

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to "Arts and Africa".

DISC

"REGARD SUR LE PASSE" - Bembeya Jazz National.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This stirring introduction to day's programme is the opening of a musical tribute to a 19th century West African leader who became a legend in his own lifetime. In 1870 Samory established a powerful force amongst the Mandinka people of Senegal and Guinea to combat French colonial expansion. Samory hoped to recreate the Manding empire of Soundiata Keita and although he died in exile in 1900 his spirit still survives in this musical homage by the Bembeya Jazz National.

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That commemoration of Samory is a recent example of the common cultural experience of using historical events and characters to enrich itself further. I am sure there are current celebrities that are being sung about at this very moment.

Victories are another favourite topic for new songs. What we don't normally hear are tributes to the sufferings of people. What can musicians and other artists do at times of bitterness and despair? This question has been exercising the minds of writers, artists and musicians in those countries worst affected by the famine that is now devastating large parts of Africa. The other day we had the pleasure of welcoming to the studio Afewerke Tekle, Ethiopia's outstanding and internationally-acclaimed artist. Afewerke, whose been given the honorary title Maître Artiste, was returning home to Addis Ababa from a tour of the United States where he was raising funds for famine relief in Ethiopia.

He has used his artistic talents over an enormous range of drawings, paintings, murals and mosaics, and these have been exhibited over the years not only in American cities but also in Moscow and in the rest of Africa - in Zaire for instance, in Senegal, Algeria and in neighbouring Kenya. I suppose Afewerk is best known for his work in stained glass. One of the cathedrals in Addis Ababa has a fine example, but even better known are his windows in the imposing headquarters of the UN's economic commission for Africa in Addis Ababa.

When Afewerk came along to our studio and talked to Florence Akst about his work and his fund-raising tour and told her about the visits he had paid to the drought-stricken refugee camps, Florence asked him what an artist can do to help his fellow countrymen in such dreadful times.

AFEWERK TEKLE

Well I must say a lot, a lot. First and foremost it is the duty, I believe, of an artist to record the glories of man and the tragedies of man. In particular in Ethiopia at this moment one of the great ways that I feel an artist has to play a role is not only to record these things but to partake to, if you like, to sympathise. Your mere presence helps in these places that are affected by this tragedy. It does, somehow, give hope to a lot of these people who know you, just the fact that are there. Then apart from that, by organising exhibitions, by giving paintings so that they are sold in auctions you can help to collect some money that is very much needed. Of course most of the artists who are not internationally recognised are making a tremendous effort of fund-raising by giving exhibitions, by selling their work and also by giving help which is also outside their profession - simple things like manual labour, like collecting things to help these victims. The other thing I found which is of very great importance is to see this whole thing through. It is very difficult. I myself, for example, having visited all the camps and, then having visited the places where these settlements are taking place, you know for a while I just couldn't think. For a week or two I just couldn't think. I could work. I began as an artist who had loved the ideas of becoming a great painter, painting lofty subjects. Suddenly, after I saw this, I just saw the futility of it all. But I am happy to say after two weeks or so I recovered and one has to face these things squarely and try and do something.

FLORENCE AKST

I would like to ask a little about your visits to the camps. Was this your idea? Did you feel that it was necessary for you not only to go and record what you saw but for you to also experience something of the pain of these people or was it an excursion organised, perhaps by the government, to take artists to the settlements?

AFEWERK TEKLE

No, no this was my own personal effort. I want to paint the history of my country, the landscapes, the people. I did not realise the extent to which the devastation has taken place. I really was shaken. And when I came back as I said, when I recovered, I made several studies and I'm working on a big painting which has been inspired by a traditional song about some sad events in Ethiopian history. I more or less buried myself in that work. So I would say that it really was a personal initiative.

FLORENCE AKST

You're on your way back to Ethiopia, by the time our conversation is broadcast you will be back home. Is there still something for you to do there? Wouldn't there be a mission for you to fulfil outside Ethiopia, for instance fund-raising, do you really feel that it's vital for you to go back home now?

AFEWERK TEKLE

Yes I think it is very important. You know, let's take a family, and in a family when a small tragedy happens I think it is most important and very useful for a member of that family to remain within the family unless he has very important things to do, in which case he can be far away. You could console. Your mere presence in the family plays a great role which cannot be expressed in words. Well, if that is the case in a family, imagine it in a nation. This catastrophe in Ethiopia is of such magnitude that later on an artist, even an ordinary man, an ordinary person, will like to stay and do what he can to alleviate the sufferings of people.

FLORENCE AKST

You've stressed the extent of the catastrophe in Ethiopia. Do you see Ethiopia emerging from this catastrophe in any vital way or is it going to be something that almost overwhelms the spirit of Ethiopia?

AFEWERK TEKLE

Well, I would like to answer this question in the one way I have realised it myself. And that is, I am positive that Ethiopia will emerge from this catastrophe. It is, I believe, a problem of our generation and as such the generations of Ethiopia today will have to pull together, forget our differences in many things. Of course at the moment, you know, being immersed in it, it looks so colossal it can drown you. It drowned me for two weeks. I couldn't work, I said: "What is the use of working if a man is destined to become this? What are we in the mighty scheme of creation? Just a fragment". And I felt that this was a hopeless case. But we have only one way to go and to live through it. I am very hopeful and, in fact, one of my greatest problems is to convince my fellow Ethiopians who at times see such a black situation, such a situation from which Ethiopia may not emerge.

FLORENCE AKST

Would you say that offering hope to people is one of the responsibilities for an artist in his society?

AFEWERK TEKLE

Absolutely. I think if an artist is worthy to be called that name, he must inspire confidence in people, he must bring not only through his work but in the times in which he lives, in the society among whom he lives, he must inspire hope and he must inspire confidence. Of course to do so one must have peace, peace is a most important thing. I think it is a primary duty to paint a picture, to do magnificent work. If it is devoid of these qualities, I don't think it will speak to the generation of the artist and to the generations to come.

DISC

ETHIOPIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This religious song from Ethiopia's Shoa province tells the story of Herod decreeing that all male children under the age of two should be killed to prevent the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. A piece of music that reflects the infant mortality not only in Ethiopia but in many countries stretching Westward to Mali. But I'd like to end today's programme with the sound of the instrument that is common to all these countries - the flute. It's the favourite of pastoral people everywhere.

DISC

ETHIOPIAN FLUTE MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

More news of the arts and artists of Africa this time next week. Until then it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.

DISC

ETHIOPIAN FLUTE MUSIC.