

Authentic African music

The traditional music of the black peoples of Africa - is little known abroad. The non-African listener can find the music strange, difficult, and unattractive; and therefore often concludes that it is not of interest. Both African and non-African music are human inventions and individual notes contain the same elements such as pitch, duration, tone colour and intensity. Music plays a similar role in most societies, as work songs, lullabies, battle songs, religious music, and so on. Generally speaking the same categories of instruments are found in Africa as in Europe, namely stringed instruments, wind instruments, and percussion.

The African concept of music is totally different to the Western one though. Traditional African musicians do not seek to combine sounds in a manner pleasing to the ear. Their aim is simply to express life in all of its aspects through the medium of sound. The African musician does not merely attempt to imitate nature by music, but reverses the procedure by taking natural sounds, including spoken language, and incorporate them into the music. To the uninitiated this may result in cacophony, but in fact each sound has a particular meaning. To be meaningful, African music must be studied within the context of African life.

Music has an important role in African society. Music is an integral part of the life of every African individual from birth. At a very early stage in life the African child takes an active role in music, making musical instruments by the age of three or four. Musical games played by African children prepare them to participate in all areas of adult activity - including fishing, hunting, farming, grinding maize, attending weddings and funerals and dances.

An intimate union forms between man and art in Africa. It amounts to a total communion that is shared by the whole community. This may help explain why some languages in black Africa have no precise noun to define music. The art of music is so inherent in man that it is superfluous to have a particular name for it. The drum is so important in African society that it is sometimes equated with a man. Women must consequently treat it with the same respect that they would show towards their menfolk. In some African countries women are not even allowed to touch a drum under any circumstance, though Islam and European colonial influence have softened some of these traditions. African music is nearly always coupled with some other art such as poetry or dance and is one of the most revealing forms of expression of the black soul.

It seems logical to conclude that everyone in black Africa must be a musician by definition. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that all Africans are necessarily musicians in the full sense of the word. In some African societies music is a dynamic and driving force that animates the life of the entire community. This communal music may be quite elaborate in form. In other societies musicians form a semi-professional group. They earn their livelihood from their music for only part of the year and rely on some other activity for the remainder of the time. In numerous

African societies, the right to play certain instruments or to participate in traditional ceremonies is not open to all, but is the privilege of the professional musician. Such musicians live solely by their art and belong to particular families or castes. Griot is the term used throughout West Africa to designate professional musicians. The role of the 'griot' extends far beyond the realm of music and magic. He or she is the relater of history, philosophy and mythology, the archive of the peoples' traditions. He or she dispenses a healing therapy for the medicine man. He or she is a praise-singer, a troubadour - the counterpart of the medieval European minstrel. People fear griots, admire them but often treat them with contempt because they belong to one of the lowest castes. The fact that music is at the heart of all of the griot's activities is yet further proof of the vital part he or she plays in African life. The equivalent of the griot in equatorial Africa is the player of the harp-zither. This person is, in some ways, more fortunate than the griot because the admiration that he enjoys is not tinged with scorn, maybe because he does not normally sing the praises of the rich and powerful like the griot does.

The African musician is feeling the effects of the revolution that is currently sweeping the entire continent. Music, as it is conceived in traditional society, is not a function which enables its exponents to meet the demands of modern life. Furthermore, the competition is enormous and under these conditions music as a profession offers very little opportunity. In some societies, music is not conceived as a profession at all, a fact which is even more limiting. As things exist today, traditional music is threatened with eventual extinction and will gradually disappear unless the musician's future is assured. This is especially true for African traditional music which is of course not written down, but handed down from generation to generation.

This does not mean that the traditional African musician should be sheltered from the infiltration of foreign influences. Such infiltration can be a source of artistic enrichment contributing to the cultural cross-fertilisation described below.

Similar musical instruments are found throughout most of black Africa. However, the flora and culture found in any particular region influences the dominance of certain categories of instruments. Drums are for instance more popular in the forest regions of West Africa than in the tree-less savannah areas of southern Africa. Musical instruments often show a close link between sculpture and music. See the page on African Musical Instruments for more information on Instruments.

There is a great deal of homogeneity in the music of this vast continent but it is also clear that there are differences between regions and tribes. The Negro cultures south of the Sahara have evidently carried on a lively exchange of music with the inhabitants of the northern part of Africa. There is also a large area of borderline cultures that are related to both the Negro and the North African societies.

Much music is based on speech and the bond between language and music is so intimate that it is actually possible to tune an instrument so that the music it produces is linguistically comprehensible. Because music is a total expression of life, shared by all the senses, different cultures and lifestyles have significant influences on the music. In East Africa, the cultures are complex and revolve around cattle. The Khoi-San area of southern Africa has a simple culture dependent mainly on the nomadic gathering of food. The north-western African coast lacks cattle and is characterised by an elaborate political organisation which, before the imposition of European rule, gave rise to powerful kingdoms. The west coast of Africa between the Khoi-San area and the north-western part has a combination of the east African and north-west African traits. A number of Pygmy tribes are still living in relative isolation in the jungle. The northern part of the continent is largely under the influence of Islamite musical culture. Music within each of these areas is more or less homogeneous, differing from the neighbouring area.

The main characteristics of the west coast are the metronome sense and the accompanying concept of "hot rhythm", the simultaneous use of several meters, and the responsorial form of singing with overlap between leader and chorus. The central African area is distinguished by its great variety of instruments and musical styles and by the emphasis, in polyphony, on the interval of the third. East Africa has, for centuries, been somewhat under Islamite influence, though by no means to as great an extent as the northern half of Africa. Vertical fifths are more prominent here, and rhythmic structure is not so complex, nor is percussion instruments so prominent. The Khoi-San music area is evidently similar in style to East Africa, but has simpler forms and instruments. It contains a good deal of music performed with the hocked technique, as does the Pygmy sub-area of central Africa, which is also characterised by the presence of a vocal technique similar to yodelling.

The history of Africa and the movement of people into, out of and across Africa would indicate that many a cross-fertilisation of musical influences affected African music. In spite of slavery and colonialism - or maybe because of it - the influence of African music has spread to every corner of the world and is flourishing back home.

Millions of people were transported from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas to work as slaves for the European colonists there. Unlike the slave population in North America, the South American slave population was more of Bantu origin (primarily from Angola and Mozambique), although Yorubas (from Nigeria) were also shipped in large numbers to Cuba and Brazil. Little original African music survived intact in the new world, but some distinctive instruments have been handed down, particularly the xylophone, the berimbau and the cuica of Brazil. In the Latin American countries of the Caribbean and South America, some African music was preserved as slaves were allowed to maintain their social identities and culture. Slaves were more often kept as tribal units. In

South America and Cuba, African social music blended with the Portuguese and Spanish idioms already influenced by the North African Moors since they occupied Spain in the eighth century. Many new styles of music flourished in the Latin countries including meringue and beguine in the Caribbean and tango, candombey and samba in South America. Rumba, muntuno, cha cha cha, bolero and salsa were other popular styles in this region.

In the Caribbean many elements of European tradition influenced the music of the African slaves. Spanish, British, French and even Asian music influenced early calypso. Calypso was heavily influenced by African work songs and the role of calypsions can be likened to the role of the griot in West African society. Soca followed calypso. Even though European instruments were used, the playing style often recalled African instruments such as the xylophone. Reggae developed through ska from soca when the West Indians absorbed American Rhythm and Blues (R&B). Dub followed with a rock influence.

In the USA, African music was virtually eliminated by slave owners. Slaves were mainly imported from the Mandingo, Wolof, Fanti, Ashanti, Yoruba and Calabari tribes of West Africa. Tribal groups were split up and drums were originally prohibited, but the American banjo is based on the West African gourd guitar. African work songs appropriately survived and slowly evolved into blues. New European instruments were taken up by the blacks. Jazz, which transformed European structured music with African techniques of interweaving rhythm and melodies, call-and-response patterns and 'vocalising' with instruments, became the first all-American music form. Originally jazz was dance music, a fusion of ragtime piano style with blues, spirituals and the brass music of marching bands common at the start of the twentieth century. African-American dance music was also kept alive in the form of R&B. The R&B idioms fused with country music and ballads to become rock and roll. After jazz, rock and roll proved to be the most influential fusion but as it spread across the globe, it soon became 'white' music. Soul also developed out of R&B fused with gospel music. Many of the best soul musicians developed their talents in church gospel choirs. Funk and rap followed.

All of these various musical forms (but especially the Cuban rumba, the American soul and jazz, the Caribbean meringue, calypso, reggae and zouk) returned to Africa later and invigorated the local African music. "Western" music was introduced to Africa by visiting musicians, through record sales, and by radio. Many African musicians have of course toured the outside world and came across new musical instruments there, which they took home with them. Western instruments were followed by radio, and African popular music was born.

In southern Africa, a European musical tradition exists in parallel to the black African one. It is interesting to note that much of the earlier Afrikaans folk music of the Cape has its origins in the Indonesian archipelago, resulting from the importation of slaves by the Dutch. Chinese and

especially Indians imported into South Africa by the British had an impact on South African music also, as had the music of the native black cultures. During the Afrikaner nationalist era, much music was "borrowed" from Europe, especially Germany. Today, mainstream Afrikaans and English popular music sounds very European or American to most listeners.

The popular music of the continent is therefore in most cases the product of two parents, one African, the other external. African pop styles have become centralised, clustered around the main cultural or commercial centres, so there is 'Manding swing' or 'electro griot' music from West Africa (between Senegal, Guinea and Niger), the 'Swahili sound' from East Africa (between Uganda and Tanzania), 'jive' and jazz from the south (around South Africa), Muslim music from the north (between Morocco and Egypt), makossa and 'liberation' music in between (the area between Cameroon and Gabon, and the area between Zimbabwe and Mozambique respectively), and pan-African syntheses like 'highlife' and Congo-Zairean rumba or soukous which have radiated furthest from their points of origin (the area between Sierra Leone and Nigeria and the Congo-Zairian area respectively). Of the many popular styles of music in Africa, these are really the only ones which have spread to new audiences outside their cultural base. Many other styles - too many to mention here - are prevalent throughout the continent.

It is often forgotten that prior to the European trade in African slaves, many slaves, especially from East Africa including Nubians and people from the Kenya region, were transported to the Arabian Peninsula in the Arab slave trade. The Arab penetration into Africa started 1300 years ago. The voice, tonality and language of Islam have heavily influenced North African music, but also sub-Saharan African music in countries such as Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and even Tanzania and Madagascar. Later European invasions influenced this music again. Modern North African styles such as rai have established a keen following in Europe, and are influencing music in France especially.

The instruments of the Arab world and North Africa are believed to have been the original models for almost all Western instruments from the guitar and the violin to the trumpet and other wind instruments. Not many kinds of drums are used in Islamite music. The North African music today shows a cultural continuity which goes back to before AD 500. Classical Arab music itself was a fusion of pre-Islamite Arab music with Persian and Turkish elements.