

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

(No. 183)

(7R 50 S 183 P)

ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we talk to Francis Bebey.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Francis Bebey has been called one of Africa's major all round artistic talents. Born in Cameroun, Bebey is a writer of novels, short stories and poems - and an accomplished instrumentalist and composer. He has written a book about African musical instruments.

He began his career as a radio journalist and producer: and one of his novels 'Agatha Moudio's Son' was awarded the Grand prix Litteraire de l'Afrique noire in 1968. At the moment Bebey divides his time between Africa, where he has travelled widely and his home in Paris.

Recently he came into the Arts and Africa studio to talk to me - not so much about his writing as about his music.

MUSIC: Francis Bebey playing his music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Francis, was that your own creation ?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Well no. That poem is by Abioso Nicol (phonetic) of Sierra Leone. I like to interpret what African poets sometimes write which I consider beautiful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you are equally at home with English as with French. When you are going to write, how do you decide in which language you want to write or do you just write automatically in one of them ?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

I never decide, that's the point. No, I write in whatever language comes to me first. Actually, I've never written in English because my English is not as good as my Duala. Duala is my mother tongue which is a beautiful language, a Bantu language which I'm very proud of. Most of the time, when I have a song to sing or to express, it comes to me in Duala.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, since you feel so strongly about Duala, your own language in which you can express all your innermost sentiments and feelings, why don't you give us an example of this ?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Oh yes, this is a song about the beginning of the day: a man inviting his people to come along with him to see how the sun rises, because the sun is the light and when you see the light, you see the truth.

MUSIC: Francis Bebey song.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Splendid Francis. I will let you into a secret. I've been told that you don't like to sing. Is that correct ?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

That depends !

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, I don't believe that, I must tell you, having listened to you singing that beautiful song. Now you've written a book on African musical instruments and I must say, a very well written book at that.

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now it seems to me that your music has got a slightly Western slant. It's very polished. Now by saying that I don't mean to imply that African music isn't polished like a lot of people think, but you've just this western affectation

FRANCIS BEBEY:

... no African music is a very polished type of music. It's something different. You know, I'm an African of today like yourself wearing a suit (European costume !) you know and I've been taught a number of things. I was a former student of The Sorbonne in Paris. But also I have been taught the African ancestral proverb and my duty is to combine both cultures, both forms of culture.

To come back to my music, there are times when I compose Western music. There are other times when I compose very African music. The fact is that commercially speaking, I sell less African music than Western music. But there are things like music extract look for instance, this is a song by a pygmie, pygmies are people living in the midst of the virgin forest and this is how they sing. But I could hardly sell this one so I don't put it on record. That's why you don't know it.

MUSIC: Pygmie song by Francis Bebey.

FRANCES BEBEY:

You see, you see what I mean.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes,, well I'm not suprised that this is not very commercial. I must point out here that Congolese music is very very attractive, rspecially rumba style ..

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Yes, but they don't use the pygmie style.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

No, but that kind of music, the players have combined both indigenious.

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Not very much actually.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is it all together rumba?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Yes, but the rumba precisely is one of the things that gives me a headache. It's more Western than African and most Africans today seem to believe that this is African music. I don't agree. This is African music using European instruments, European harmony, European style of melody, while these people live near the pygmies and they don't use anything of the kind.

Don't tell me this is African music, that's all we can say because real traditional African music is completely different from that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Quite, now can you give me an example of any music in which you have combined both Camerounian and Western cultures ?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

Oh yes, sure. I can give you an example of an excerpt of a piece entitled 'Concert for An Old Mask' where you can see the melody as combined with the well known African instrument, percussion. Look for instance, when I play this music when I do this music then I add percussion to it music.

You see what combinations I'm trying to bring out of it. That's the kind of research I'm making in music. To what extent I'm right to go on with this I don't know. But this is the kind of thing I'm doing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now Francis, what are your ideas for the future. What do you intend to do from now on. Will you continue writing music, are you going to specialise in the musical field, the experimental aspect which you just told us about. Do you want to branch out more into the field of experimental writing or do you want to become a film producer, if possible ?

FRANCIS BEBEY:

What I want is to live as a man able to produce something for the rest of humanity, whether it is in music or in literature. I don't really make any difference. What I want to do is to prove that as an African I can present myself anywhere in the world as a man. This is very important to me and I think it's very important to all Africans.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Francis Bebey, truly described as 'a man for all seasons'. He strangely seems to pluck the strings of the heart when he plays that guitar and sings in his truly unique style.

Too soon our time is up, but I hope you'll join me again next week at the same time for more Arts and Africa. Meanwhile it's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

MUSIC: Francis Bebey song.