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By
ELLA
KIDNEY

SONGS of NYASALAND

“ I HAVE opened the door ! ” This saying of David Livingstone about Africa so often rings through my head ; and I feel it is as true in reference to the volume of wonderful music thus revealed to us as in the graver purposes to which the great explorer was specially referring. David Livingstone indeed opened the door ; and because it is wide open now, we are able to travel and humbly gather up some of the musical treasures from this mysterious continent.

Anyone who has heard a Nyasaland native telling stories to his companions round a camp fire at night will know of the subtleties of expression and change

of voice that he puts in and the graphic way he portrays each character in the yarn he is telling. And so it is in his music ; and, I suppose, its truth and sincerity account for the occasional strange kinship with our modern musical thought. It comes almost as a shock to discover what a very little way, after all, civilization seems to have travelled from the primitive along the road of human emotion expressed in song. Without notation or training colleges, among these children of nature there are still the fundamental truths of the art, nobly and accurately expressed in sound.

The songs of Nyasaland come mostly from the lakes and mountains in the highlands of Africa, but some of them from the sandy, tropical rivers flowing from the heart of the continent. It is strange to think this music was sung or played by the various native tribes entirely for their own ceremonies, enjoyment or amusement—never for European ears. Whether in highlands or lowlands, of warlike or pastoral habits, the natives are very shy of singing their choruses except among themselves, and quickly hush when it is known a stranger is approaching. There are certain melodies sung when travelling known to those who are observant of such things, but the average person passing through—or even living in—Nyasaland is unaware of the extent of native music, and of the very large part that music takes in the native life. During my first year in Africa I was often travelling up and down the Zambesi River, and was then able to study the boat songs. At that stage I could only guess at their meaning, but later it was fascinating to follow the lilt of the words also. Afterwards, when my husband and I made our home among the mountains further north, we were interested to observe the variety of the music sung by the native tribes. Each had its character as definite and distinct in its rhythm and general style as the beadwork worn by one race differs in pattern and colour from that of another.

As time went on the natives around gradually gave us their confidence, and we had dusky visitors, often bringing presents of sheep, fowls, skins, or beadwork from various parts of the country. At certain seasons of the year we occasionally visited other parts of the mountains or went to Lake Nyasa, and thus were brought into touch with a variety of native life.

The village repertoire was always small—one, two, or at most three, songs to one large settlement—but with experience a trained ear could differentiate the music of adjoining villages, as well as the marked contrasts between mountains and plains. The difference was marked, even although the inhabitants might be of the same race, speak-

ing the same language, and having the same customs. There is a freshness and originality in all the tribal melodies. Each bears the impress of distinct individuality. It is as if music has its dialects as well as its languages.

I must confess that primarily my interest was among the women, their customs and thoughts, rather than their music; but more than once, apparently in recognition of some slight service rendered to wife or child, a man would tell me of certain dance or war songs sung in his village, and knowing I had what to him seemed a mad craze in that direction, somehow persuaded his friends to let me hear them. On two occasions a little party of ten or twelve men even came to our garden, and, sitting on the grass under the trees, sung their short repertoire, accompanied native fashion by a small stringed instrument, the shaking of rattles, clicking of sticks, clapping of hands, and the poundings and tapping of drums—a combination of sounds crude enough, but very effective with the voices. These little performances were given on the distinct understanding that there should be no stranger present, and also that native women should not be allowed near. This was a good many years ago; and, I suppose, they felt it a little beneath their dignity to be seen entertaining a woman, even if she were white. It is rare in these days to come across music untouched by softening and civilizing influences, and many will regret with me that it is so rapidly disappearing—the children are ignorant of the wild music of their fathers.

One of the most beautiful, and yet simplest, melodies in my collection was written while on a little river flowing north from the sandy reaches of the Zambesi, within a day's journey of the sacred spot where, by the river bank, Mrs. Livingstone was buried.

A lovely glimpse of silvery water, mountains covered with primeval forest, grassy plains, a barge—dignified by the name of houseboat—intense heat, slow, lazy travelling—these all make up the journey. On each side of the deck of the barge stand eight brown figures, their supple, well-built bodies showing

to perfection under the bright light of a tropical sun. Each holds a long pole for punting, and their only clothing is of leopard and other skins fastened around their loins—they make a picturesque group with their silhouettes clear-cut against the sky. Were it not for their singing and their slow, rhythmical movements, one could almost imagine

*The palm-tree sprang from sand, it rears
its head.*

The white bird sings.

Down from the silv'ry stream

The grasses nodding float,

*The sand-bird builds her nest, her cry is
heard.*

The sun sleeps on.



THE CHIEF MUSICIAN IS HIGHLY DECORATED ON HIS PERSON BY CLOTHING OF VARIOUS HANDSOME FURS, LONG IMPOSING FEATHERS ON HIS HEAD-DRESS, WEIRD BEADWORK AND CHAINS ON HIS LIMBS. IT IS HIS DUTY WITH HIS ASSISTANTS TO TEST EACH OF THE DRUMS.

them to be a group of Greek statues, so graceful and full of suggested strength is their wonderful poise. They sing very slowly, first one side then the other taking up the refrain, their voices now distant, now near, as they travel around the winding bends of the river.

*Out from the waters deep
Arose a misty cloud*

Low in the West she goes.

The rocks are dark and cold.

*The village fires rise high, with red and
gold.*

The nightjar sings.

The women do not take part in native music, and there are two distinct classes of male voices among Nyasaland Bantu tribes. The first, rather rare, of high

pitch, somewhat similar to falsetto in quality, is much admired by the natives, and always used for solo parts when available. The second voice approximates to baritone, but it is of a *very* rough description, and is the voice of the majority.

Occasionally, but not often, certain notes were sung slightly, but definitely, sharp or flat. These notes did not depend upon the idiosyncrasy of the singer, but belonged primarily to the song, and they were always sung in this manner, even by different singers.

There are some humorous little songs, used chiefly at dances during harvest-time. They are somewhat of nursery type, but have a fascination of their own. There is constant interweaving of solo and chorus, and it is a wonderful experience to listen to the precision of the entries, remembering that there are no conductors or trained singers. The boys sing this class of song with great enjoyment, poking fun at one another and hitting off the various points with subtle humour. Even the girls occasionally join in, somewhat tentatively, but as if the lilt and fun were irresistible; and they clap their hands in time to their brothers' clicking of sticks by way of accompaniment.

Here is a chorus of this description. It is a merry-hearted, impudent song of mischievous boys calling to one another and stealing maize from the fields in the absence of the lawful owner. First, the lower voices sing out the challenge, then the others take it up:—

(Low voices): *Robbers come to gather in your neighbour's field!*

(High voices): *Lightly! Quickly come and gather up his corn.*

(Low, almost whispering): *Stealing softly in among the golden grain.*

(High, a little louder): *Gather! pluck the fruit and hasten on again.*

(High): *Golden (low) corn!*

(High): *See! It's (low) ripe!*

(Low): *Quickly! Come together!*

(Altogether): *Up your neighbour's grain!*

There is a burst of exuberance in the last four lines, and it is sung very quickly and with great gusto. It is difficult to remain still when hearing this; the impulse is to get up to dance, and to

join in the fun. This type of music is remarkably pure, and is quite free from the questionable emotionalism noticed in some of the wilder ceremonial choruses; but even these latter are never vulgar or trivial, and always direct to the point.

Among the best known are the *Songs of the Road*. When native chiefs or Europeans wished to go a long distance they were carried in a canvas hammock called a machilla, slung on bamboo poles, and the teams of natives who bear these poles on their shoulders frequently amuse and encourage one another along the road by means of these songs, while carrying out their arduous labours.

While travelling thus I have been able to write much of this music, and when halting for a rest in the middle of the day during the heat the natives making a fire by the roadside and cooking their food, I have often elicited interesting information about the songs they had been singing. Some of these are sung by **Angoni**, some by **Ajawa** and other races. One of the best-known choruses originated among the boys who had been captured and driven from their homes by cruel Arab slave-raiders, and then forced to work in strange countries, where their hearts hungered for their homes and kinsfolk. But there are other choruses in happier strain—of contented, strong workers looking forward to a good meal when they had reached the end of a journey. I need hardly remind any readers who have experience of coloured labour of a native's unconcealed delight at the prospect of a lucky shot at game which will provide him with a welcome meal.

SOLO—*Come, my people,*

CHORUS—*Come for fresh meat.*

SOLO—*Come, my brothers,*

CHORUS—*Come and seek food.*

SOLO—*Come, my people,*

CHORUS—*Come to buy meat.*

SOLO—*Distant going,*

CHORUS—*Runs the wild-buck.*

(All together):

Horns upraised and eyes a-glowing.

(With great emphasis):

Come to find him! Quick, we'll slay him!

There are many of these travelling songs, and there are also many "calls"

—longdrawn whistles and other sounds used by the natives to communicate with one another, each having its own particular meaning. I was interested in making notes of them when possible. These "calls" are very well guarded, and it is impossible to obtain direct information about them.

It was only by keen observation over an extended period that it was possible to make out some definite communications intended by definite sounds.

Among these primitive people the sense of rhythm is evoked with intensity, and they are also brothers to the modern student, who, with a keen ear for the finish of phrases and gradation of tone, concentrates on the *manner* of singing and the regular recurring pulsations. But he might at first undervalue their music if he heard the rough quality of many of the voices.

It is interesting to note that I have never come across a song which might be classed as analogous to our so-called "love song," and perhaps this fact indicates their attitude of mind. They are very fond of their children, and are generally kind to their fathers and mothers, but singing a love song to a dusky fair one is unheard of.

There is one curious song consisting of three notes only. In the singing of this, unlike many others more elaborate, changing harmonies are somehow suggested, partly by the constant variation of tone and the differing qualities of the native voices, but chiefly by the essential nature of the character and spirit of the song as a whole. Monotony is certainly not present, and the ear is ever interested by new suggestions with a strange, even exhilarating, effect. The close—the cry of the soul in despair—is almost majestic in its passion.

Some beautiful music, worthy to be preserved, is sung during the final ceremonies of mourning among some mountain races. On the night of a full moon the chief singer stands on the top of a hill, and, with hands raised to direct the sounds from his mouth across the valley below, he sings the "Lament" with high voice and in declamatory manner; while at the foot of the mountain hundreds of villagers sit

huddled among the trees to sing a refrain between the sentences of the "Lament."

The drum-making for this ceremonial music is a difficult art.

After many months, when the drum-makers, assisted by many willing hands, have completed their work, a time is chosen for the testing of the instruments. On a night with a full moon the singers and musicians are called in by the village people, and there is a great gathering of happy people out to amuse themselves—something like an old English fair. The chief musician is highly decorated on his person by clothing of various handsome furs, imposing coloured feathers for his head-dress, weird bead-work and charms on his limbs.

It is his duty, with his assistants, to test each of the drums, a lengthy process, as there are often a hundred, or even more. The smallest drums are tested first, and great is the satisfaction of the onlookers when their excitement is worked up to the ceremony of testing the larger ones and a particularly fine drum receives the approval of the musicians.

The "Song of War" is not found among the pastoral tribes, but only, as is fitting, among the more independent and warlike peoples. It was rarely a prelude to or accompaniment to the actual fighting—such stern business was generally done with quiet tracking and sudden attack. But the courage of the rank and file was often worked up to the stage of consenting to the offensive by a series of night "singings" in the villages of the attacking party; and after victory there were generally rejoicings over the number of unhappy slaves they had captured in their raids. The Angoni have some particularly fine war songs. One of these is included in this number.

Imagine it sung with vigorous and defiant diction, the tones being flung about, as it were, in all directions, yet interweaving the solo and chorus accurately and almost interminably. It is difficult to listen to this sung in its homeland without feeling something of the moving spirit which underlies the whole character of their music.

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SONG OF WAR.

ELLA KIDNEY.
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SOLO. *Allegro con deciso.* **f**

Come to fight now!..... We'll brandish

CHORUS.

f Fight now! **f** Slay them!

(Pesante) *Con vigor e marcato.*

Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. *

spears! Straight forth doth Yes, they trem - ble when

speed your ar - rows. Trem - ble!

near; And far they'll flee as keen your

we draw we ap - proach them! Sharp - en

SONG OF WAR--Continued.

ar - rows,..... upraised, and shout - ing loud - ly *poco rall.*
Brave heads our de - fi - ance.

a tempo. who op - pose us our spears shall
All there Quick - ly
a tempo. *rall. al fine.*

ff Allargando. pierce their breasts! They will be scat - - tered!
They will be scat - - tered.
ff