

# THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AND AFRO-AMERICAN MUSIC

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In recent years the study of African and Afro-American music has assumed a new importance in academic institutions. This is due partly to the growing acceptance of these traditions as areas of study within the general fields of musicology and ethnomusicology, and partly to the world wide interest in African studies as well as the emergence of Black-Studies programs and similar cultural studies in the Americas and the Carribeans. The availability of commercial recordings of these musical traditions as well as the cultural presentations offered by touring African companies and those of the African Diaspora also have contributed in some measure to this new interest.

Accordingly, research into African and Afro-American music has received a new impetus and is being undertaken not only by those persons fascinated by these traditions and their artistic, historical, and sociological problems, but even more so by those persons for whom the traditions constitute a part of their way of life. The membership of international organizations, such as the International Music Council, the International Society for Music Education and the International Folk Music Council, now includes national committees and individual members from African countries, while UNESCO is actively encouraging a wider acceptance and appreciation of African and other non-western music through its special series of gramophone records and conferences.

The liberalization of attitudes following the emergence of this new internationalism in music is encouraging music educators to broaden their outlook. Articles on the place of "black music" in the school curriculum, and other articles which examine the relationship between music and the community have appeared in the *Music Educators Journal*.

It seems therefore opportune, and indeed appropriate, that African and Afro-American musicians, composers, musicologists and educators involved in the study of African and Afro-American traditions in the world of music should come together at a symposium such as this to share their knowledge and insights, and to explore with others various approaches to the study of these traditions and their interrelations, particularly approaches that take into account the interaction now taking place in this area between Africans and Afro-Americans.

## *The Historical Approach*

For obvious reasons, the relationship between African and Afro-American musical traditions has always been seen first and foremost in historical terms. It does not appear, however, that the definition of this

relationship and its relevance to different areas of music study have been fully explored on both sides of the Atlantic. So far, the importance of the music of Africa in historical studies of Afro-American music has tended to be seen more as providing a point of departure than as something that continues to be relevant to the present. African music is drawn upon for accounting for the peculiar features of Afro-American music, features singled out because they do not conform to Euro-American practice. Accordingly this music is looked at somewhat cursorily by some scholars in their search for "origins," "precursors," "survivals, and "sources of influence-drawing on the fieldwork of other scholars who were not concerned with such questions when they undertook their field work.

African music studies have similarly tended to be insular. There has been a tendency to confine investigations to the African continent and leave the African Diaspora out of account. Very few historical studies of some depth have appeared, partly because of the lack of documents and partly because of the interdisciplinary techniques which such studies demand of the investigator. As the recent volume of essays on history and music in Africa' shows, this problem is not insurmountable. However in the absence of comprehensive histories of African music to which the early history of Afro-American music could be related, scholars have no alternative but to continue to fall on social and political histories of Africa for the illumination of their problems, or draw upon early documentary references to music-inadequate as they are-for a picture of the musical cultures of Africa in the period of slavery.

It is not only the historical field that has been neglected in African musical studies. Other kinds of comparative data are not consciously provided for in African musical studies, for while students of Afro-American music make the effort to reach back to Africa, students of African music do not seem to be interested in looking at extensions of African musical cultures in the Americas and the Carribeans. Accordingly no systematic comparative studies of African and "African-derived" music have been attempted by African scholars. Thus there is a need to bridge the existing gaps in scholarship, to look beyond the immediate problems that require attention on either side of the Atlantic, and to keep the wider African context constantly in view. There is a need to resolve the ambiguities surrounding Afro-American music, ambiguities which have tended to exclude it from African musical studies as well as from the serious study of music in Western schools and conservatoires of music.

#### *The Problem of Unity and Diversity*

The recognition of African cultural values as a formative factor in Afro-American culture which may be revitalized in significant areas is beginning to resolve these ambiguities and to give greater emphasis to the links with Africa as the base upon which to build contemporary materials. Accordingly there is a new trend of thought which is encouraging an inte

grated approach to the study of African and Afro-American music, a new trend which sees the relationship between African and Afro-American music as dynamic and unbroken at the conceptual level in spite of the differences in materials to which these concepts are applied. This new trend sees African and Afro-American musical cultures as two sides of the same coin, as musical cultures exposed to different formative influence in their respective environments but which share a common conceptual identity in certain vital spheres. Accordingly it seeks to integrate the study of these two musical cultures in the field of musical scholarship, in education, in composition and performance, as well as in the theatre.

It is important to stress that an integrated approach does not overlook the differences between African and Afro-American music. On the contrary it has to recognize the fact the Afro-American music has an American or Euro-American component that will always differentiate it from music originating from the African continent. In certain respects Paul Oliver is right when he observes in his work on *Savannah Syncopators 2* that blues and jazz are far removed from Ashanti *adowa* music. And yet as he admits, striking parallels between the musical techniques and usages of the savannah cultures of West Africa and those of Afro-American music compel anyone searching for the origins of the musical resources employed in the blues to pay some attention to these.

Of course the problem of what is similar or comparable in music is always relative to one's experience and sensibility. Artists tend to see this in a completely different way from scholars committed to "classification" and "systematization" and who tend to see the hard boundaries of musical expressions rather than their confluence and sources of artistic development.

There are certainly areas in which African and Afro-American expressions shade into one another, either because of present day interaction or because of "residual strains" which give an African quality to these expressions. These "residual strains"- exemplified in a limited number of structural characteristics and musical processes-belong to African music as a stylistic family and may be met not only in music from West Africa, but also music from other parts of Africa. We should thus not be surprised to find something in the music of the Masai of Tanzania or indeed in the music of certain Nilotic peoples of East Africa which reminds us of something in Afro-American music, for this residual strain has a wider distribution than the areas which were ransacked for manpower to work in cotton fields and sugar plantations. In other words, whatever relationship West African music bears to musical expressions in East Africa or indeed to those of Central and Southern Africa may be reflected in transatlantic musical cultures related to those of West Africa.

I would like to illustrate this point with a set of random recordings of African music which highlight this "residual strain" or bring the problem of affinity to the foreground. All the examples represent typical "African sounds" so there is no question of their being mistaken for Afro-American music. But they have qualities that appeal in a very direct manner to those

whose cultures are African-derived, qualities which bring the "residual strain" home in the choice of "beat," rhythmic and melodic organization, and form. In other words, although the sounds are typically African because of the medium used, the structural framework in terms of which the sounds are organized brings the music close to the kind of African music cultivated by Afro-Americans in their American environment.

My first example comes from West Africa. It is a recording of the music of Malinke xylophones played by two musicians, one of whom plays improvised variations. If this music were transcribed and played on instruments typical of Afro-American musical culture, we would have it transformed into "Afro-American sounds. Those of us listening from our African background might, think that we were hearing an example of early Afro-American music that was rather close to our own musical experience.

My second example comes from Zaire, and again it illustrates the persuasion of affinity through the beat. The sounds are "African sounds," for the instrument is a sansa or hand-piano. The singer sings in an African language in a typical African style. But we have something here that can be understood musically in both cultures without difficulty.

My third example comes from South Africa. It has been chosen on purpose to illustrate the persuasion of affinity created by the musical organization. This organization is simple, but it gives one the illusion of an imitation of contemporary pop music because of the structure of the ostinato figure played on the musical bow. It is performed by a fifty-five year old Zulu woman who sings softly as she plays this traditional stringed instrument.

My final example comes from East Africa. It is an example of the choral music of the Masai of Tanzania. It has a three-part structure: a part for a lead singer, a chorus response, and an ostinato hummed steadily in the background by a group of men. Here again the sounds are "African sounds," but the persuasion of affinity reaches the listener through the structural organization.

In all the foregoing examples, I have deliberately chosen musical examples from Africa that show some kind of kinship with the type of African music developed by Afro-Americans. I could have played other examples which would be "way out" simply because Afro-Americans did not carry everything in African music with them to the New World. Even if we assumed that they did, they were certainly not able to maintain it all.

### *The Search for Closer Affinity*

The realization that Afro-American music does not exemplify the whole of the African heritage is encouraging Afro-Americans to study African music as part of their search for closer African identity. While some are interested in redefining the historical nexus between African and Afro-American musical cultures or in broadening its base, others are going

back to traditional African music in order to become acquainted with those aspects of the music lost to their own culture.

There are composers who are turning to the music of Africa for new materials or ideas, for as Bartok observed, however simple folk songs may seem to us, they are "classical models of the way in which a musical idea can be expressed in all its freshness and shapeliness, in short in the very best possible way, in the briefest possible form and with the simplest of means."<sup>3</sup>

Performers have also shown great interest in the music of Africa and are similarly drawing on it for new modes of expression. Many Afro-Americans and others visit the School of Music and Drama of the Institute of African Studies (University of Ghana) with the avowed intention of learning to play drums and other African musical instruments or studying African dance forms.

This interest in African music and dance is, of course, not confined to Afro-Americans. There are other Americans who are equally interested in studying African music-dance, either for its own sake or because they believe it will help them to understand Afro-American music, which they regard as part of their American musical heritage. The American interest in African music is matched by a corresponding interest in Africa in Afro-American music. All over Africa urban and literate Africans who have not been brought up to acquire the prejudices of Western art musicians enjoy Afro-American music because it is closer to them than Western art music. It fills a musical vacuum created by their colonial experience, which separated them from the traditional music of their own cultures.

Some Western critics of Africa deplore this situation, which is really not our own making. Indeed, one person has raised a crusader's banner in the *World of Music*, and his article has subsequently been reprinted in the *Journal of African Music*. The main plea of the article is that Africa must be saved from "cultural genocide," from the onslaught of Afro-American music, pop music and the acculturative influence of the West, which leads to the creation of hybrid music.

In the twentieth century world of today, it is impossible to insulate Africa from external influences. The answer to the problem does not lie in perpetrating old Western musical prejudices in Africa but in recognizing the "identity crisis" which this represents, as well as the need for balanced music-education programs in which the studies of African and Afro-American music is integrated in a way that is meaningful to the youth of Africa.

No African country wants to lose its heritage of traditional music. Indeed, the need for strengthening the institutions which support this is recognized by many African governments. The cultural commission of the Organization of African Unity is also conscious of the need for preserving the treasures of the past and is making the necessary effort to encourage this without losing sight of the challenge of the twentieth century world of music, a world in which musical expressions of different epochs and cultures are now in close juxtaposition because of the ease of communica

tion and the extensive use of mass communication media in all corners of the globe. I am sure that Afro-Americans will be the first to tell Africa to save her heritage of music, for it is also their heritage of music.

*Integrated Studies and Scholarly Research*

The present situation in both Africa and America has come to be regarded by some African and Afro-American musicians and others as a challenge, the challenge not to be satisfied with a mere sentimental approach to the African heritage or with mere affirmation of the historical nexus, the challenge to seek for a wider perspective and a deeper understanding of this nexus in new but broadly integrated studies on both sides of the Atlantic. Such studies could include performance practice, analytical studies of form and structure, studies of the "literature" and materials of African and Afro-American music, as well as historical and sociological studies which draw on materials from both sides of the Atlantic.

The development of curricula materials for these must be backed by scholarly research into African and Afro-American music, research designed to provide the materials needed so much by music educators, composers, performers, and others. It is this scholarship, this need for basic research that can be applied in meaningful ways to problems of music education and curriculum development as well as to performance and creative work in integrated studies of African and Afro-American music that this symposium hopes to stimulate.

At present the scholarly study of African and Afro-American music seems to vacillate between ethnomusicology and musicology, between anthropology and history, between music, folklore, and even linguistics. In his *Savannah Syncopators*, which deals with the blues and West African music, Paul Oliver found it necessary to lament the fact that "the connections between African music and the blues have been little researched or considered by anthropologists, especially those with experience in the field in both Africa and the United States."<sup>4</sup> At a recent joint meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology held at Chapel Hill, North Carolina in November 1971, one of the experts who spoke on behalf of jazz and popular music was an anthropologist who is well known for his book on urban blues and who is believed to be very well informed on the music of the Tiv of Nigeria. What all these indicate is the breadth of the preparation that the scholarly study of African and Afro-American music requires of the investigator. An interdisciplinary approach is needed in some areas of our study, while other areas demand investigations on both sides of the Atlantic.

As far as I can see there are two main areas of scholarly concern to which we need to devote our attention: studies of aspects of single cultures and comparative studies. Both types of research would need to be related to clearly defined contexts or framework of investigation. Studies of Afro-American music, for example, must deal with the community context in which black artists seek identification with the black community or seek

to maintain their community experience as a source for the creative arts. Then there is the national context, which relates the Afro-American experience to the total American context and which sees Afro-American music both as something distinctive and as a contribution to the total American cultural heritage. For Afro-American arts are not being created in a vacuum: the pressures and challenges of the American environment and all it means create corresponding responses not only in the content of the music but also in the choice of medium as well as in the selection and refinement of techniques.

The juxtaposition of jazz, blues, gospel, and Western art music in the same culture and the existence of common educational musical institutions or music schools and University departments geared largely to Western art music are bound to influence highly trained composers who draw on their Afro-American experience. There is a tremendous amount of activity both in the field of popular music and in the field of art music as the record industry amply testifies. The Black Music Center at Indiana University has a list of 1,000 black composers whose biographical data and compositions are being documented. There is also the international context which gives an added dimension to the musical activities of Afro-Americans. The popularity of Afro-American music and musicians outside America provides new opportunities for musicians to share their art with wider audiences. And some who find it difficult to gain acceptance and recognition in the highly competitive home-base find sympathetic and appreciative audiences elsewhere.

Similarly the study of the music of Africa must be attacked on at least four different fronts. First, there is the local context in which materials developed by individual ethnic groups are studied and documented. There is so much specialization in Africa that it is only by taking a look at the music of each ethnic group that one can get a comprehensive picture of the totality of the African heritage. Second, there is the national context in which one studies not only the aggregate of music within a given territory but also the transformations in musical life that follow national development programs and other factors that affect social and cultural life on a countrywide basis. Third, there is the regional context in which musical problems of interterritorial nature, particularly those concerning the history of musical instruments, musical types, and musical usages can be studied. It is in this context that one looks at the problem of music areas or forms of musical interaction that cut across territorial boundaries. Lastly, there is the continental or Pan-African context in which one takes an over-view of the music of Africa and considers the unity of African music as a major stylistic family of musical expressions. It is here that one evaluates the effect of Pan-Africanism on the development of new music as well as on the use of traditional resources. Modern African thought is leaning more and more towards the development of an eclectic attitude towards the music of Africa which emphasizes the unity of Africa's artistic expressions.

### *Comparative Studies*

Considerable progress has already been made in descriptive studies of African and Afro-American music as single cultures, as the extensive bibliographies on both traditions testify. It is undoubtedly in the field of comparative music research that African and Afro-American scholars can make their distinctive contribution to the kind of integrated study that we now seek. We need to go beyond the present emphasis on random comparisons and the search for origins which end up in mere speculation or conjecture. In this connection it is important that *fields* of comparison as well as *areas* of comparison are clearly delimited.

The fields of comparison would include: (a)

Historical studies

(b) Structural studies (including comparative studies of singing styles, scales, rhythmic usages, etc.)

(c) Conventions of musical practice (d)

Aesthetics

(e) Comparative sociology of African and Afro-American music (including investigations into oral tradition and processes of musical transmission, processes of social or economic control, performers, etc.)

(f) Modes of communication (including studies of song texts.) (g) Dance

In delimiting our areas of comparison we have to bear in mind that we can only compare musical styles that are idiomatically, historically or sociologically comparable. In other words we may compare

(a) Expressions which belong to the area of folk music or expressions which belong to community life,

(b) Music of religious expression inspired by the church-such as the music of spiritual churches in Africa and sanctified churches in the United States,

(c) Popular music in the United States and popular music in Africa,

(d) Afro-American art music and new African music-that is, the music of Western-trained composers using Western techniques and resources as well as traditional African or African-derived techniques and materials.

What I am suggesting, then, is that comparative studies of African and Afro-American music need not be confined to the purely historical. They need not be confined to the search for "Africanisms"-for origins, survivals, retentions, adaptations, and reinterpretations-the kind of study almost exhausted by anthropologists and others who have followed their trail. Systematic comparisons-that is, comparisons of musical systems, categories of structure or units, and elements of structure may be equally rewarding.

Secondly, our studies need not be confined to Africa of the slavery period. They must extend to present-day Africa and its urban and rural communities, Africa and its ethnic diversity redefined or linked within new state framework, Africa with its literate and preliterate populations. Just as African influence on the Americas deserves attention, so does American feedback in Africa call for study.

The program of this symposium has been designed with some of the foregoing observations in mind. It is my hope that the papers on selected topics will bring to light some of the problems involved in looking at African and Afro-American music as an integrated area of study. It is my hope also that arising out of the papers and discussions will be joint research projects, undertaken by scholars and musicians on both sides of the Atlantic, and that these will form a basis for further study and discussion.

#### Notes

1 Klaus Wachsmann, ed., *Essays on Music and History in Africa* (Evanston, 1971).

2 Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators; African Retentions in the Blues* (New York, 1970).

3 Quoted by Lajos Vargyas in *Studia musicologica* VI (1964), p. 179.

4 Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators*, p. 39.