

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody; Louis Mahoney here with sounds that could be new to you, in "Arts and Africa".

We've talked about - and played - a good deal of music in "Arts and Africa" but on the whole it's been traditional. Not surprising really, when you think of the enormous richness and variety of our traditions. But there is plenty new happening - like this for instance.

MUSIC

AKIN EUBA:

You see, I have been sort of playing with the idea of the possibility of inventing a new piano style - an African piano style. I would postulate that in a century or two the piano would become an African instrument.

MAHONEY:

The voice - and the music - of the Nigerian pianist and composer, Akin Euba. 'The piano an African instrument'? Well, I have to admit that, outside a jazz band, I wouldn't have thought it. But Akin Euba (he's played his music in concerts in West Africa and in Europe and the United States), Akin has plenty more enthusiastic things to say about the piano and his own blend of music. And if the style doesn't immediately sound African, I'd better tell you that the little bit we've been hearing is from the opening of one of his compositions with the title "Scenes from Traditional Life".

At present, Akin is Acting Director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife, Nigeria. While he was in Europe earlier this year, giving some concerts, we invited him to come and record some of his music and then, still seated at the piano, talk about it to Florence Akst.

But before talking to Florence, some more of his music. Here's part of a composition called "Impressions from an Akwete Cloth", and this section is called "Movement and Immobility".

MUSIC

EUBA: The "Impressions from an Akwete Cloth" actually derived it's title from a piece of woven cloth which my wife and I bought in Akwete village in East Central State. And I liked the cloth so much - the designs were very vivid and interesting, and they made all kinds of impressions on me, as to traditional ceremonies and traditional objects and masks and that kind of thing - and then I felt that I would like to convey these kinds of impressions by writing a piece. The work was written in 1964 and it was part of a series of three piano works in which I attempted to simulate drum sounds. I had been playing with the idea of the possibility of inventing a new piano style - an African piano style - and these three works were just an experiment in that direction.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now, obviously a lot of your ingredients are from West Africa, from Nigeria (perhaps, in fact, even from Akwete itself as that was the source of the inspiration).

EUBA: Yes, well I wouldn't say that you could trace any theme or any rhythmic pattern in the work to any Nigerian sources but I would say that, the percussive style of the piano tended to copy what the drum sounds like and this is why, in fact, there are several 'seconds' (what you call double notes) in this piece because very often when you play a drum - a single pitch drum - you do get more than one pitch in fact. But as to actual themes and motifs and melodies, these are purely for me.

AKST: In fact it is your own personal idiom.

EUBA: Yes, my own personal idiom. You see the piano already has elements of African music in it because it is a percussive instrument. You could compare it with the xylophone for instance which also combines percussive with melodic elements. Or you could compare it with tuned drums which are tuned in sets - you can play melodies on them.

When I was a small boy, we had a piano in the house. My father reads music (he used to play in a dance band as a young man) and had also learnt to play western key-board instruments. He could play the piano and he could play the organ a little and so he was very interested in teaching me to play the piano. I think he had the impression that I had some kind of talent for music so that when I was about eight years old he started teaching me the piano. And I might say that the first instrument I ever played was a western instrument. I did not play the drums in those days, I had heard some drumming but my contact with traditional music was fairly remote. I was more close to piano music - to western music. I am talking now, of course, about the time when I was at school.

AKST: So you have had to educate yourself in African music?

- EUBA: Yes, in fact this education in African traditional music began while I was a student in London.
- AKST: When you were out of Africa.
- EUBA: When I was out of Africa. When I was a student in one of the regular conservatories I began to feel a need to get to know my own traditional music a bit better.
- AKST: Your education in music includes the two factors of Western classical music as well as Nigerian music. But what about the third ingredient? What about pop music? Has that entered into your life at all?
- EUBA: Well, I must confess that I have had no direct experience with pop music. I don't play any pop music.
- AKST: What about jazz?
- EUBA: I don't play jazz either. At least I have not yet done so. I may well start one of these days. The point was that when I was learning the piano under my father, he felt that it was bad practice ever to play from memory - ever to improvise - but to play from the book. He had a point there; that if you play from the book you are forced to play correctly. So I was not encouraged to improvise and today I feel this to be a sad loss, because some of the things I would like to do with the piano in my search for this African pianism, in fact, borders very closely on jazz.
- AKST: In fact, it sounds to me rather as though you're saying that your ability to express yourself spontaneously through improvisation has been destroyed by studying a western, classical mode.
- EUBA: Quite so.
- AKST: And would you warn young musicians at home....
- EUBA: I would indeed. I would indeed say that of course things are going to be different because we learn as we go along. I would not allow my children to become educated in western music and not become educated in their own musical culture. I think I would like to encourage young people in Africa to start to combine the two cultures much earlier than I did.
- AKST: Are you in contact with musicians of a like mind elsewhere in Africa?
- EUBA: Well, I am in contact with fellow musicians and composers in Ghana. My strongest contacts are really in Ghana. As for musicians in other parts of Africa I wish I had more contacts than I have now, but I would like to compile a catalogue of new music, for the concert hall, by African composers. It will serve a dual purpose; not only will it enable me personally to know what is going on but also I think this would be interesting for people to know what kind of new music is coming out of Africa. I would like to indicate in the catalogue

EUBA: for instance, what a composer has written and if possible
(cont.) to indicate where these works are available because, as you
know, the question of publishing music in Africa is not
properly started yet so that most of this music exists
only in the personal libraries of the composers. One also
wants to get some of this music into major libraries so
that you could say in such a catalogue that so-and-so's
work is available either with the composer or in such-and-such
a library in case somebody wanted to play it.

AKST: Now Akin, suppose there's a composer listening now who would
like to get in touch with you and tell you about his work.
How should he get in touch with you?

EUBA: Well he should write to me at the Institute of African Studies,
University of Ife, Nigeria.

MAHONEY: The pianist and composer Akin Euba talking to Florence Akst.
And with that briefing about his aims, let's listen to more of
of his music. This piece is also from 'Impressions from
an Akwete Cloth'. The title's a descriptive one: 'At night,
after the Masquerade Play'.

MUSIC

The final movement of Akin Euba's 'Impressions from an Akwete
Cloth' played by the composer. And it's almost the final
note in today's programme but I thought we'd make it a
complete cycle by listening to the music we heard at the
very beginning - the opening of Akin Euba's 'Scenes from
Traditional Life'. And meanwhile, I'll quickly say goodbye
and hope to meet you next week for another edition of
'Arts and Africa'.

MUSIC

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