

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello and welcome from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey. The results of a short story competition and music from Rhodesia - that's today's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY: Amongst the books that have come our way recently is a new collection in the "Modern African Stories" series published by Fontana. We'll be taking a look at it in a later programme but it reminded me that it must be about time for the results to be announced of the short story competition run by the BBC's Somali Service. Well, it turns out that the prize winners have just been named and one of the three judges, Nuruddin Farah, the Somali novelist, has come along to tell us the kind of stories that were submitted.

I suppose Nuruddin you must have had a large contribution?

NURUDDIN FARAH:

Yes, there were 330 who took part in this competition.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Did you put any limitations on sex, age?

FARAH: No, there was no limitation whatsoever, despite the fact which disturbed me as a person which was that only two women took part in it and neither of them had won a thing.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Did the short stories have to be traditional or did they have to be original?

FARAH: They had to be original, but when you are an African and you are writing a short story no matter how you try, without you being conscious of it, you find there is this traditional element that creeps in somehow.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Now, you yourself are a writer and the short story form demands very rigid disciplines and it's completely new to Africa - it is quite unlike the traditional form of story telling which we are used to in Africa - you have really got to put everything you've got to say in a nutshell, as it were. How did the competitors deal with this difficulty?

FARAH: Well obviously in parenthesis one could mention the fact that Somerset Maugham and Chekov and Guy de Maupassant (the French short story writer) all talk about the short story being brief, the short story having a punch, you know intensity and density; and dealing with one character, with one incident; the short story has to have a beginning a middle and an end. But then when any writer comes to a short story he brings to that form his background, his experience in life and so he deals with it in a different way. And there is no restriction whatever on any author provided he tells the story in a way which would obviously impress upon the reader something of interest, something that is well told.

TETTEH-LARTEY: On the whole, do you think that with all these difficulties posed by the short story, African writers should be encouraged to follow that form or would they rather go for the novel which is more like the traditional story telling.

FARAH: Well you see, there is something professional about writing a novel, or writing a short story: if any author can write a novel he will try but I have my misgivings whether or not a novelist, good as he may be, can write a very good short story because it is a very tricky discipline. It's got its own strength: you know, the fact that you've got to tell so much of an experience in so little space and convey "a message" to a reader who you can't go and convince. But in any part of the world, if you say "I'm a short story writer" no one will take you very seriously but if you say "I'm a novelist" people will take you seriously. So there is obviously that professional snootiness about it.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Well, I hope that, in spite of the fact that this is quite unlike our traditional tale-telling and Africans do like telling tales, we'll get some writers in the future who will take to this short form.

FARAH: Well, yes, you see, in the story-telling in Africa for example, there is the performer who stands before an audience and the telling of the story depends so much on the reaction that he receives from the audience and if he tells his story, for example, that has all these obscene words and things like that, and there are among his audience boys under age or even women, he omits some of these. That obviously suggests that there is a relaxed atmosphere in this story-telling in the African tradition whereas in the short story writing as such, apart from the fact that it owes to the written tradition, it also imposes upon the writer a discipline that probably is of his own background, his own experience.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Thank you very much for talking to us Nuruddin.

And we thought you might like to hear the opening lines of the winning entry. The story is entitled "Your Fate is in Your Own Hands".

OPENING OF "Your Fate is in Your Own Hands"

TEWANE-LARTEY: That was the opening to the prize winning story entitled "Your Fate is in Your Own Hands". It was written by Cusmaan Ahmed Diini, a 26 year old shop keeper.

"KGOPOTSO" PLAYED BY STUDENTS AT KWANONGOMA COLLEGE OF MUSIC

TEWANE-LARTEY: A marimba orchestra with "Kgopotso" - a Mdebele dance specially arranged for this Rhodesian group.

"KGOPOTSO"

TEWANE-LARTEY: The members of the orchestra (there are six marimbas plus a couple of rattles) are all students at the Kwanongoma College of music in Bulawayo, Rhodesia. "Kgopotso", like all the other tunes we'll be playing, is the composition of one of the college's lecturers, Albert Mhlanga, and he told Graham Ross about his career in music.

ALBERT MHLANGA:

When I was a little boy, still attending primary school I used to like singing very much and also I used to fiddle about with the home-made guitars. Then when I grew up my aim was to become a guitarist or a singer and I asked my parents about buying me a guitar, but the opposition I got from him scared the daylights out of me! But then later on after doing my education, normal education without music of course, I still felt that I still wanted to do music. Then, when the College was first established, there was an advertisement in the paper for students who were willing to take up a course in music. I seized on this chance and so I became one of the first to be trained as a music teacher. Then eventually I found that there wasn't just singing in music and playing the guitar, there were other instruments that one could learn, like the piano, the flute, the saxophone and all the orchestral instruments and also in the type of singing: that there are many different styles of singing besides African and pop music. So I underwent a training in classical singing and I became a very good bass singer but I hurt my voice by over-using it when I was a teacher in the primary school before I came to the college here to teach permanently.

GRAHAM ROSS: Now, you compose a lot of songs as we've heard earlier on today. What gives you the inspiration for these compositions? Where do you draw your inspiration from mainly?

MHLANGA: Well, I'd say that was a very very difficult question to answer because composition is a thing that is inborn - if you don't have it it is very difficult for one to compose good music. But I'll tell you from my own feelings that before I compose sometimes I hear melodies in my head, then I write them down. After writing them down then I have to arrange them for various instruments - sometimes this composition comes in a sort of a dream. The night before I compose I have a dream about composing or somebody playing my music and then when I wake up sometimes I remember the melodies that were going on and so I write them down. Sometimes it's just a way of expressing my happiness or expressing my sorrow - you know I can go to an instrument and sort of extemporise and I find that I play something that I've never played before or heard somewhere else. Well, those are the ways I go about it.

KWANONGOMA MUSIC (Chan'tengure)

ROSS: Is it very disappointing to you as a musician to see what sort of effect western culture has had on this traditional type of music, or do you think that one can have a dialogue between the two different types of music and perhaps share and participate and grow together? Or do you find it absolutely abhorrent that this western culture has tended to shatter traditional forms?

MHL. NGA: The feeling I have is that the majority of my people do not like African music and that sort of grieves me. But what normally happens in modern times, well in African music when a musician comes forward, is that his ideas are not purely on African lines, they are a mixture of African ideas and western ideas so that you have a burying of the two cultures and therefore their images are another form of African music, which would not be quite as true to say is African. It is African in the sense that it is played by an African but as far as world standards are concerned it is a new African music.

ROSS: Now, the Kwanongoma College of Music is extremely unique in Southern Africa. Would you like to see colleges like this being set up throughout Africa to promote and foster this type of music?

MHL. NGA: Yes, that is our ambition that our music should be spread to all races, not just to Africa alone, personally I'd wish that a college could be established overseas to train other musicians who know something about their own culture, but know nothing about African culture.

KWANONGOMA MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY: We heard this june played on the mbira or thumb piano during the interview with Alport Mhlanga but I wasn't able to tell you that it's the story of a wagon driver called Chan'tengure who never starves because whenever he runs short of food, his wife collects grease from the waggon wheels and makes him a stew!

KWANONGOMA MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY: Just one more tune from the Kwanongoma College of Music before I go: a Ndebele "gumboot" dance. Alport Mhlanga hadn't a title for it until one day a friend of his said it reminded him of cowboys out on the ranch. And so it became "Ranchera". And while you're making up your minds whether that's how it sounds to you, I'll say goodbye and hope to meet you next week for more "Arts and Africa".

KWANONGOMA MUSIC (Ranchera)

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