

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No: 289P

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you once again to another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. You may remember that last week we featured a report from David Sweetman, who has been covering the Festival of African Arts in West Berlin.

Well David is now back in London with a pile of tapes covering the different aspects of what was obviously a major celebration of African culture. We cannot possibly get all of them into one programme - so we've asked David to take-over for the next three weeks and report on three of the major elements of the festival - Music, theatre, and art.

He starts this week with music. But before I hand you over to David lets hear a little of the concert that opened the festival of African traditional music.

TAPE: BAND 1 ASHANTI DRUM MUSIC

DAVID SWEETMAN

The Ashanti drums of Ghana's Arogomma Ensemble who provided a suitably royal fanfare to open the festival of traditional music. This first concert was held in the suburbs of Berlin in the Dahlem Museum which houses one of Europe's major collections of traditional arts and crafts from all over the world and in particular a stunning collection from Africa.

The concert, which featured many groups from different parts of Africa, took place in the different galleries of the museum and even spilled out into the gardens. It was attended by a milling crowd of enthusiastic Berliners keen to see and hear something which for them was quite new and different.

SWEETMAN (Cont'd)

Well for me, hugging my tape recorder and microphone, it was an occasion to speculate on the nature of festivals themselves and what they hope to achieve. After all, the marble halls of a museum hardly provide an authentic setting for village music. And in any case isn't Africa just too big and diverse to be bottled-up in a brief concert. I talked to the Organiser of the traditional music section of the festival - Palestinian Habib Hassan Touma, who is now a naturalised German and who works on the staff of the International Institute for Comperative Music Studies in Berlin. And I asked him if one can really talk about African music when the continent is so big.

HABIBI TOUMA

No definately not. My choice was regional more than cultural. I took some countries from West, Central and East Africa who were represented in this festival, in fact we can have more than fifty festivals of African music!

SWEETMAN

What do you think the German public can understand from coming to a show like this? After all most music from Africa is deeply related to certain activities, such as harvest or child-birth. Is it possible to do it in a sort of European way as a spectacle?

TOUMA

Well, this was one of the main difficulties I faced. But I made my choice in such a way that we could put this music on stage.

SWEETMAN

There's a tendancy in Europe to view African traditional society as static - its a great mistake usually, but is it the case with music? Does what we call "traditional" music nevertheless develop and change as time goes by, or is it now frozen and is there a deep gulf between traditional music and music, say, that is practiced in urban areas, and that is developing and changing as time goes on?

TOUMA

Well, its not the mistake of the traditional music itself, its the mistake of those who are responsible for music, and I mean by this the Governments themselves, the Cultural Ministers in each country. Traditional music should not be frozen, but through colonialism it was neglected, which affected this traditional music by importing Western music into these countries especially responsible are those African intelligentsia or intellectuals who think that anything which comes from Europe or from the West is better than their own.

SWEETMAN

Habib Hassan Touma, Organiser of the festival of traditional music.

This problem of how best to present African music under European theatrical conditions was something that had confronted all of the groups taking part. One of the best solutions that I saw came from the Voninavoko Ensemble from Madagascar, whose songs and dances were really musical sketches illustrating aspects of Malagasy rural life. In this piece from the southern part of the island we were shown aspects of the harvest where young men and women of the village gather in the rice crop.

MUSIC: VONINAVOKO ENSEMBLE FROM MADAGASCAR

SWEETMAN

The group that provided themselves with the greatest difficulties of all were the Nigerian Ensemble who were obliged to combine music from several distinct and different cultures. Yoruba, Hausa, and Naguta from Jos in the Plateau State, as well as the Ibo State the Xylophists. Accompanying the group was Professor Akeubi of the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Lagos. And I asked him whether this curious mixture wasn't just a little too artificial.

PROF. AKEUBI

In order to present traditional music outside its context you have to somehow do something to it because this is not the way we would perform the music in the context of ceremonies. The Bata Dance, for instance - the Bata Dance would be performed in the context of a Shogu ceremony. Shogu is the God of Thunder and Lightning. Now there'll be a lot of people around, people who move from one part of the village or another - in fact, the whole village constitutes the arena of performance. But where you have a form on a restricted stage then you have to choreograph the performance for a new context, you see.

SWEETMAN

I noticed that there was a producer there who was telling people what to do, this is very unreal as far as traditional music is concerned.

AKEUBI

Unreal as far as traditional music in its context is concerned, but then nowadays traditional musicians in Nigeria are required to perform new contexts that are not traditional.

SWEETMAN

Isn't there a risk that the music will now stay frozen - that it won't develop and change because you are in fact taking these things and making them into little elements in a show. - outside in the 'real' world even traditional music moves on, it isn't static, is it?

AKEUBI

Well that's just the whole point, you see. Traditional music reacts to new and changing social conditions. Now the social condition in which we find ourselves today demands that we should perform music not only for people in the urban areas who have left traditional villages but also for people outside the country itself. So this is a new context for traditional music and this has always happened. We tend to forget that traditional music that we know - that we've found, and that we think is authentic - has always been involved in this way.

SWEETMAN

I notice that some of the things done here you have the whole troupe doing them together so you have Hausa, Yoruba - everybody altogether. So surely that is the ultimate in artificial production, isn't it?

AKEUBI

Well, I think that last performance, actually, is - when we planned this programme - the festival organisers wanted pieces of traditional music, and we felt that that was artificial - that in fact you ought to see traditional music in the kind of context in which it is performed. So we decided to present a context which is particularly possible, the visit of an Emir from the north to a Yoruba King in the south, this is the kind of presentation you would see - in fact I wouldn't agree that it was artificial.

SWEETMAN

So in fact it brings together two parts of Nigeria in a historically correct circumstance?

AKEUBI

It's not something that we have actually seen but it is something that could happen today or tomorrow, which would be perfectly traditional. If an Emir from the north decides to visit a Yoruba in the south he would bring his own traditional musicians and this would be something that didn't happen before in that particular village, but both of them are traditional. It would be something a new social circumstance demands that Kings from various parts of Nigeria should visit one another, and therefore the musical context that arises out of that would be, from our point of view, quite authentic.

SWEETMAN

In fact Professor Akeubi was quite right about one thing. The piece "Royal Greetings" was certainly a dramatic sketch.

The Hausa Emir with his splendidly dressed retinue was equally matched by the bright outfits of the Youraba count. Apart from any nagging doubts about the authenticity that we may have had it was certainly a stunning piece of theatre.

TAPE BAND 5-ROYAL GREETINGS- MUSIC

SWEETMAN

"Royal Greetings", performed by the Nigerian Ensemble who were one of the great successes with the Berlin public. But if they represented the highly polished professional approach, back at the Dahlem Museum was something that represented the opposite end of the scale.

TAPE: BAND 6 - MUSIC

SWEETMAN

Well that noise was not so much music being made as music about to be made. The Dahlem Museum had put on a special exhibition of African musical instruments and every day 2 young musicians and instrument makers Moses Yotemy of Zambia, and Donald Kachomba of Malawi came to the gallery to show visitors how to make a traditional wooden xylophone.

It was one of the most exciting spots in the festival with groups of German school-children turning up and having a great time cutting, banging and chopping, making it the only event during the entire three weeks where Africa and Berlin seemed really to come into contact with each other. The man who organised the exhibition, Professor Richard Campbell, an American who is Curator of musical instruments at the Dahlem Museum explained to me what he hoped to achieve.

PROF. RICHARD CAMPBELL

Musical instruments are there to be played. They are living objects, at least this is my opinion as a curator. I want the objects to be touched by people - the feeling of how this particular instrument functions, what materials are used, and this is one of the ideas of my workshop.

SWEETMAN

Do you think that African traditional music is a living tradition, that it changes and develops or do you think that it is now static as people are collecting music, preserving it, either in museums or in professional theatre troupes?

CAMPBELL

No. We can see this in the daily happenings here in the museum or even in the concerts that are being presented here in Berlin.

SWEETMAN

What are the greatest influences - pop music from the West say, or radio - ?

CAMPBELL

Radio is the main thing - records are actually in the second place - you also have the exportation of African music to the West which is obvious through jazz or through various cult musics such as voodoo cult which is prevalent in central America. On the Easternside of the continent one does find influences from S.E. Asia, especially in xylophone playing, which shows a definite tendency towards a musical structure which is based on the musical systems of Cambodia, Thailand, or even Indonesia.

SWEETMAN

Professor Richard Campbell, who, along with his two African colleagues, certainly provided a lively antidote to some of the more theatrical and produced events. However, there was certainly something for everyone and the citizens of West Berlin seemed to be grateful and all the major concerts were booked-up weeks in advance. For myself I would like my fiscal memory of the festival's traditional music to be Moses Yotamu and Donald Kachamba, playing an impromptu tune on the xylophone that they and their young German friends had just made.

TAFE: BAND 8: MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was David Sweetman with a selection of the traditional music from the West Berlin Festival of African Arts, the first of three reports on the festival that David will be doing. He will be back next week with a report on some of the theatrical events, so until then its goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye - and we'll be leaving you with a little more of the music we began with, the Ashanti drummers of the Arosoma Group from Ghana.

TAFE: BAND 1: PLAY TO TIME