

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today's music and poetry comes from East Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE :

In fact, we're paying a return visit to the town of Lamu and its neighbouring islands on the Kenyan coast to listen to some famous and distinctive poetry. And we'll be making a jet-speed ascent of the Nile from Cairo to Lake Victoria to catch up with the traveller and composer, David Fanshawe.

The map printed in his new book, "African Sanctus" shows his journeys in the Middle East, Egypt, the Sudan, East Africa - and I see that he, too, has visited Lamu.

Now, after I'd read the latter part of "African Sanctus" - the part that's mostly about his African wanderings and the music he experienced (and recorded) there, I was delighted when he agreed to come along to the "Arts and Africa" studio to talk about his love of African music and the Africa he knows - the north and east.

DAVID FANSHAWE:

Well, I started in Africa, in Cairo, because that naturally leads me up the Nile through to Sudan and into Uganda. Instead of trying to find the source of the Nile, as the early explorers did, I thought I'd try to find the musical source of the Nile which is rapidly disappearing.

TETTEH-LARTEY: And that, of course, gave you a sense of direction?

FANSHAWE: Definitely. If one is travelling, one must know where one is going.

TETTEH-LARTEY: What sort of musical impact did you have in the very first areas you visited?

FANSHAWE: Religious. The first thing you hear in Cairo is the call to prayer, the Islamic recitations in the mosques. Being a composer not being a musicologist or just a collector of music, I naturally felt that I wanted to join in and I felt that I could combine Islamic tradition with the western choral traditions. That is why I have written a mass called "African Sanctus".

TETTEH-LARTEY: You travelled to Cairo down to the Sudan and eventually arrived in Uganda.

FANSHAWE: In 1969/70. Yes.

TETTEH-LARTEY: What differences did you find in the music between those two areas of Africa?

FANSHAWE: It's the difference between Montiverdi and "Jesus Christ Superstar". (both laugh). I mean, you see you have got "Allah, Akbah, God is Great" in Cairo and then you've got this fantastic xylophonic type music from the Bunyoro in Uganda upon which I have composed my Sanctus, and I love the cacophony and the idea of Ugandan music with western music.

MUSIC FROM "AFRICAN SANCTUS"

TETTEH-LARTEY: David, one can easily recognise the African rhythms there and one can also detect European elements in it. Was this deliberate?

FANSHAWE: Absolutely. I have merely composed the mass because that is in fact on top of, or harmonised with pure African field recordings. I mean, those were the Bunyoro xylophone players and the Bwala dancers of Uganda and I have mixed the African choir with them. Because, after all, there is only one music in the world - we're one people on a very small planet.

TETTEH-LARTEY: I think it is a very beautiful combination indeed. You also talked about the rain song, which to me appears to have been the very apex of your achievement if I can so term it.

FANSHAWE: Yes, the rain was pouring down as it does in equatorial Africa and I walked into an African hut - and I often hear music just out of the blue - some man is singing. This man happened to be a musical genius in my opinion. He was playing a little instrument, a harp, and the song is one of the greatest songs I have ever recorded in eight years recording experience in East Africa.

MUSIC FROM "AFRICAN SANCTUS".

TETTEH-LARTEY: Now David, you have visited the Eastern part of Africa, you have not been to the other side of Africa. Do you intend to visit that part sometime?

FANSHAWE: Sir, you come from the other side!

TETTEH-LARTEY: Yes I do.

FANSHAWE: Of course. I am in love with the place. I want to go right through west Africa, south west Africa into south Africa and at my best to, at the end of my lifetime, have a whole library of events because this is great music, as great as anything, honestly, that we've got in the western world.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Well, David, when you do visit that part of Africa I am sure that you will find equally exciting music.

FANSHAWE: I know I will.

TETTEH-LARTEY: And if you'd like to make a note, David Fanshawe's book "African Sanctus" is published by Collins and Harvill Press, the price is four pounds fifty pence; and released at the same time is the recording of his mass, also called "African Sanctus", on the Philips label.

And now, to Lamu on the coast of Kenya. Now, the other week Paul Toulmin-Rothe was telling us of the music he found when he visited this culturally rich part of the world. Well, he's also been explaining that it is the home of great poetic tradition.

And greatest amongst the poems is "Utendi Wa Mwana Kupona", a nineteenth century poetic homily. Mwana Kupona addressed it to her daughter telling her what every respectable young woman should know about keeping her husband contented. And it's still read to brides on their wedding day. Here are a few of Mwana Kupona's recommendations.

PART OF TRANSLATION OF "UTENDI WA MWANA KUPONA"

Just five verses from more than a hundred. But such poems are not read as we read that translation. They should be beautifully intoned. Here's a recent example - for a change a poem to teach young men to appreciate their wives

PART OF TRANSLATION OF "Manuicato Ya Wambeja"

...but here to how how it should be read is Esha Abubakr Ahmed.

ESHA ABUBAKR AHMED:

READS PART OF "MANUICATO YA WAMBEJA".

TETTEH-LARTEY: The verses that Esha was reading are part of "Manuicato Ya Wambeja" a composition written by her uncle and teacher, Ahmad Sheik Mohamed Nabhany. Sheik Nabhany continues to combine the practical and the poetic in the form used by Mwana Kupona more than a hundred years ago - though by reversing the subject there's a delightful touch of parody on the original. The instructive element comes over clearly in another poem, "Sambo" (that means "The Boat") in which he describes in detail the local type of boat or dhow - what kind of wood the boat-builder uses, the names of his tools and how they sail such a boat.

SHEIK NABHANY:

READS "SAMBO"

TETTEH-LARTEY: Now Paul Toulmin-Rothe was especially interested in the type of Kiswahili used by Sheik Nabhany in his poems.....

NABHANY: I use Kingozi which is very old, old Swahili and some other words - I use very simple words because everybody can understand what I am writing.

PAUL TOULMIN-ROTHE:

Does that mean that not everybody understands these words in Kingozi nowadays?

NABHANY: Very few people in Lamu, in Pate, do understand this Kingozi but the young people don't understand unless we teach them very well, like my niece. I used to teach her.

TOULMIN-ROTHE: Mr Nabhany, why is it that poets like yourself prefer to write poetry in either Kingozi or in Kiamu? Why are those two dialects selected for poetry?

NABHANY: This has got a very wide vocabulary. That's the reason why everyone likes to write it in Kingozi and Kiamu. Now I am writing in Ungozi which is Swahili vocabulary - so many words about science, about sea, about the waves and wind blowing in Kiswahili.

TOULMIN-ROTHE: Apart from yourself, Mr Nabhany, are there many other Swahili poets who are writing today along this coast, do you think?

NABHANY: Oh yes. Now especially in Lamu there are so many young boys that are starting writing now and they are progressing well in writing the poetry. And I understand that this year, during the Maulidi there are competitions about these poems.

TOULMIN-ROTHE: Do you find that the young poets today are as good as the old ones of the olden days?

NABHANY: No, not at all. But they are trying to be good because they must have, when you become a poet you first of all must have a wide vocabulary, in order to get the words, to form the poems for the poetry.

AHMED: READS MORE FROM "MANUITACO YA WAMBEJA"

TETTEH-LARTEY: More lines from Sheik Nabhany's poem "Manuicato Ya Wambeja". And there's plenty more for us to hear from Lamu with its rich heritage but that's for another day. For more it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and from "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC FROM "AFRICAN SANCTUS"

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