

**The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe**  
By P.F. Berliner. London, Univ. of California Press, 1978, 280pp.,  
£12.00.

**Africa: Shona Mbira Music Recorded by P.F. Berliner.** New York, Nonesuch  
Records, H-72077, Stereo, 1977, no price indicated.

**The Soul of Mbira: Traditions of the Shona People of Rhodesia Recorded  
by P.F. Berliner.** New York, Nonesuch Records, H-72054, Stereo, 1978,  
no price indicated.

Although most African instruments have roles in addition to their being used and appreciated for sheer enjoyment and entertaining purposes, few have such well-defined additional roles as the mbira of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Standing out as a sacred symbol for unity, strength and solidarity in Shona society, it seems to embrace the whole life-philosophy of the living Shona man, his close relationship with the life of the past, and the life beyond the past—the ancestry and the overall creative force of life. What then could have been more appropriate than to present a very broad study on this instrument at a time when Rhodesia, with its majority of people living in separation from, and in suppression by, a White minority, finally moved through the shattering experience of armed struggle into the independent land of Zimbabwe, in which there is now a deeply felt urge for unity, reconstruction and reconciliation. The mbira, in itself a symbol for such desires in its old environment, could certainly symbolize those very ideas in the modern and independent Zimbabwe.

In the introduction Berliner draws the reader's attention to the profound relationship between the mbira, its music, its musicians, and society—a relationship which he follows up with clear and adequate description of all its different aspects. He argues that this relationship applies not only to this instrument and its music but also to most Shona music in general, which has carried on living, changing and developing in spite of Western colonial and materialistic pressures. As all Shona music is believed to have originated from its people's ancestry, it is perceived as an all-embracing functional art form and expressive cultural force, and is thus held in highest esteem by the people. Hence it is also protected, at least to a certain degree, from derogatory exploitation. In his preface Berliner furthermore notes the complexity of such music, especially the mbira music, which is rich in polyphonic structure and sophisticated melodic movement, and so draws attention to the subtlety and beauty of such music. Thus African music as a whole, and Shona music in particular, has nothing to do with 'primitive' music.

Berliner states that the main purpose of his study is a multi-disciplinary endeavour, which has involved him in 'research on related cultural aspects of the music such as its history, its folklore, the poetry which accompanied the music, the process of learning the mbira, the meaning of the mbira in the lives of its musicians, the role the music played in Shona culture and analysis of the music itself' (p. xv). With such objects he attempts in nine well-defined and revealing chapters to cover the profound philosophy which has evolved around the instrument and its music since its origin in the distant past.

He begins by giving a comprehensive review of African music among the Bantu-speaking peoples of the continent, focusing on aspects of the human experience of the music, its instruments, and its emotional and expressive values to man in his social environment, and in his relationship with the supernatural forces. Nevertheless, the basic, as well as the intrinsic, ethnographic values are not evaded to any extent—on the contrary, he is able to associate such surface

notions with the inner and deep values of human musical experience within the Black cultures.

Turning more particularly to the Shona mbira Berliner reiterates what has already been established within the anthropological discipline; that is, that the mbira has a long and fascinating history in Zimbabwe among the Shona people. However, he also adds that archaeological evidence ought to be supplemented with historical aspects—a method which he embarks upon with apparent success, drawing attention to Shona culture in general and its folklore and religious experience in particular. By describing the common belief among the Shona that the instrument originated from their ancestors and was then handed down to the people, he points to the profound sanctity of the instrument. This belief carries with it great responsibilities, obliging the people to learn how to make and play the instrument in order to keep the link between the ancestors and the living unbroken. By their so doing, the instrument holds protecting powers, both for the actual player and for the society at large, as well as being the very means of establishing desired contacts between ancestors and the living.

Berliner firmly emphasizes that visual notation in any form is not sufficient for describing the essence of a cultural music such as Shona music, as 'no satisfactory analogy for conveying its quality to one who has not heard mbira music performed' is at hand (p. 52). Nevertheless, he attempts 'skeleton' notations for the sake of conveying the cyclical patterns of melody/harmony and rhythm upon which all mbira music depends, and how such patterns undergo a continuous stream of subtly changing musical ideas, which interact and also change the rhythmic experience. For the sake of making such subtleties more noticeable and clear Berliner has supplemented his visual notations with two L.P. records of outstanding technical and musical quality.

On the record *The Soul of Mbira*, four major types of Zimbabwean mbira are represented, the *Mbira dzaVadzimu*, the *Matepe*, the *Njari* and the *Ndimba*. The music performed is of the highest musical and technical quality and constant references are made in the study to the music itself. A recording of particular and fascinating interest is the performance of the song 'Nyamaropa Yevana Vava Mushonga' on Side 2 on an ancient 25-keyed *Mbira dzaVadzimu* with an old, and apparently most traditional, tuning. According to tradition this particular instrument is said to have been played at Chitungwiza, the ancient court of the great tribal spirit, Chaminuka. The second record, *Africa: Shona Mbira Music*, contains a number of *Mbira dzaVadzimu* tunes and songs. The approach adopted here is more strictly comparative and analytical, excerpts of the songs being presented in order to illustrate fully the fascinating complexity of Shona mbira music. (A third record, *The Sun Rises Later Here* (Chicago, Flying Fish Records, 1978), has no connection with Berliner's academic study of the mbira but it is most interesting to listen to: the manner in which he has been able to blend the indigenous characteristics of other cultural musics with his own Western creative talents in a 'jazzy' way is absolutely amazing.)

Berliner obviously strives to view and present the process of musical expression from an unbiased angle by avoiding 'inadvertent distortions that can result when African music has imposed upon it Western concepts having little to do with the way in which Africans view their own art' (p. 53). This approach is intelligently applied all through the study, and is clearly noticeable, for example, when the relationships between keys of the mbira are described, or the African musician's views on tuning are discussed in terms of the Shona-ized *chuning*, rather than the proper English word, as referring to 'a number of interrelated aspects' (p. 61), and indicating many more emotional and expressive points—and perhaps also indicating more subtle modal concepts—than is the case with the Western term. Furthermore, in regard to the actual distance of degrees within the Shona mbira heptatonic scale, Berliner questions convincingly the hypothesis

presented by a few ethnomusicologists of the equidistant character of such a scale, although the matter cannot be said to have been fully covered yet.

Finally, in his last chapter Berliner attempts to describe the 'law of the mbira' which, he states, is not to be regarded as a 'systematized dogma' but rather as a 'particular code of behaviour' (p. 235). In so doing he again underlines with firmness the sanctity of the instrument and its music. Furthermore, he points out that the ancestors themselves are believed to take an active part in the music-making process—an activity which even more closely associates the living society and living man with the ancestors and the overall creative and life-giving force. That is certainly the deep and profound Shona mbira philosophy, that is, 'the soul of the Mbira'.

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**African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke**  
By B. Jules-Rosette. Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1975, 302pp., no price indicated.

**The New Religions of Africa** By B. Jules-Rosette (ed.), Norwood N.J., Ablex Publishing, 1979, 248pp., no price indicated.

The African Apostolic Church of Johane Maranke was established in 1932. Twenty years later, it had spread well beyond its country of origin, Zimbabwe, into Zambia and Zaire. Jules-Rosette's monograph deals with the results of her field research, conducted between 1969 and 1972, among congregations in Zaire, Zambia and Malawi. The bulk of her information concerns one of the sect's most peripheral congregations, in terms of distance from the Zimbabwean religious centre, in Kasai province, Zaire.

Jules-Rosette's data are of particular interest not only because they come from a distant congregation, of markedly different background from the cultures of Zimbabwe, and shed interesting light on the process of cultural diffusion from one part of Africa to another; nor only because they show precise ways in which congregations may differ from one another, at the same time diverging from ideal doctrinal prescriptions emanating from the Zimbabwean centre. Her data also indicate how complex the processes of symbolic combination and cultural adaptation are in independent religious sects. The use of different languages, both African and European, in a single service; the attempt to standardize marriage rules and marriage payments in congregations of different cultures; the reflection of new governmental forms and new technology in instructions to members; the emphasis on literacy and efficiency in the performance of religious roles—all impress upon the reader the specific aspects of coming to terms with social, political and economic change in twentieth-century Africa. Maranke's apostles do not appear as a conservative, tradition-orientated, 'nativistic' sect looking to the past, but rather as groups of people, related by many common ties, striving to adapt to a somewhat threatening contemporary world.

Having noted the interest value of this monograph, one must also note its defects, the most important of which, from an anthropological perspective, are methodological. Jules-Rosette admits to difficulties of language use, particularly in transcribing and translating tapes, but nowhere does she reassure the reader that defective transcriptions were remedied. Her questionnaires were regarded by some respondents as a form of 'examination about the church's doctrine', and she notes without further comment that several 'were checked by the church's secretary for intelligibility, literacy and doctrinal completeness' (p. 54). Her role as a representative of sect interests to various officials in central and municipal