarked that some Mozambican music groups had already grown as popular as Osibisa and other famous African bands. He added that this was mainly thanks to their faculty for cultivating the European taste for the exotic. He was, of course, quite right: Mozambican groups like *Grupo R. M.*, *Hokolókwè*, *Alambique* and others performing in the same genre have succeeded in popularizing an attractive new harmonic technique adaptable to both solo and ensemble playing. What is more important, the groups' immense creative abilities have resulted in a succession of arrangements of popular traditional styles remarkable for their subtle and varied shading. This development has also been significant to the process of transition

from dance to theatre music: 'Valba', by *Grupo R. M.*, is a good example of the way in which the traditional music of the Maputo suburbs has evolved. *Hokolókwè's Sêngue* is another.

Another aspect of this qualitative leap in the evolution of genuine traditional popular music, with its roots deep in the ancestral (Bantu) culture, is undoubtedly the break with the rather humdrum, harmonically monotonous conformity to the natural melodic scale and endless cyclical patterns.

Today modern Mozambican musicians are eager to learn. We know of many musically illiterate yet dedicated performers and composers who have joined the 'second' literacy drive, anxious to learn the written language of sounds – sounds as yet unexpressed – and their accompanying harmonies. Musical notes may be said to correspond with words in

Song, dance and juggling feats form a part of the richly varied Mshao tradition



poetry: they are linked together, complement each other and harmonize with one another, to beautiful effect. To quote an old music instructor: had we always been musically literate the old timbila groups would, in the course of the centuries, have produced their share of African Beethovens.

Roots

One of the most beautiful features of modern music as well as of yesterday's popular styles must be the formal elements of traditional music which are preserved in the texture of contemporary compositions. Any listener with a smattering of musical knowledge can easily identify the regional origins of numbers like 'Xizambiza' by Roberto Chistonto or Alambique's recent release, 'Awinzilo'.

To hear the legendary *Fany Mpfumo* sing 'Because I Love You' – in English – to a reggae-tinged beat is to be drawn by the characteristic Ronga tonality of the music into the world of his ancient 'sagas'*.

Another contemporary musical style from southern Mozambique is the 'Marrabenta', which flourishes in the city suburbs. Though it has come a long way both in terms of quality and technical development it has not ceased to be what it was. The style has already gained a nationwide following and is regarded as a subculture in its own right, and its songs are sung in several Mozambican languages.

If we compare music from the south of the Save river with that of the central regions and the coastal zones north of the Zambezi river respectively we find that contemporary Mozambican compositions reflect the land's cultural complexity. This state of affairs is good both for young composers and their audiences.

The 'Magaiça' songs, which the magnificent *Alexandre Langa* and other composers, including *Francisco Mabecuane* and *Billy Cuca*, who died young, brought with them from the mines of South Africa, bear the imprint of the miners' struggle and, in their musical structure and instrumental techniques, of Zulu culture as a whole.

In *Chissena* and even in *Chinghúngoê* country in central Mozambique rhythm, harmony and melody are again different. Sometimes they are closely associated with local traditional compositions, sometimes with the local tribal language, as in the songs by *Ignacio de Sousa* from the city of Beira or by *Taibo Ismael* from Tete.

Musical development from areas further north like Nampula, as represented, and that admirably, by the group *Yophuro*, clearly shows the influence of Arab culture. This is immediately detectable in the vocal technique, intonation and harmonic progressions of the pieces composed and sung by one of the group's members, *Zena Bacar*. Her themes remind us of the traditional songs of the *Zikiris*, who celebrate *Id-il-Fitr* at the close of Ramadan.

In the midst of diversity we can at least attest to the vibrancy, warmth and brilliance of contemporary Mozambican music.

Can One Sing of Mozambique in Portuguese?

The erroneous conception that Mozambican music should only be sung in its own native tongue has been the subject of much discussion. Portuguese is a symbol of and a means to unity in Mozambique as well as a result of specific historical conditions. Clearly, composers will tend to work in the language they have the best command of, and it would be foolish not to admit that Portuguese is the mother tongue of many of the country's citizens. Are their songs not to be thought of as Mozambican, and if not, what are they? There is no reason why Portuguese cannot also be merged with Bantu or even Zulu rhythms.

But – and this is important – it is necessary to fuse Portuguese as mode of expression with the philosophical totality of the national context and to know how to interpret the signals from contemporary life in Mozambique against the backdrop of unifying national aspirations, in which music as well as literature are decisive factors.

Thus when *Hortencio Langa* sings in 'Menina Do Laço Dúde' that "tomorrow she will be a teacher, and that will be society's new morning," he is singing about the Mozambique of the present. Moreover, in children's music, now still in its infancy, the songbooks are almost exclusively written in Portuguese whatever the children's mother tongues, and it is these children who will be the new morning of Mozambique's indivisible society.

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* sagas: songs based on legends about witches and wizards.