

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Welcome to today's Arts and Africa. And there's no better way to start the programme than with an introduction.

MUSIC Mohammed Al Amin

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The introduction to a lament for the dead. It's also an introduction to the popular music of Sudan. I'm using the word "popular" in the sense of music that appeals to the majority and is available commercially. In the Sudan this really means the music you hear in the capital, Khartoum and the other cities of the North.

I've recently had the opportunity to spend some time chatting with a visitor from Khartoum - Farah Eissa Mohammed, tape librarian in the University of Khartoum's Institute of African and Asian Studies. His particular interest is traditional music but on this occasion he and Lucy Duran, who's just returned from a visit to Khartoum, have been telling me about the music that you're most likely to hear in the city.

MUSIC Mohammed Al Amin

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Farah, how would you describe this sort of music?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

The singer is Mohammed Al Amin. He is one of the leading singers in the modern style. Here you'll find the link between modern and traditional music. This specific item is about a mother praising her dead son. He took this from traditional music and he put it into a new style.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you describe that as popular music as what we call 'pop'?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

Yes in the sense that he uses modern instruments. But the words are traditional.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What instrument is he playing?

LUCY DURAN

The instrument is called 'ud which is arabic for lute. It doesn't have frets so it's not like the guitar. It has a round belly instead of a 'waisted' one like the guitar. It has five strings, five double strings, and is played with a plectrum. It is very typically an Arab instrument and it was introduced into the Sudan by the Egyptians, probably some time in the 1920s and it has now become very much an instrument of popular music - the town musical tradition.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So it's not popular in the ordinary sense of the word in the sense that we describe disco music as popular? Not in that sense at all?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

No I don't think so.

LUCY DURAN

But it's popular in the sense that this is what the majority of people living in the towns like to listen to. And Mohammed Al Amin is a very successful performer who commands very large fees to play at people's wedding parties and he also appears in concert halls and so on. He's popular in the sense that people like to hear his music.

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

This is true to a great extent.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this sort of style true of all popular music?

LUCY DURAN

I think this one is slightly different in that he is accompanying himself on the 'ud whereas nowadays in the Sudan most of the popular styles have an orchestral accompaniment. This will either be an orchestra made up of violins and 'ud and drums and maybe one or two other instruments: saxophone sometimes, accordian sometimes. The orchestra is used to accompany typically Sudanese style singing, and I think one of the things which differentiates Sudanese popular music from, say, Egyptian popular music, is the five note scale, the pentatonic scale. So in fact sometimes when people hear it they think it sounds Chinese!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, you talk about typically Sudanese popular music and we know that the Sudan is a very varied country. What language, for example, was that music sung in?

LUCY DURAN

Although Sudan is obviously an enormous and varied country, I think basically

we're really talking about the music of Khartoum, the capital. The next example is a very typical example of what I was talking about - the five note scale - and is a woman singing a love song to orchestral accompaniment. The name of the singer is Asha Al-Falatia. She died in 1980. She was a very famous singer.

MUSIC Asha Al-Falatia

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is that sort of song meant for dancing to or just listening to?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

For both listening and dancing.

LUCY DURAN

But you do often see people dancing to it especially at weddings when everyone is happy. Then you see people getting up and dancing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you got other regional examples, distinguishing between one region and another?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

Yes. For example the third item here, by Abdul Gādir Sālim, shows another style. Abdul Gādir Sālim is from the province of Kordofan which is west of Khartoum and his style is typical of Kordofan.

LUCY DURAN

There are a lot of unusual things about this example. One of them is that there is a cello playing on its own to introduce the music; there is also the use of hand clapping which again makes it sound very much like village music, and finally there is the use of saxophones and the accordion in the orchestra as well as electric guitars. So there's a terrific mixture of different things going on here, but Abdul Gādir Sālim is recognised for his typically Kordofan style.

MUSIC Abdul Gādir Sālim

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There's a mixture of very lovely sounds there isn't there? And rhythms too. Now the cello although it's a stringed instrument is not local is it?

LUCY DURAN

No it certainly isn't local. Of course it's just a European instrument. But you must agree it's not played in a European way.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

No, no! I thought the singing was quite unique in its own way.

LUCY DURAN

That's a shoulder-shaking dance.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this sort of thing found on records? I mean is this song from a record?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

Yes. This song was recorded for the Sudan Broadcasting Service and after that it went on sale in the shops.

LUCY DURAN

They don't in fact seem to make records, actually discs, in the Sudan, everybody has cassettes there. There are only two cassette companies that actually manufacture cassettes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Once again the language is Arabic isn't it?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

Yes the language is Arabic.

LUCY DURAN

But a lot of the styles nowadays are changing to incorporate more of a type of disco sound, and the final example we have illustrates again, very much, the direction which popular music is taking. What's his name again Farah?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

Al-Nur Al Jailāni.

LUCY DURAN

He plays in a style which they sometimes call jazz which has a very heavy use of electric guitar and the rhythm is much closer to what one might think of as something like funk. But nevertheless, you still hear this same traditional kind of singing style with the hand clapping, so that the "baby has not been thrown out with the bath water".

MUSIC Al-Nur Al Jailāni

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much Farah Eissa and Lucy Duran.

MUSIC Al-Nur Al Jailāni

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A strange sound when you think of it. The rhythms of black Africa reaching Khartoum via the funk and reggae of North America, instead of from Southern Sudan as you might expect.

To end today's programme I'd like to go back to that strange and attractive song from Abdul Gādir Sālīm and the solo cello. Now however, not the voice but the rhythm to play us out. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for today but reminding you that this time next week there'll be more "Arts and Africa". For now it's goodbye.