

Of Strings And Rattling Gongs:

The Story Of MUSON

The inspiration for the foundation of MUSON came from Mr. Akintola Williams, OFR. It began with his approach on 26th May, 1983 to Sir Mervyn Brown, KCMG, who was British High Commissioner to Nigeria between 1979 and 1983 and who with Lady Brown had helped to stimulate awareness and appreciation of classical music from their arrival in Nigeria in 1979. The High Commissioner and his wife who are proficient with musical instruments organised musical soirees and concerts in which music lovers and performers both in Nigeria and from foreign countries participated at regular intervals at the High Commissioner's residence and other venues in Lagos. Other embassies, notably the Italian and the then West German missions, were also encouraged to organise similar events with internationally acclaimed classical music performers who delighted a fast growing group of enthusiasts.

Mr. Akintola Williams's approach to Sir Mervyn was in the form of a request to assist in organising a group of artistes and friends to form a society for classical music performers and supporters. He felt that such a group would include people like himself who 'though appreciating good music, neither played any musical instrument nor could sing!' Sir Mervyn confirmed his preparedness to help organise such a group and went further to record his appreciation of the initiative being the

first time anyone had broached the subject with him.

Based on the foregoing and after establishing a temporary secretariat in his residence, Mr Akintola Williams by mid-October, 1983 contacted Chief Ayo Rosiji, Patron, Mr. Louis Mbanefo, Vice-Chairman, Mrs. Francesca Emmanuel and others on a proposal to



form a musical group. With Sir Mervyn's assurance to solicit the support of artistes and other interests in Europe, the Goethe Institut of Germany and the Istituto Italiano Cultura of Italy, both of whom had been prominent in the promotion of classical music in Nigeria, the stage was set for the establishment of a musical society in Lagos.

On 25th October, 1983 a steering committee of the musical group met to map out the strategy for such a society. And so the Musical Society of Nigeria - MUSON - was born!

The formal establishment and success of MUSON are due mainly to its Chairman, Mr Akintola Williams, who did all the spade work to enable the steering committee to agree on the name of the Society, its objectives, structure, secretariat, administration and short and long-term plans. Subsequently, the membership of the steering committee was enlarged for it to draw up the constitution, register the Society, identify artistes, and work out a programme of performances.

After MUSON was registered under the Land (Perpetual Succession) Act, Cap. 98, a twelve-member Board of Trustees was appointed to replace the steering committee.

The logo for the Society, which was adopted in January, 1984, was designed by Mr Duncan McKellar, an architect and artiste born and bred in Mombasa, Kenya and very much influenced by indigenous African art. Mr. McKellar had then been in Nigeria for nearly ten years as a practising architect. The logo depicts three African musical instruments which he portrayed in 'a style traditional Nigerian and in a circle or wheel always turning and eternal'. He also designed the permanent programme cover for MUSON concerts.

Inaugural Concert

The inaugural concert of the Society took place on the 24th and 25th of February, 1984, at the Metropolitan

Club, Victoria Island, Lagos. The Chief Guests of Honour at the two performances respectively were Chief (Dr) M. A. Majekodunmi, C.F.R., K.C.M.G., the then president of the Metropolitan Club, and Sir Mervyn Brown, K.C.M.G., O.B.E. now the former British High Commissioner in Nigeria, who came specially for the concert at the invitation of the Society. Eleven artistes, comprising Nigerians and expatriates, presented a repertoire of baroque Italian and English pieces. German leiter, opera, classical and traditional Nigerian music. Since that first concert, MUSON has arranged an average of six concerts every year. In these ten years of MUSON's existence, this musical provision has been made possible through the voluntary contributions of the cream of local artistes, and international guest artistes of renown sponsored by various organisations.

Schools Competition

In pursuance of one of the objectives of the Society, which is the promotion of the education of children in the performance and theory of music, the Society started organising annual musical competitions for schools. The first competition took place in King's College, Lagos, in 1986 and fifteen schools, mainly from Lagos State and Ibadan, took part. The different categories for this first competition were Vocal Solo, Instrumental Solo, Instrumental Ensemble and Choral, and there were three age categories: eight years and under, twelve years, and fifteen to eighteen years. Prizes awarded were cash and certificates for first, second and third places, and performance certificates for all participants. Since then, competitions have been held annually and the effort has been rewarding as budding talents are being identified and encouraged to develop themselves further. Two of such talents are now studying abroad, in Clare College, Cambridge and Conservatoire Nationale Supérieur de Musique, Paris.

School of Music

At a meeting held on the 4th of November, 1986, the Board of Trustees set up a committee to make recommendations for the establishment of a School of Music which will eventually develop into an Academy of Music. The Committee made recommendations on the school curriculum, staffing, and the temporary location of the school. Recommendations were also made on the funding of the school. The School was established and has been actively functioning, teaching in temporary accommodation provided at Corona Schools in Victoria Island and Apapa since February 1989, and has been examining since November, 1991. The School now has a staff of seven, and holds classes in violin, piano, recorder, flute, trumpet and voice, at various grade levels. So far over 500 candidates have been examined at various grades. In addition, the School has a programme of weekend and vacation courses for teachers to update their knowledge and improve their practical skills in their chosen instruments.

Site

In furtherance of the objectives of the Society, the Board of Trustees as far back as early 1984 started looking for land for MUSON building in suitable locations in Lagos. Out of several possibilities on Lagos Island and at Ikoyi, the piece of land that was chosen as most suitable by the Society was located at Onikan area of Lagos Island opposite the National Museum. An application for a grant of the land was

made to the Lagos State Government in May, 1985. Approval was finally granted, and the state government, in addition, granted the Society certain special concessions on ground rents and on the fees for the processing of the building plans.

Structure

The Conference Hall Building, air-conditioned as are all the buildings in the MUSON Centre, has on the first floor an auditorium which sits one thousand while the second floor houses two Function Rooms each of which can accommodate about two hundred people, and which can be partitioned into smaller rooms. The auditorium is suitable for hiring out for annual and extra-ordinary general meetings of small to medium-size companies, for conferences, symposia, trade and other types of exhibitions, official receptions and social functions. It is most ideal for popular music concerts, and for classical music concerts on occasions when the Recital Hall is considered inadequate (until such time as the larger Concert Hall envisaged for Phase II is built). There is a stage capable of accommodating a medium size orchestra of seventy to eighty instrumentalists, two Green Rooms for the use of artistes, and two Buffet bars with pantries.

The Music School, in the building adjacent to the Conference hall, provides permanent and purpose-built accommodation for students, who previously have been receiving their instruction in temporary accommodation at the Corona Schools in Apapa and Victoria Island. **CR**

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