

THE PLACE OF WESTERN MUSIC IN THE MUSIC
EDUCATION OF AFRICA*

The history of the development of music education in West Africa has not yet been recorded. In this paper, I shall give an outline of this history with particular reference to Ghana where I have gained a first hand experience of it during the three years of teaching and musical activity in Ghana. I wish to deal with two main points. Firstly, how to perform West African rhythm and melody on western stringed instruments taught on the basis of our teaching method and secondly, the results that could be obtained in teaching strings at the Music Department of the University of Ghana at Legon.

Before proceeding with this, I would like to touch upon a question which has a bearing on my material and which appears as one of the themes of this conference, namely: What do we mean by exotic music? Where is the borderline between exotic and non-exotic music? Peoples of all continents have got their own special or characteristic music based on their own tradition. Hungarian traditional music would sound as exotic to the audience of a western country as an Akan funeral dirge¹. In one of his writings, Rabindranath Tagore similarly mentions that the European classical music is nothing but cacophony for an Indian.

What western musical forms produce any effect on musical life in West Africa, or more particularly in Ghana? As a consequence of the colonial period three influential forms may be mentioned here:

1. Church music
2. March music
3. Western song-hit

* To be read at the Interlochen Conference at Michigan, United States on the 18th of August, 1966.

1. J.H. Nketia: Funeral Dirges of the Akan People, Achimota, 1955.

1. Church music:

A large percentage of the population of Ghana is Christian. Beside the Catholic Church, there are a number of Protestant missions as well as various sects such as Adventist, Quaker, etc. Not only churches and mission schools offer church music but also the State primary and middle schools too. Some of the texts of these songs are translated into African languages but English hymn books are also used, for English is the language of schools, Government and Commerce. This is because there are several different languages in Ghana, none of which has emerged as an agreed or official common language. So before teaching Ghanaian folk songs regularly at schools a lot of difficulties have to be overcome. No wonder that English folk songs and children's songs are still taught in some schools, while western music is taught in the high classes. A second difficulty arises from the fact that for a long time there were no systematic collections of folk songs available that would answer the requirements of musical education, although some steps have now been taken to remedy this situation.

2. The music of the military bands:

The march music enjoys a widespread popularity. The European brass instruments - trumpet, trombone, horn, tuba - are well-known. Local military and police brass bands are not bad at all. I have heard them play on festive occasions and to my great surprise in addition to the usual marchings there were some medleys of Mozart operas on the program, performed in military march tempo.

3. Western song-hit:

The Western song-hit makes its way through radio, film, gramophone records, local and imported jazz bands and the television joined them about half a year ago.

Against this background, let me now turn to the present phase of development and the material with which we are working.

The collection of folk songs was initiated by Dr. Amu^{*} only a few decades ago. His book of original compositions of "25 African Songs" based on his collection was published in 1932. It was he who improved on the structure of the bamboo flute and organized polyphonic flute ensembles. We have every reason to say that his activity was epoch-making in the development of African music studies in Ghana. Professor Nketia, Head of the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana is carrying on scientific research work into African music. His contribution to African studies in the field of ethno-musicology, in the form of essays, books, selections of rhythms and tunes for class work, collections of folk songs is of great significance not only to the study of the folklore of Ghana but also to the study of the music of Africa as a whole. Although under different circumstances, our Bartok and Kodaly followed the same path of activity. Young African musicologists are carrying on their research work under his directions.

Following the initiatives of Professor Nketia a new experimental Department was inaugurated three years ago for teaching Western strings - violin, viola, violin-cello, doublebass. On the invitation of the Professor, the University of Ghana at Legon entrusted me and Judith Domanyi to start this new department of violin-violas and violin-cello-doublebass.

What was the Professor's intention when setting up this department?

The principal intention was to enable African students to acquire the instrumental techniques of the West which could be used by creative people - creative performers and composers - in the development of African music. When there are competent performers, composers might be encouraged to compose new music in the African idiom for them.

As a corollary to this, there was also the ideal of bi-musicality emphasized in the school - the ideal of training young Africans to appreciate both Western and African music. Ghana is a pioneering country in this respect for western stringed instruments lack any tradition in the country and until recently they were quite unknown in many parts of the country.

* Dr. Amu is a Senior Research Associate of the Institute of African Studies, Legon - Editor's Note.

Parallel with instruction in musical instruments, such theoretical subject matters as notation, aural training, harmonic, counterpoint, form and analysis, history of music, etc. are being taught.

The instruction is not limited to western instruments. In a most appropriate way each student has to pass an examination in the handling of a traditional instrument. Generally they choose a percussion instrument but the bamboo flute and xylophone also enjoy popularity.

As to the teaching of strings in a non-western country, I had had some experience in a pioneer work like this, in 1957-58, in North Vietnam, but the circumstances were not as favourable as in Ghana. For example, no collection of folk music was at my disposal, and the time given to me was too short for I was expected to have trained music teachers and professional musicians in just one year. Both the school management and the Minister of Education emphasised the importance of putting folk music on the annual programme of the school even though a textbook or any other material was not available.

So it was a pleasant surprise at Legon to get into my hand a selection of African rhythms and melodies compiled by Professor Nketia and books on African folk music.

As a matter of fact I could not make use of this material at the beginning. Even the apparently easier tunes and rhythms could not be performed without accurate preliminary studies, but later on I could introduce the students to their own kind of musical tongue.

First Year:

The group of my students ranging in age 16 to 40 raised rather mingled feelings. All had some theoretical notions, a few of them could even play the piano; (in the big towns the organ, harmonium, and piano are well known) but none of them had ever learned a stringed instrument.

The picture was the same at the department of violoncello and doublebass. At the end of the first term I sent away four students whose rate of learning seemed hopeless. The instruction started at a low stage following up the well-proved Hungarian pedagogical methods.

The physiological endowments, stiff muscles, technical difficulties of playing on a stringed instrument with a tradition in Ghana raised serious problems. All the students could drum complicated African rhythms, could sing their own polyphonic songs without music and textbook, yet very elementary problems of notation such as reading a simple 2/4 tune, or playing the interval of the third correctly, or following persistent time-measure seemed to present difficulties. Certainly African music operates on certain definite rules, some of which are perhaps a little different from those that obtain in western music. There is room for the personal contribution and for the inspiration of the moment. The African can always compose, improvise and "live" his music, music which is closely linked with movement.

Cross-rhythms, traditional variations of 6/8, syncopations and upbeat used in African music are rather different from the accented and unaccented bars of western classical music.

When playing legato, it was not an easy task to explain how the sounds are attached as no legato can be played on their best-known instrument, the drum.

Due to these obstacles the usual programme for a year has been divided into two years for those who could not cope with it in a year. Here I experienced for the first time how badly we needed tutors specially adapted to suit this new situation. African music had special requirements that could not be covered by our textbooks though they are of very high standard.

Besides, the students had to get used to regular exercises and learn to concentrate.

Last but not the least, I myself needed time to get thoroughly acquainted with my group, and to inspire them with confidence in me.

In the course of teaching I was rather surprised to see that the Hungarian folk song built on pentatonic scale, the sharpened rhythms were better appreciated than the Western classic music. Later on, having got acquainted with the African music I came to the proper explanation².

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2. (a) Preparatory Exercises in African Rhythm:
Mmabo Mmabo / Akan folk song/, Anu Deem Ayida/Kasem folk song/
 - (b) Egyenka Ba / Akan f.s. / Kanlana / Kasem f.s./

Towards the end of the first year I made some experiments with some of my pupils. I put on our programme some exercises of African rhythms and melodies. The music they heard, sang and played every day, could hardly be recognised. That was the first time they saw their traditional music in a textbook. It took them time to identify the written music with what they had only heard up to that time.

For the second year 12 students continued their studies in the department of cello-doublebass, while in the department of violin their number came up to 15.

Systematic teaching was carried on and I made the African tune-rhythm exercises obligatory as well as a selected material of folk songs. The programme was enlarged by playing music at sight, accompanied by piano, according to personal gifts, and playing in ensemble. This latter means that students of the string had an orchestral practice once a week where at the beginning they played in unison, or played polyphonic tunes.

The programme of the second year grew richer by a little collection for beginners selected by Judith Domanyi out of the collection of Professor Nketia. This was the first remarkable attempt to use West African music as teaching material for western string, while applying western teaching methods³.

The programme of the third year was gradually increased by incorporating into it more African music in addition to further synthetic instruction in classical music. In the course of the year, instruction in singing and wind instruments (wood and brass) was started. Thus there was the chance of enlarging the string orchestra with wind instruments.

The teaching of western classical chamber music has not been neglected in the programme. At the beginning only simple duets were performed, later enlarged by viola, violoncello into a quartet and piano trio.

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3. Graded exercises in African Rhythm for violocello Book One.
Elementary by Judith Domanyi and J.H. Kwabena Nketia.

A few works of chamber music of strings based on African idiom have already been composed by Professor Nketia and tried as an experiment. We have planned with Professor Nketia to combine African drum and other percussion instrument with string and wind. So far a work arranged for violin-cello-African drums, a violoncello-clarinet duet and a flute-piano partita have enriched the repertoire of our programme.⁴

What are our further aims?

1. To realize a more differentiated, multicoloured modern African music, with a fuller intonation, based on well-tried educational methods.
2. To make up a programme which would consist of both Western and African music elements.
3. To prepare a special literature both in theoretical and practical fields; to prepare new tutors and textbooks on the basis of the indigenous music of African students.
4. To introduce individual instrumental teaching at schools.

Working closely with our colleagues, we hope in this way to lay the foundations for a new system of musical education which makes use of western instruments in a new way. It is our hope that the School of Music and Drama will bring up not only a new generation of musicologists who will study the old traditional music but also a new generation of composers for recreating African music, soloists to perform the new music and music teachers to spread music education all over the country.

Elizabeth Partos.

4. Chamber music in African tune composed by Professor Nketia.