

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to the music of the Nile in "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

EGYPTIAN MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The sound of drumming from Egypt; not the sophisticated music of the cities, but music of the peasants of the south, of the Upper Nile in fact. For the three thousand years before the birth of Christ, Luxor with its Valley of the Kings provided the burial places of the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt. Now someone who's been to Luxor more recently than that, last year to be precise, is Ken Wittingham.. Ken, welcome back to "Arts and Africa". In fact, you've been recording music all over the country haven't you?

KEN WITTINGHAM:

Yes I have, though to be fair I must say that as you'll hear from the quality of the music, most of it has been recorded not in the fields but in concerts and that kind of thing. Actually, the music I prefer most I think, and what I'll talk most about, is from the south.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Sure. Where would you like to begin?

WITTINGHAM:

Well, I think if we begin with the sound of a singer from the south who's really something like a story-teller and story-telling is really the most traditional entertainment for the peasants in the

villages in the south, and all over Egypt in fact. If we move from the ordinary story-teller, he's got a big audience, he needs something more than just his ordinary voice, so he turns it into a song. Perhaps we could start there.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: Story-teller

TETTEH-LARTEY:

That certainly sounds very ancient to me. What's he singing about?

WITTINGHAM:

Well, this is really just the standard introduction to the song. He's preparing his audience, getting their attention and so on, and if you listen now as we move into the song, then you start to hear the distinctive features of the story-teller as he begins to draw the audience into the subject.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: Story-teller

WITTINGHAM:

And here we have him moving into the story. It's going to be a love story, something about a girl that he wants to marry, but there are difficulties between the tribes that the girl comes from and he comes from. These are very traditional stories, and a lot of them are related to ancient periods of history when there were tribal conflicts in the area. The song may well go on for hours. There's one particular song cycle of some tribe that actually takes six days to sing the whole song. Of course these days they never sing the whole thing in one stretch. But the stories go on for a very long time. When it's the dramatic story-teller, who if he was telling a story without music, would use his hands or body gestures, this kind of thing, in the song he uses intensive rhythms then the song becomes faster and faster. But yet the important thing is for anyone who knows the language, you'll find that the words are extremely clear, because it's not the music that's important, but the story. And perhaps it's because life's still very tough in the south where the climate is very difficult, very hot, very cold, very bad for agriculture, and every night the men will sit in the cafe, just telling stories, just telling each other what's happened during the day. Of course this gets very boring after a few days, so it gets developed into these stylized forms.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What other forms of entertainment do they have, if any?

WITTINGHAM:

Well I suppose the other thing that really goes hand in hand with the

music and the story-telling is the dancing of course and the area is very rich in folk dances.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well I enjoyed that piece of music we had at the beginning, but I wonder if that's the only instrument, I thought it was a bit monotonous after some time. You know, all the whining going on all the time.

WITTINGHAM:

Yes, I suppose it could sound a little that way, because really in the song, the singer or perhaps his friend will be accompanying him on a rababa, which is, how can we describe it, perhaps it's a bit like a two-stringed violin made out of a little goat skin, that's all. And yet, although it sounds a little boring in those songs, the kinds of things that can be done with this very simple instrument by a real artist who knows how to play it, and perhaps before we move on to listen to a bit of that kind of music, a real virtuoso rababa player, we should point out that in the song of course the musical accompaniment is not really important. It's just to give some kind of backing to the singer so that his story will be cut away from the sounds of ordinary life and provides a background, that's all. But now perhaps we could move on and listen to a real piece of rababa playing and you can see exactly what the instrument can do.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: Rababa instrument.

WITTINGHAM:

So you see you can do a little more than just make a background whining noise.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, that's right.

WITTINGHAM:

And perhaps you'll have noticed there as well that when he's playing on his own without a singer, things tend to become a little more lively and also the drums come in and here of course is where the dance comes in, because this is the kind of music the dancer will perform to. And in fact I saw a few performances of these people. They really get involved in their music and don't really take any notice of what's going on around them. And you'll suddenly find the rababa player will leap to his feet and perhaps put his rababa behind his head and play it with his arms behind his head, and he'll even dance with the girl. The girl will be dancing, perhaps with a broomstick

and he'll be dancing behind her, imitating all her movements. So they make a real duet with the dance and with the music. It's quite a fantastic thing to see.

Now the government's started to take these people and bring them to the cities. The cities are a bit more sophisticated, there's a different kind of culture that happens in the cities, but there's a big audience for watching these kind of things and also they're making attempts to bring together all the folk culture from all over Egypt. So you not only have this fairly harsh and vigorous music from the south, but you have the more lyrical and lilting instruments from the north or from central Egypt, which is mostly flute music, various kinds of flute, simple woodwind instruments. And they're trying now to find ways of putting all these different trends together into one orchestrated composition, so that everybody can participate together. Now I myself don't know whether this is successful, whether you can really combine different kinds of music together into one thing. But anyway their trying is a way to preserve this kind of music, which is going to die out slowly as the place becomes more industrialised, more educated and so on. Perhaps we could just listen to an example of one of these folk groups, people drawn from all over the country. They're led by the rababa player who we just heard, playing on the stage at a concert in one of the towns.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: Folk group led by rababa player.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's immensely sophisticated and very pleasant to listen to, very modern sounding.

WITTINGHAM:

Yes. I mean I think you could almost feel the conductor pointing the instruments to come in at the right moment, and everything sounds just perfect. But it loses perhaps some of the vigour of the countryside. Anyway up till now we've been concentrating mostly on the rababa, perhaps it's time we looked at one or two other instruments, because the flute's just as important in the Egyptian music as the rababa is and it's more representative of a different area, towards the centre of Egypt and perhaps also in the north around the Delta area.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: for flute.

WITTINGHAM:

That again, as I'm sure you'll have noticed, was an orchestrated piece of music, and you had the rababa there playing in the background, giving the lower harmonies, but I think it gave a good example of the virtuosity of the reed instruments and the flute.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I notice there seems to be a heavy influence of African rhythms on the music of Egypt. That is, Africa south of the Sahara.

WITTINGHAM:

I think one can find three or four kinds of influence. I mean, really if you listen to the drumming, some of it's African, some of it's almost Indian. And again the way that the words are used and the singing's done is very Arabic, so really Egyptian music seems to be a big mixture of so many different kinds of influence. But if you think you heard some African influence in what we've heard up till now, then I think we have something even more African.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: with drums to show African influence.

WITTINGHAM:

This is music which comes from the Nubian population, who mostly live in the south of Egypt, and of course who are very closely connected to the Sudanese. The Nubian music is for me one of the most exciting kinds of music that's found in southern Egypt, especially that very African feature, where you get the singer and the people responding to each other, and the drums responding with the voice. I'm sure you know the kind of thing I mean.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC: Drums.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

That sounds very much like Nigerian juju music.

WITTINGHAM:

That's right.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I wouldn't have known that it was actually performed by Egyptians if you hadn't told me.

Well Ken, let me thank you very much for coming along and bringing us this panorama of music. A lot of it was quite new to my ears. I'm rather curious to find out the sort of singing that followed that splendor rhythm we heard a minute or two ago so let's end the programme with that, while I say goodbye and hope to meet you at the same time next week for more "Arts and Africa".

EGYPTIAN MUSIC

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