

Through Sweden and beyond; the spread of South African song in the global Anti-Apartheid Movement

By
Anders Nyberg (Swedish Musician)
(For biography see end of paper)

Introduction

Dear friends.

I have been asked to share a little about the role of the singing within the Anti Apartheid Movement. The perspective will be a personal one and that of a grass-root, yet "on the wings of song" it will also attempt to rise to a global one.

Let me start by telling you a story.

In the mid-eighties I was, together with the Swedish songgroup "Fjedur", teaching South African Freedom songs to a class of 8-year olds in a school outside of Stockholm. I told them about Mandela and Botha and we taught them the song "Vula Botha! Siyangqongqoza – Open Botha! We are a'knocking. Release Mandela, our leader!"

As I wanted them to sing a bit louder I said:
"You see this Botha, he's got a bit of a hearing problem. You have to sing *really* loud if he's going to hear you all the way to South Africa!"

And the kids, to my surprise, took me literally, and sang with expressions of total dedication; red faces, thumping hearts and clear voices that must at least have been heard - across the street...

I almost felt a bit ashamed – after all you are not supposed to betray little children's innocence like that.

A week later we returned to the school for the next rehearsal. This time they came running towards us already in the schoolyard with faces beaming of even more excitement and pride. "He heard us, he heard us!", they cried, pointing at a newspaper they carried triumphantly.

The headline confirmed with big black letters: "Botha opens talks on the release of Nelson Mandela."

I bit my lip and wondered; really, who is the teacher and who's the student here ...

But the story doesn't end there. It gets even better.

A few years later the miracle happens, Nelson Mandela is released! And he chooses Uppsala Cathedral, my own hometown church, as venue to deliver his first speech outside of Africa! I had the inexpressible joy of conducting the choirs at the occasion.

He opens his speech with these words:

As no man is an island, so too are we not men of stone who are not moved by the noble passions of love, friendship and human compassion.

Imagine then how our hearts beat as your voices wafted across the great distances that separate us and penetrated through the prison walls, as over the walls of Jericho, to reach us in our cells. Everyday we heard your voices ring – Free the political prisoner! We heard your voices sing – Let my people go!

As we heard that vibrating and invigorating cry of human concern, we knew that we would be free. We saw that no prison walls or guard dogs or even the cold seas that are like a deadly moat surrounding Robben Island, could ever succeed to frustrate the desires of all humanity. We drew strength and sustenance from the knowledge that we were part of a greater humanity than our jailers could claim.

Intended for oblivion, we were discovered by the little people whom we had never met. They wrote to us to give us encouragement and hope. They celebrated our birthdays with us. They remembered us at Christmas. They defied the elements to demonstrate about us. They prayed for our freedom. They did what they could not afford, by contributing some of their earnings so that we could study and purchase what little we could to relieve the rigors of prison life.

In the end the high and mighty also heard the voice of the little people. They too discovered that buried away in the dungeons of the Pretoria regime were men and women who should never have been arrested in the first place. They too joined the noble chorus – Free the political prisoners!

I don't think anyone could doubt Mandela's sincerity in this statement. Yet his claim to everyday have heard the voices of the little people is as incredulous as the children's claim that they were heard by Botha.

But in these statements, difficult as they may be to believe for us mere mortals, lie a deep and unobtrusive truth that guided the whole anti-apartheid struggle and in the end gave it its victory. Human beings *do* get moved by noble passions of love, friendship and human compassion. Human beings, be it a Mandela, a Botha or anyone else, are actually unable *not* to be moved by them.

The North – South Connection

Let me at this point of the presentation go back a little, and give a biographical background.

In 1978 the Swedish song-group "Fjedur", of which I was a founder member, got the opportunity to travel to South Africa via the channels of the Lutheran Church. We came from a small community from the northern vast forests of the country and insignificant as I thought this was from the beginning I more and more realise its significance. We grew up in an area where the last echoes of an ancient pastoral culture with a great musical heritage still could be experienced and our music was based on preserving and furthering this, along with this inexplicable interest in African music.

Incredulous as it may seem I think it is correct to say that we were still part of a remnant yet unbroken succession of an oral and vocal tradition that stretched back to – yes – to the days we as humankind trekked out of Africa. Our trip was at any rate, in the deepest of senses, a homecoming rather than a foreign encounter, a finding of Self and Identity rather than a venturing into a strange territory.

The more I live in this country, the more I realise the extraordinary nature of this journey of one month. We landed here in Durban and spent the first days travelling the dusty roads of the homeland - using the euphemism of the time - Kwa Zulu. After 10 days in this area, more appropriately named a concentration camp, we met a poverty and an oppressive system that we of course never had encountered the like. Yet, through the means of the music we shared a common language that transcended every barrier of space or time and allowed for a communication and an identification of unfathomable depths and incomprehensible joy.

I do not expect you to believe me as I can't understand this myself, but after 10 days in this the most deprived of areas I had acquired a muscle-ache in my cheeks - from constantly and happily smiling. Coming home to Sweden again we had no choice but to share our experiences and our great wealth of songs and stories. Only through sharing them could we make this amazing journey somehow real and comprehended by ourselves.

We released within a few years time a series of booklets and music cassettes under the heading South African Songs of Protest and Praise. The concept of including both political songs and spiritual songs was rather new and caused a few mumbles in both camps. But the synergy caused by this coalition made it a fast-growing and all-encompassing movement.

The songs caught on instantly and in a big way. Sweden had a long history of committed involvement with the South African struggle and these songs seemed to fill a need for an emotional outlet of expression of solidarity with South Africa and its apartheid victims. But the songs would have gone nowhere if they hadn't at the same time also worked as Songs of Freedom for the Swedes.

In a choral nation as Sweden's, with its high standards, yet being very homogenous not to say conformist, these songs immediately enriched - or challenged. They demanded movement in order to make sense. The traditional linear formations cracked as the choristers needed to sing in more circular ways. This also challenged the hierarchical structures and the role of the conductors. The songs were democratic not only as far as the demands of the lyrics were concerned, they invariably and unavoidably changed structures of power in the groups that performed them. The African concept of circle also manifested in the notion of time. The songs had no real beginning and no end, very unlike the Western linear concept and freed an overly time-conscious people to be in the now.

It was a far cry from only being an exotic import of strange music from a foreign land, or only an expression of altruistic solidarity for that matter. Had it been it would not have made the impact it did. For hundreds of thousands of people who encountered the South African songs in Sweden it was a liberating meeting with a whole different mind-set. The culture of *Ubuntu* that had formed these songs and woven in all its great African concepts of time and space, charisma and community in its creations, was now also able to share these fruits to a hungry and thirsty people on a foreign shore. This, in my belief, was the greatest achievement of the South African songs in Sweden.

I could go into great lengths telling about different aspects of this North-South Dialogue. But let me instead turn my attention on another bridge that the South African songs achieved to build that probably isn't as well known;

The East - West Connection

Fjedur continued touring in Sweden, giving concerts, workshops and recording and broadcasting continuously and often as fulltime professionals during most of the eighties. Along with the South African music the Swedish folk-music was always present and indeed first choice.

This feels important to state; the African musical branch could never have blossomed without this deep indigenous root, and this also served as a good reminder of the dangers of the African songs turning escapist or superficial.

The big international leap for Fjedur and our South African music came 1984 when we were invited to take part in the general assembly of the Lutheran World Federation held in Budapest, Hungary with delegates from all over the world.

South Africa was high on the agenda of the ecumenical movement at the time and the strange phenomenon of a group of blonds and blue-eyed's performing the songs only seemed to accentuate the fact that the apartheid issue indeed was of global concern.

Especially for the big delegations of East European youth the stories and songs from SA became very catalytic. The following years we were invited officially from both East Germany, (three times) and Estonia to perform our South African songs. It is true to say that our Anti-Apartheid platform ensured us of having no problems to receive official invitations as this was very much official policy. But it is equally true to say that the young people of Eastern Europe themselves, due to their situation of limited freedom of speech and movement, could in many ways more easily identify with the oppressed masses of South Africa. And yet, the expressions of South African defiant resistance found in the songs we taught them was of course something totally new and beyond anything they had previously experienced. Again the old African oral tradition proved very useful as a means of efficient and immediate transportation as these songs spread mouth to mouth around Eastern Europe.

One particular concert in GDR comes to mind as a good example of this ambiguity.

We sang in a big church in Leipzig packed to capacity. Our Swedish folk-music as well as our renditions of their own Sebastian Bach was well and politely received but when we came to the South African part of the program the atmosphere got more electric. As an introduction to the song "Ayangena" we told the story of when we had had the privilege to sing that song for Desmond Tutu in Oslo when he received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The story went something like this:

"At a reception we sang a few songs for the South African delegation headed by Desmond Tutu. From the very start of our singing there was a growing commotion among the South-Africans and when we came to the song "Ayangena" the bishop just couldn't sit still any longer. Clad in his long purple robe he rose to his feet and with his whole entourage behind him he came dancing up towards us on stage. "Ayangena" is a song that makes fun of the security police, in very vivid motions it says: "They enter, they exit, they hesitate..."

Now it so happened that the day before, Tutu had received a bomb threat and the whole Norwegian Security Police was on highest alert to what probably was their most high-profiled assignment ever. They had clearly received instructions not to leave the bishop an inch.

The scene was magnificent: First in the procession comes Tutu ecstatically singing and dancing, then up on the stage follow these discretely dressed security-men, but seldom has anything more insecure been seen - we called them the Norwegian insecurity-police. Last in this hilarious parade comes the rest of the South Africans, bellowing out in exuberance: "Ayangena! - They go this way, they go that way, they don't know what way, trip and stumble, go astray" as the police in front of them so vividly illustrated.

So now we are going to sing "Ayangena", a song dedicated to the South African Security Police but it seemed to work fine with the Norwegians as well."

By that time the first shy giggles in the East German audience had turned into outright liberating laughter - at least among most of them - and as we sang "Ayangena" it was quite easy to spot by their reactions who identified with the singing masses and who identified with the Security Police...

In Estonia where the transformation aptly was named "The singing revolution" the songs from our collection "Freedom is coming" were all translated into Estonian and sung in the streets and halls of Tallinn.

At a 1986 concert when we performed in the gutters - literally - of Harlem, New York, a man came up to us afterwards and told us excitedly how he just had come back from Estonia and all these South African freedom songs were now also heard in the streets of the cities of Estonia.

Thus the whole world united in the Songs of Freedom: The singers from the North singing songs from the South in the West that had been heard in the East.

The spread of these songs around the world is a remarkable story not least for the fact that it was done virtually without any "marketing". Primarily relying on the oral tradition itself and aided by the distribution of tapes and songbooks the songs carried the cries of Freedom to the corners of the world. I could relate a number of instances where I have encountered these songs in the most unlikely places as well as stories from other travellers.

But let me trace the journey of one such song. This story also starts in a Stockholm school in the mid-eighties but this time it was grown-up students studying to become social workers. They had been singing South African songs together with me and afterwards they discovered that the school owned stocks and shares in companies with investments in South Africa. After a short but vocal time of lobbying by the students the school board conceded and sold the shares. In a fine gesture they gave the money earned on the sale to the students to be used in a way that best would forward the South African struggle. The students called me and asked for advice on how to use it:

"Should we bring up a South African student?"

"How 'bout bringing the whole choir?" I responded and a year later the Pula Choral, a group of Students and Mine Workers from Welkom and Bloemfontein landed in Stockholm. Their three month tour in the height of the insurrection was an occasion that no one who experienced it will ever forget.

One of the songs they left behind was "Malizwe".

A couple of years later I travelled with a Scandinavian song-group on a tour to Cuba and Central America with a repertoire of World Music. We ended up in Bluefields, a town on the Nicaraguan east coast with a very special history. Twice in the history of slavery the slaves managed to break loose on a ship and throw the crew overboard. One of the ships was "Amistad" whose story has been told by Spielberg in the film with the same name. The other ship drifted ashore where Bluefields now lies, its inhabitants mainly descendants of the Africans who refused to become slaves in the New World.

There we gave a concert together with local musicians. When we sang "Malizwe", intended a cappella, the band on stage heard the easily recognised sounds of their African roots and started to accompany us in their own Reggae idiom. A wonderfully new fusion happened as the Latin American spices enriched the African treat with new flavours. Above us on stage hung a

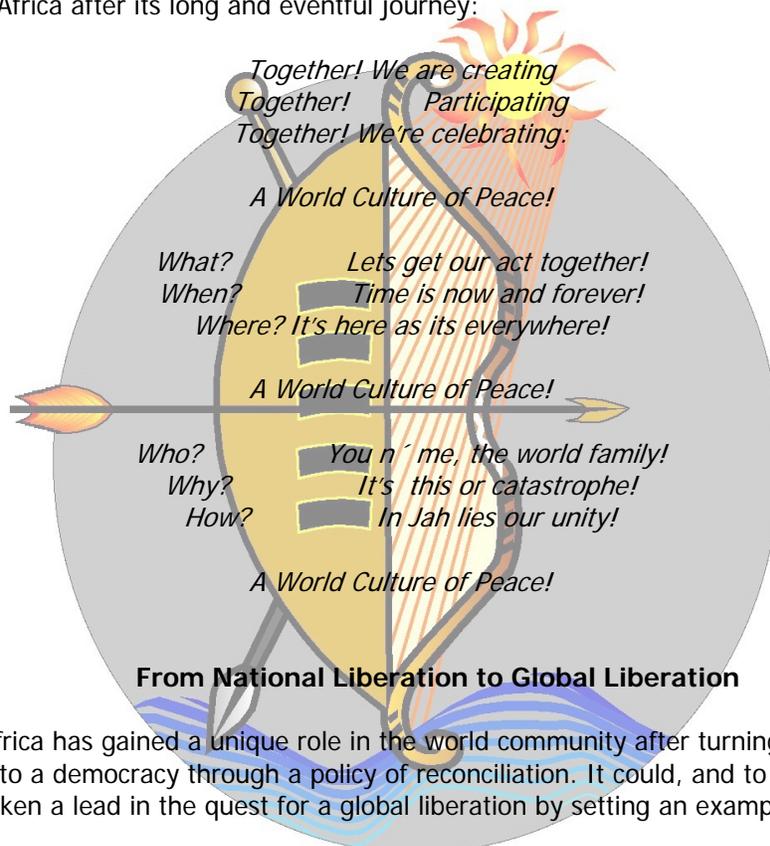
beautifully decorated banner, which I am happy to say I can display here today, with the simple but suitable words;

"Together we can create a World Culture of Peace!"

With these new words and rhythms added to the song we had a beautiful new creation to bring back to South Africa. A song that had travelled in the same tracks, but the opposite direction, of the old Triangular Trade and with a reverse message of reconciliation and restitution.

In South Africa we recorded this song, as part of the project "Seeds of Peace", with a gathering of top South African artists responding to the horrors of child abuse.

In the studio we had artists like Gloria Bosman, Johnny Clegg, Jennifer Ferguson, Danny K, Kreesan, Vusi Mahlasela and many others. Now we can all listen, and join in, as this song returns back to South Africa after its long and eventful journey:



South Africa has gained a unique role in the world community after turning a brutal and violent state into a democracy through a policy of reconciliation. It could, and to a certain extent already has, taken a lead in the quest for a global liberation by setting an example alone.

This conference has the intention of not only exploring the history of the global antiapartheid movement but also, I quote; "to link past experiences of liberation with the creation of a world social movement to deal with current global challenges."

That is indeed a bold aspiration, that most speakers, with all due respect, have chosen not to address.

The banner, written by descendants of Africans who refused to bow down under the most gruesome circumstances to be able to create their own peaceful society in the New World, is venturing to do exactly that.

"Together we can create a World Culture of Peace".

Maybe it has something to teach us all, it certainly has something to teach me.

For I must admit when I read it, a part of me wants to react like I did that time in Stockholm when the kids tried to sing so Botha could hear them; A bit naïve, isn't it?

But this country with its extraordinary people and leadership has since taught me the rationality of believing in miracles. It takes a grand vision indeed, including the ability to hear the voices of the little people far away, and belief in the power of that message.

This time the challenge is on for all of us. We who have had the great privilege of seeing the miracle of the old apartheid state transform peacefully into this country we all love and cherish, have now an imperative to take the next step. Not only to join the Voices rallying for a dramatic, thorough and immediate change of World Order. But actually to believe that it is possible. That it is the only thing possible!

Together, we *can* create a World Culture of Peace!

BIOGRAPHY

Anders Nyberg is a Swedish musician.

He has a diploma in Choral Conducting from the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, but he insists his most influential teachers are found among the traditional musicians of Sweden and South Africa, the two musical poles in his life.

After working in Gugulethu, Cape Town in the eighties he has released a series of recordings and published sheet music with South African Freedom songs and toured extensively over the world with South African and Swedish musicians giving concerts, workshops and seminars.

Anders has also worked in the movie-industry and a script co-written by him was recently nominated as the Swedish entry to the Oscar Awards in the category for best foreign film.

Today he shares his time between his homes in Dalarna, Sweden and Johannesburg, South Africa.

