

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 98

(5R 53 S098G)

ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa" from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today, a composer and pianist talks about his craft.

MUSIC:

Concertina for Piano and Orchestra by Akinola Akinyeli

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Stay listening if you think that the piano is not an African instrument. Now Akinola Akinyeli will be putting a fresh point of view. Akinola has been studying western classical music here in London for the past five years, first of all at the Royal College of Music where he was taught the piano and composition and he's currently studying music theory and conducting at the Goldsmith's College, University of London. Well he came to public attention at the beginning of the year at a concert where he was the soloist in his own composition for piano and orchestra.

The whole idea of putting musical ideas on paper rather than sounding them straight out onto the instrument you're playing is unquestionably an imported idea. Even when someone's taught the techniques of notation how can they be taught to create music? Well, that's the question I put to Akinola.

AKINOLA AKINYELI:

Well it is difficult to teach somebody how to compose music. One learns the theory and then from there you sort of proceed and if you're creative then you'd just want to put a few notes down, pieces come out of those.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Would I be right to suggest that what you are studying is what one would term Western music and therefore probably not as useful to Africans on the whole?

AKINYELI:

In fact I think it is very useful to Africans, among other people, If you consider the history of what is called classical music, it started from Italy and then went through Germany, you know, and France to Britain. Now Eastern Europe started to come in and put their own part in. Similarly, I think for Africans, apart from developing sort of indigenous African music, that is folk music, it is necessary to have Africans writing classical music, so that they can bring in it across to the rest of the world the feeling of the African, because it is difficult I think for the rest of the world to go out of their way to study indigenous African music. But if African composers can write classical music, they are able to convey the feeling of the African in this way.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I think that's quite a valid point. Now you've just composed a piece of music. Could you illustrate the way you have achieved what you've just said?

AKINYELI:

Well, in this piece that I've just written, "The Concertina for Piano and Orchestra", I have tried to bring out the African element which people would readily understand. First of all the rhythmic aspect, most people tend to appreciate it very easily, the rhythmic content of African music, and so I don't think it is difficult to understand the opening section of this work because it's got a rhythmic drive to it.

MUSIC: "Concertina for Piano and Orchestra" by Akinola Akinyeli

AKINYELI:

Yes, those bars come just after the opening of the work and you could hear the African rhythm, you know the syncopation.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I thought it was extremely pleasant that one could make out the African rhythm. Now what instrument did you use in that piece?

AKINYELI:

Well, I used the conventional orchestra of strings, percussion, wind and brass and things like this. I've heard people express the wish that African musicians could write purely for African instruments. Now this would be, I suppose, a very good thing, but African instruments are not so well graded and the technique has not been developed yet. I mean the African masqued drama for example, I think is second to none, but he passes it down to his son. There's no fixed way of teaching somebody who doesn't pick it up from boyhood. So I think it is possible to

get the sound of African music or something similar to it in the modern orchestra.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The piano, of course, is not indigenous, the guitar is probably nearer to an indigenous instrument. Have you ever thought of using the guitar?

AKINYELI:

I don't think the guitar is more indigenous. Somebody was saying the other time that the piano is probably African, more than anything else, because the wood used to make the piano is got from Africa mostly, the ivory for the keyboard is got from East Africa, the metal strings probably also the copper.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I was thinking more in terms of instruments actually played. The guitar is very, very popular in all parts of Africa, you see. That's the sort of thing I was thinking about.

AKINYELI:

Yes, I know that's what you were driving at, and if all the things that go into making the grand piano are found in Africa I suppose.....

TETTEH-LARTEY:

How about the xylophone for example?

AKINYELI:

That's fine as well, it is good. It's almost like a piano in many ways. It's more percussive but I think the piano would do for certain works. One cannot go on writing for just the piano but I think for certain works the piano would do.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you make use of local tunes, indigenous tunes, or do you compose the tunes yourself? That one for example I couldn't recognise as any particular folk song.

AKINYELI:

Well, the example we heard was, well I took it from a folk dance tune, but I reorganised it so that it's not easy to recognise. But I've used another tune, the Eyo Festival tune from Lagos and in this one I think anybody from Lagos or Nigeria can easily recognise the tune.

MUSIC: Concertina for Piano and Orchestra by Akinola Akinyeli

TETTEH-LARTEY:

This sort of music is refreshingly unlike some other music composed by well-known composers like Fela Sowande, Ephraim Amu and the latest example was Sam Akpabot, whom you might have met. Now, do you consider yourself in the main stream of composers, or are you trying to do something different?

AKINYELI:

I'm not consciously trying to do something different. I suppose even though we're working on the same type of material our individuality will come out. If you take the Eyo-tan, for example, in Nigeria, in Lagos, it's basically a very happy tune but the way I've treated it, listening back to it I feel it's got some melancholy about it. I think it's probably because I was a bit emotional about it when I was writing it, and thinking about home and things like this, it's more sad than it usually is in Nigeria.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What did you have in mind when you composed the "Concertina"? Was it to record an experience, was it to put something down for the future to be remembered by?

AKINYELI:

Basically it was to express my feeling for those early days when I was living in Lagos, going to school in Lagos and things like this. Well, if you think of it that I have not been back to Nigeria for over five years, well I think you'd understand. Again it's the same kind of thing with Chopin, the Polish composer who was living in France for most of his life. He had this great feeling, this longing to go back all the time, and it came out in his music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now when you go back home now that you've mentioned it, how large an audience do you think you can command for this sort of music?

AKINYELI:

Well, I think at the beginning there probably won't be very many people, not many that is compared with the rest of the population because we've got sixty million people in Nigeria and other countries have got so many as well. At the beginning it will probably be restricted to those who've studied some music at school, but gradually I think, when people find that their own

rhythms are being used in their works and things like this, they'll come along and listen, they'll feel they can participate more, they'll feel they're being represented in the field of classical music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And in order to achieve it do you intend to play in the large cities or are you going to travel about the country and make a sort of popular appeal?

AKINYELI:

I'm not going to try to make a popular appeal. I think I'm going to write music that I think people would understand and then I expect them to try to listen.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What do you intend to do with your studying of conducting? Are you going to be a performer yourself, or do you intend to specialise in conducting, or do you want to put your force more into composing? What aspect of music do you intend to play the largest part?

AKINYELI:

Well I think a real musician should be able to do all. I think classical music now has got to such a stage that people have become too specialised. You've got some great pianists who can do nothing else except play the piano, some conductors who've virtually forgotten the instruments they started with, some composers who don't play any instrument. An African musician of this century should be able to do the same.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And to end Akinola, this very interesting chat with you, I spoke to Sam Akpabot on his way from America through London and I asked him what his ultimate ambition was and he said: "To be remembered as the greatest African composer who ever lived", may I ask you what your ambitions are?

AKINYELI:

Well, my ambitions are not sort of personal, I think they have more to do with doing justice to the great wealth of music in Africa. I think without doubt Africa is one of the most musical parts of the world and to think that not very much has been represented or done, or anything like this so far. I mean we are responsible for jazz and other things. Even pop music,

modern pop music, has got some roots in Africa, and to think that we have not really got down to putting things down ourselves I think it's a great pity.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Akinola may I wish you all the very best and I'm sure all our audience will also do the same. Thank you very much.

AKINYELI:

Thank you.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

My guest was Akinola Akinyeli. Let's hope that he'll be bringing his music home to Nigeria before long. I'd certainly like to hear more of his blend of sounds and rhythm - a very happy blend I thought. In fact, there'll be a further opportunity in just a moment for us to hear the final part of the "Concertina". Just a quick goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey; hope you'll join me this time next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Concertina for Piano and Orchestra by Akinola Akinyeli.

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