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SONGS from the Heart of Africa

by Ella Kidney

WHILE listening to some modern music by British and other composers I have often been aware of the thought that somehow the music of the world is showing certain signs of "internationalism."

Who shall say—perhaps a foreshadowing of a league in the highest in art as well as the League of Nations, a merging into larger channels of the many and varied musical characteristics of the scattered races?

This thought will possibly be challenged, and I only record it as it is curious to me, and intensely interesting to observe that the trend of much of the colour, the rhythm of the music heard in many of the best concerts of the season is strangely suggestive of other climes. The home musician who judges strictly from an academic point of view, and chiefly from secondhand knowledge of folk-music, may doubt this; but ask any old traveller, who is musical also, if he can hear with closed eyes the works of Gustav Holst or such wonderful things as W. Vaughan Williams's "Four Hymns of the Almighty" without being transported in fancy to some great festival gathering in India and hearing the strange music that greets one's ears in the real India of the native—the dramatic and resonant calls sounding in unexpected places—the sweetness and longing in the quiet and quaint refrains?

Or take, again, in the concerto for tenor voice, pianoforte and orchestra by Arthur Bliss, which evoked such enthusiasm at its first performance at a recent concert in London that the concerto was repeated in its entirety. It is full of the more virile musical elements of certain parts of Asia, and what to unaccustomed ears seems a clash of sound and its sheer crude enjoyment of rhythmical effects is no new thing to many an observant and hearing traveller, although doubtless there is no such comparison in thought in the composer's mind, the music here presented is in a more scholarly and etherealised form, and the instruments which are the medium for expressing it are more grateful to the ear.

The true modern composer is expressing in his own wonderful way that which has permeated him, as a sensitive soul, of the restless pulse of the world, but he would not be aware how much he was voicing of the spirit of the time—the fusion of the melting-pot of the ages.

Maybe a friend says after hearing some of this modern music—English or foreign—"Isn't it weird? Isn't it strange? Aren't the dissonances extraordinary? What an arresting rhythm!" And even before the speaker is silent little glimpses of Eastern or African life flit before my eyes, and I see the dancers or the *saint*, and hear in fancy once again those extraordinary sounds.

Some years ago, when on my first visit to India, fresh from student life in London, I remember English folks smiling at the "noise" of native music. It was merely cacophony to them, and they were good-naturedly contemptuous of any one who was really interested and wanted to absorb some of these un-

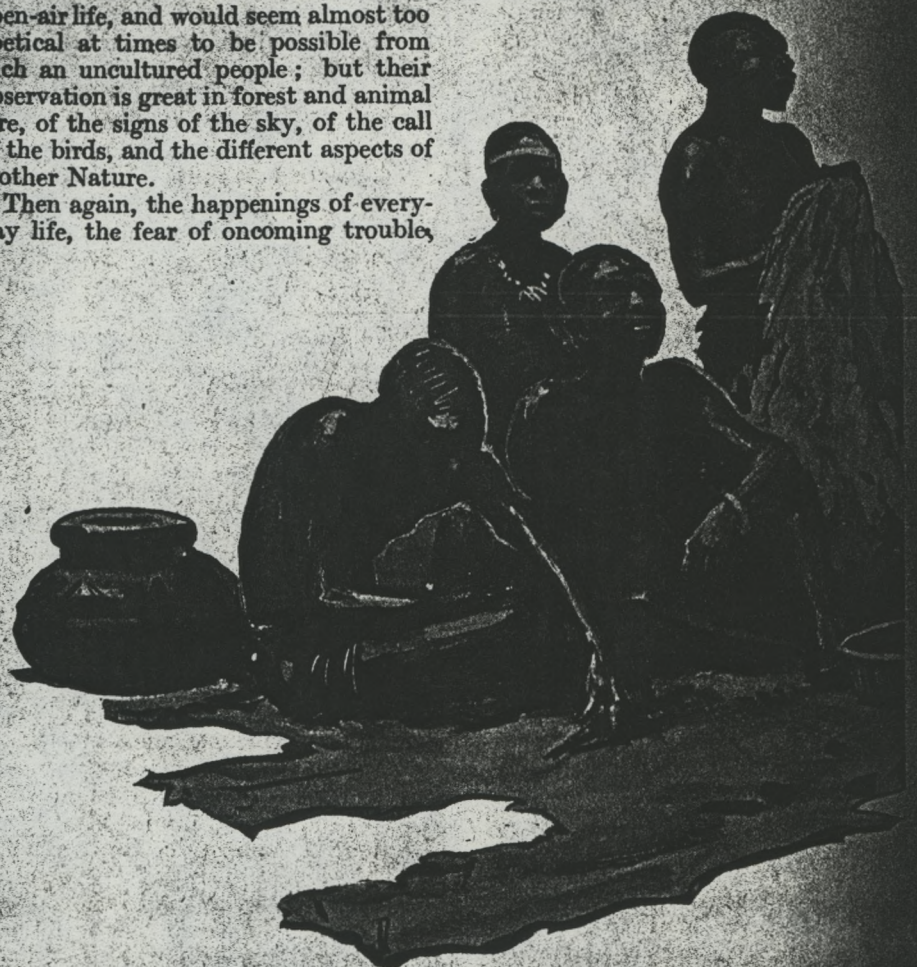
familiar sounds. True, it *was* strange after the stately structures of Beethoven.

However it may be, it is good to note the real interest people have been showing for some time past in the folk-songs of different nations.

As with others of similar nature, these songs of Nyasaland seem to express as well the various human emotions, of gaiety of heart, of sorrow, of bewilderment, of confidence, courage or fear, that, not knowing their origin, one might be tempted to think they were written by educated European musicians, instead of arising, one knows not how, among isolated black races in the highlands of Africa. They touch on events or feelings we all understand. Much of it is the natural outcome of the care-free, open-air life, and would seem almost too poetical at times to be possible from such an uncultured people; but their observation is great in forest and animal lore, of the signs of the sky, of the call of the birds, and the different aspects of Mother Nature.

Then again, the happenings of every-day life, the fear of oncoming trouble, the joy of happy play, the grief of mourning, are they not known to us all? And these songs, instead of being sung in crude and halting fashion as one would naturally expect from primitive people, are revealed as beautiful and artistic expressions of the various human emotions conforming to a definite plan of form and structure for each class of song. It is a curious trait also that when one is accustomed to the "idiom," these songs cling most tenaciously to the memory and imagination.

The following "Song of the Road" conveys the idea of endless travelling on foot, of weary rests by the wayside, then on, and on again, in search of the far-away village the travellers set out to reach.



"THE DRUM MAKERS START THEIR WORK."

(*Solo*) :
Journey onward, journey onward now,
(*Chorus*) :
Brave, strong heart,
(*Solo*) :
Journey onward, journey onward now,
(*Chorus*) :
Brave, strong heart,
Push on quickly, push on quickly now,
Brave chieftain!

Let us travel, let us travel on,
On! Big one!
Restless, hurry, now we hasten on.

Hasten with us, little rabbit, come,
My brother,
Hasten with us. See our mountain home,
Little brother.

Lion-hearted! Lion-hearted! out
Of the forest.
Burn to ashes! Burn to ashes him
Who affronts us.
Burn and pound and cast away his life.
Huh - - - - - - - - - - - - h!

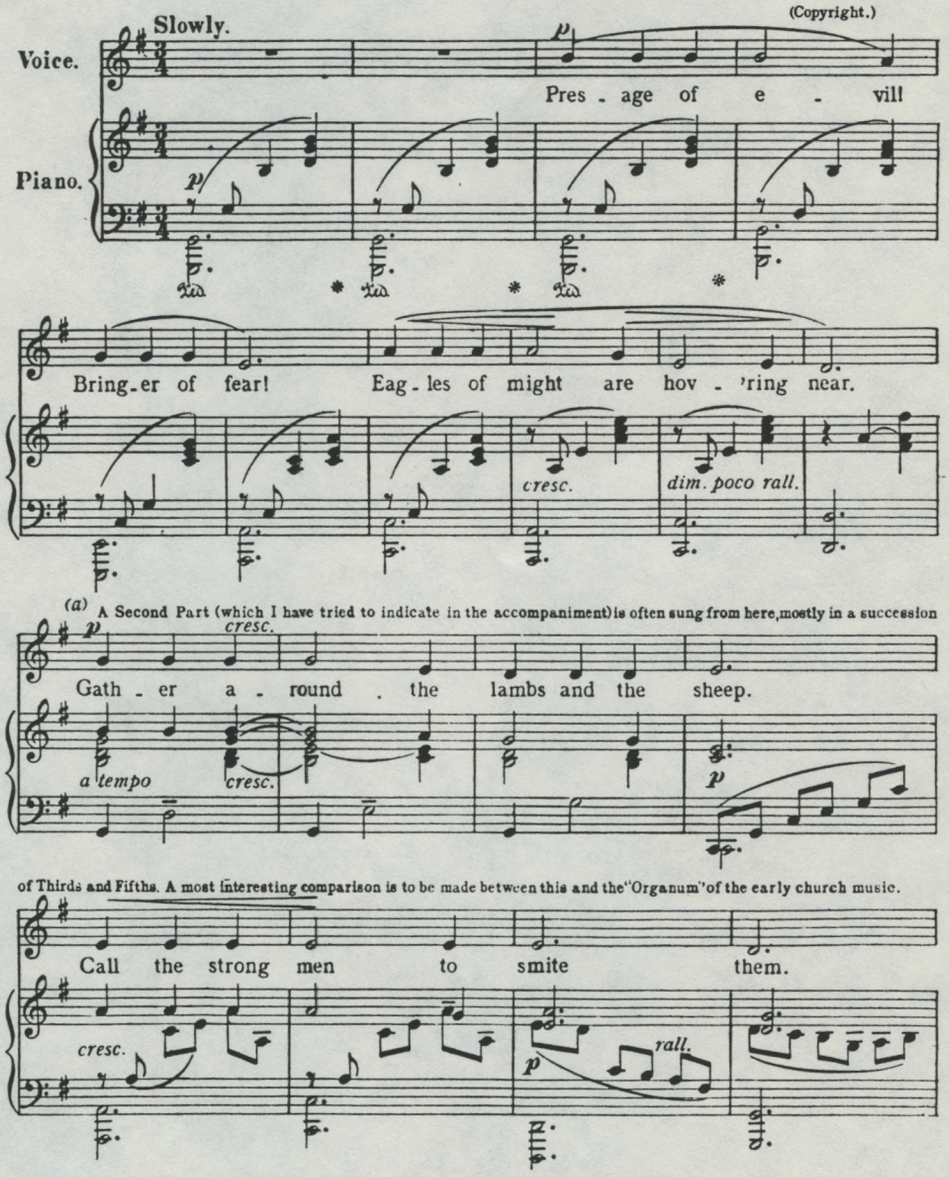
This song is not sung with the murderous expression the words would lead one to expect. The "burning" and "pounding" of enemies merely means that no difficulties coming in the way will prevent them from pursuing the journey. In other words, they show a dogged determination to "win through" and to accomplish a journey monotonous and full of discomfort, and there is no doubt that this singing greatly helps to encourage and cheer the weary foot travellers to pursue their way with

ASSISTED BY MANY WILLING HANDS."

BOAT SONG.

The Approach of the Eagles.

ELLA KIDNEY.



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Pin - ions out - spread as slow - ly he flies,

Li - zards glance up! The wee chick cries!

Bring out your ar - - rows! Throw your spears!

(The hush of fear!)

Hast - en! The strong men con - - - quer.

(The boat is disappearing in the distance.)

Boat Song

the lightheartedness that feels no burdens.

In a previous article* I wrote of the drums which are used in much of the Nyasaland music, and there is a system of tuning, rough and ready perhaps, but in skilled hands marvellously answering the purpose. The making of the drums was considered a very serious affair, and was prepared for many months beforehand. Likely trees were felled and cut into sections, some large, some small, all proportionate to their girth, ranging generally from a yard across down to four or five inches only. The inside of the section was burnt and cut out after the wood was considered seasoned ; the animals were shot, and their skins prepared and stretched. When the drum-makers started their work, assisted by many willing hands, they took the largest sections and stretched the skins across the top of these pieces of hollowed trees, and fastened them round tightly with wooden pegs. Then they prepared the next largest in size, and so on, until the smallest was completed, and the materials were all used up. The drums were then placed with the hollowed side downwards in a grass hut, and were left there some weeks " to settle." After the testing of these drums, which proved some unsuitable—the tone was not resonant, or the wood insufficiently seasoned and split—there was a further and more critical selection, and this is how it was made. The singers sang their songs belonging to the village répertoire, and as they were singing the chief musician gently tapped a drum, deciding if, in his opinion, the sound of the drums would go with or clash against the song, and it was chosen or rejected accordingly. Thus their tuning, and the results were often most effective, and not to be lightly condemned by more learned folk. I have observed that they have a wonderfully accurate sense of absolute pitch, and that the same songs and choruses sung on various occasions and by different people were practically unvarying in pitch, and also in the spirit in which they were sung, although other words were often substitutes.

* Outward Bound, April, 1921.

In the next song there is a good dea of " drumming " accompaniment from instruments both large and small, and it has quite a thrilling and exhilarating effect when sung with the real passion of its homeland. The singer is in trouble, and the words present, not the literal meaning, but the native's picturesque way of describing his sensations. The allusions to his pipe and his smoke mean his nearest and dearest. His smoke is much to him.

Oh ! My Soul ! Oh ! My pipe !
Troublous waters round me.
Oh ! The sunshine ! Ah ! My smoke !
My brother now is starving.
Troublous waters round me.
My brother now is starving.

Alas ! The Moon. Alas ! My pipe.
You are in the forest.
Oh ! The starlight ! Ah ! My smoke !
Here are thorns and briers.
Gath'ring round about me.
Here are thorns and briers.

In the thicket now I go,
None is near to help me.
In the clouds are fear and woe,
Down the depth I'm falling.
Troublous waters round me,
Darkness round about me.
In the depth I'm falling,
Darkness round about me.
Splashing, splashing, chunga, chunga,
Kalilole ! Kalilo ! Kalilole ! Kalilo !
My very soul is torn.

Drums are also much in evidence during the various dances of harvest, initiation, beer drinking, and the festive gatherings at different seasons of the year. The measure of the particular dance is first announced with the tap-tap, boom-boom of the drums, and when the " patter " of the time is well established in the minds of the hearers, and dancing is going on with a certain mild enjoyment, another party of drummers join in with a sort of cross-rhythm, which has the effect of awakening interest, and stimulating the dancers.

After the first introduction of this " cross-rhythm " it is soon allowed to

die down, the original patter remaining persistent and clear, and after awhile the second set of sounds are heard mingling with, yet clashing against it. Still again it dies away into silence. Then these other drums bring back the cross-rhythm at lessening intervals, more quickly and quicker still, until the two sets of drums are heard without intermission, the dancers meanwhile being worked up into a state of frenzy.

In the more orderly dances the feeling is then gradually subdued by the lessening of the intensity and the rapidity of the drumming, the cross-rhythm occasionally disappearing, then reappearing after longer intervals of silence, until finally the original patter is heard intact. This also in its turn gets slower and softer until it stops, and the dancers, tired out, steal away to their huts to sleep.

Signalling from village to village is also carried out by means of drums, and in some districts suitable by reason of their geographical position messages are sent very long distances. The signalling drum has a peculiar sound, and when far away it is difficult to describe it or even to say it *is* a sound one hears. Rather it is like the consciousness of a very slight *thud*, a beat against the ear. I could "sense" it (I can use no other word, for I certainly did not *hear* it!) very far off, but discovered that other Europeans with me were not aware of it, nor could some distinguish it even after I had told them it was going on. Others confirmed my experience, although it had not occurred to them to connect it with signalling. They had just thought of it vaguely, when they thought of it at all, as some sort of drumming going on, too far away to be of any interest.

Some of these drums of the older class used for communicating with other villages are large affairs, and the deeper boom of these has a different significance from the higher notes of others. The more ordinary communications just mean that they are wanting messengers or carriers from the other village, and if there is anything really urgent there is no doubt about the persistence and rapidity of the drumming, although there will be no perceptible increase of sound to the far-away listener. This continues until it is answered in a similar manner, when the desired communication is made, but the sounds used convey ideas of varying character rather than a string of words.

I have previously referred (in "Songs of Nyasaland"*) to the music coming only from the men, generally speaking, but of the women and girls joining in the fun and singing of the harvest songs; and on the western shores of Lake Nyasa the women will often turn out in large numbers to welcome visitors or friends, singing and clapping their hands to the lilt of a simple refrain. This singing is musically not so interesting as the more definite songs of their menfolk, and there is little of structure or melody but what is of a crude nature, yet there is something pleasing about it, and the goodwill of the women who express their welcome in so kindly a manner makes up for any deficiency in music. The boat-song printed in this number represents the villagers turning out of their huts to frighten away the large and fierce eagles they see flying overhead with evil intentions of carrying away any young birds or animals for their prey. I have been told that there are laughing songs sung in some parts of Portuguese Nyasaland, but I have not personally come across them, although I have often heard songs bringing in the characteristic sounds of certain animals or birds, and the bark of a leopard is often introduced into choruses of a rough description. But I have not made many notes on this sort of thing, as I have been interested chiefly in the real music of the country rather than the imitative childish diversions of the native.

In the hot sandy plains towards the coast-line in the East there are distinct traces—at times very marked—of Portuguese influence; and it is interesting to know that some of this must have been from the very early explorers and missionaries, these melodies resembling closely the church music of Southern

[*Continued on page 71.*

* Outward Bound, April, 1921.

Songs from Africa—*continued from page 29.*

Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is no affinity in any songs that I have heard in this district with music of a more modern type. The history of one particular song quite startled me. I heard it up the Zambesi river from a crowd of natives travelling in canoes or dug-outs, and they were of a tribe who had no dealings with white men at all, and disappeared into the bush if a stranger came along.

This tribe was despised and looked upon as wild men even by their own countrymen, and few knew their language. Many years afterwards I showed my manuscript to one of our most eminent musicians, one specially interested in old music. He was amazed at this song, and questioned me closely as to the exact part of the world I had heard it, and the circumstances.

I expressed my surprise at his interest in this particular song, when he explained by saying that he believed this melody to be a pure bit of fifteenth-century music practically intact, and that a record of it could be found in a certain museum.

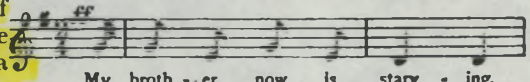
This led me to endeavour to trace the connection, for it seemed an extraordinary thing to find this in the twentieth century being sung by primitive naked men so raw that they would flee on the approach of a stranger and had no dealings with civilisation.

I learned that in 1586 a party of Portuguese missionaries travelled up the Zambesi, had chosen a site and made a home there, and for a time tried to teach the natives around. Their devoted labours did not last long, for one by one they laid down their lives, and left little trace of their work, but it is more than astonishing to find that the melody which they used in their little services, and which was familiar to them from their Roman Catholic church in Portugal, should be faithfully handed down from generation to generation literally from ear to mouth for over three hundred years in these wild districts. I am told that this particular music disappeared from the Portuguese churches about the end of the sixteenth century, so it would likely be unknown to the later explorers and missionaries. This is the only instance I have met among uncivilised races giving some practical indication as to the length of time songs can be handed on so accurately from generation to generation. It sets me wondering as to the age and origin of the real music of the inland native, in which I could find no trace of outside influence, and its "idiom" is perhaps all the more interesting to the keen student of human affairs. Its individuality is felt, by those sensitive to such things, to be different in its characteristics from any folk-music yet known.

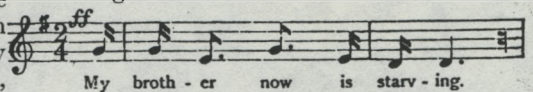
I had thought it possible, nay, probable, that in general points of rhythmical structure some of the negro music of America would largely reflect some of these Central African melodies; many of them are from districts alongside the great slave routes; and I discussed this point with Mr. Roland Hayes. But he told me that these "Songs of Nyasaland" are *not* like the American, and quite different from anything he has hitherto come across.

By the contact with the differing melodies of West Africa, the steady rhythmical effects of Central Africa were displaced in some instances by the disturbed accents of syncopation which has become such a popular element of the present-day music.

For instance, in the "Song of Nyasaland," "Oh! My Soul!" part of it runs:—



which would most probably be naturally inflected by the West African or American negro into:—



a forerunner of the modern jazz.

As I am writing this I hear the sound of a single drum. On looking from the window in an English town I see some British Boy Scouts marching up the hill near by, helped by the rhythmical beat.

Whether lisping in the baby language of the art, or in giving forth the noble expressions of the great men, surely music is the mother tongue common to us all.