

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with some music from Uganda to introduce this week's Arts and Africa.

MUSIC - XYLOPHONE

That xylophone was recorded in Kampala by Martin Plaut of the BBC's African Service and he's here with me now to let us hear some more of the music he put on tape when he was in Uganda recently. Martin, I know you're going to let us hear quite a range of music, now where did you record it?

MARTIN PLAUT

Well, it all began actually when I went to the National Theatre in Kampala and I met Augustine Bazaale who is the resident stage manager there and he said to me "Look, if you like what you hear why don't you come up to the University?" And so I went up to Makerere University and saw the Department of Music, Dance and Drama there and they showed me what they were doing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It wasn't specially arranged for you, I mean the music they played?

MARTIN PLAUT

No, not particularly. This was just an ordinary session at the University. In fact it was recorded sitting under the trees. They have some pre-fabricated huts and they work under the trees, mostly in groups, learning the various traditional instruments. And they make the instruments as well as play them. In fact, all regions of Uganda apparently have their own specific traditions of music and it's exactly that that the University is trying to preserve and to really build up. And interestingly they're not just taking the traditional songs as they found them - some of them they're also adapting and using more modern instruments to play them on. But in fact the next piece of music I thought was particularly interesting - it's a zither and this was made at the University by people who are trying to preserve the traditional side of the music. But let's let the player himself introduce it.

STUDENT

This is a Chiga song about a man who had fallen in love with a woman, his wife, and later on she deserted him and he's regretting.....

MARTIN PLAUT

And what are you playing it on?

STUDENT

On a trough zither.

MUSIC - THE HUSBAND'S LAMENT

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Martin, what is the attitude of the Department of Music, Dance and Drama towards the teaching of music at the University?

MARTIN PLAUT

Well I think one of the problems that they face is the tremendous onslaught that you have on African music, in a sense, from outside. I mean you've only got to switch on any transistor radio and what do you hear blaring out - it's the music of the west, it's the pop music. Obviously some kind of balance has to be struck between that kind of music and traditional music and I think one of the interesting things that's happened recently is that in fact there's in a sense a reverse process. You're beginning to have, shall we say Africa fighting back and beginning to influence a lot of western music. But I think that can only happen if you have the strength of the traditional music to draw upon. That was one of the points that Rose Mbowwa, who is the Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Music, Dance and Drama, made to me when I spoke to her. And I began when I spoke to her with what must be the obvious question: What place do you see for traditional music within the syllabus, the overall syllabus of music?

ROSE MBOWA

A big place in the syllabus. We are trying so much to develop our own music, our own drama, our own dance here and in the teaching there's a lot of emphasis on Ugandan performing art. We are also dealing with other cultures, but first and foremost we want to develop our own. And so what you are seeing now does play a great deal, does mean a lot.

MARTIN PLAUT

Is this something that's a recent development or have you been doing it for a number of years?

ROSE MBOWA

The Department started in 1971 and since then we have been doing this. Of course as the years go on we acquire more and more instruments and kind of expand. And the more we do this the more discoveries we make through research and we hope that we will be recording this for other scholars - the history of the instruments, the techniques of performing them - so that they can also be developed like other instruments belonging to other cultures.

MARTIN PLAUT

Was it actually difficult to find people who had the skills necessary to play and teach the instruments?

ROSE MBOWA

Not really. We have quite a number of professional people in the villages, like the old man you've just been interviewing, who started off teaching in 1971 when the Department started with a diploma. In fact we use them as demonstrators whereas the academics can be so good on theory, they're not really good on the handling of the skills - passing on their skills to the performers. So we have a number, so that was not really a problem.

MARTIN PLAUT

Do you find it difficult to interest young people when there's so much pop music around, so much western music around, is it difficult to interest them in traditional music?

ROSE MBOWA

Yes, it has been. That's one of the problems our Department is finding really, making the young people realise that this is worth it. But from what they see us doing and the appreciation we get from the people who watch it, and from the kind of academic work that we are doing people have started realising that it is good and worth doing. And fortunately in the schools the music is being taken seriously - right from primary school they have started training young people to play instruments, sing traditional African songs and so on, so that the younger people are introduced to our own culture. They kind of grow up with it and they realise that it is important. Unfortunately, some of us were brought up on western culture in our education and want to change this.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So Martin, it looks as if the preservation of traditional music by the Department is not because there is a danger of the music dying out, it is just to enable the country to resist the competition from outside.

MARTIN PLAUT

Yes, I think that's about it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now we know that during the civil wars in Uganda, the recent civil wars, the National Theatre was a casualty as a result. Was the Department of Music also affected in any way?

MARTIN PLAUT

I think there can't be anybody in Uganda who hasn't been very severely affected by the fighting. I mean just about everybody, particularly in the Kampala region, has lost relatives, they've lost friends. Makerere University had an enormously high reputation and obviously that has suffered. But it was such a high academic standard that although a lot of people have gone there's a residue of knowledge and of experience that they can draw on and also there are quite good physical surroundings. The University itself is still intact, I mean it hasn't been shelled to pieces or destroyed as some of the buildings have in Kampala and so people are really making a go of things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have they got the resources to run the Department efficiently?

MARTIN PLAUT

Well, I think like everybody else they're finding life particularly difficult. I think the inflation rate which is now three hundred to four hundred percent does make life very very difficult for anybody who is trying to live on a fixed salary. Quite frankly I just don't know how many of the academics manage to get by on a salary of, well some of them are earning a salary of fifty thousand to sixty thousand shillings, when that really doesn't even pay for your food. But they still maintain real dedication to their work. I thought actually one of the songs that you might like to hear is the song that relates to a war that goes back many years, to the First World War, the 1914 - 1918 war, and this was a praise song that was sung to me.

MUSICIAN

This is a Runyoro song. It is praising the ex-servicemen of the First World War.

MUSIC - IN PRAISE OF FIRST WORLD WAR EX-SERVICEMEN

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The students there seem to be in a very happy mood.

MARTIN PLAUT

Yes indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well thank you very much Martin Plaut for your account. What song have you chosen for us to end the programme with?

MARTIN PLAUT

Well I thought we'd leave the war behind us and have something of a love song, which I thought was a beautiful number and the title of this is "My Love is Like a Diamond".

MUSIC - MY LOVE IS LIKE A DIAMOND

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This week music from Uganda. Next week more "Arts and Africa" - I hope you'll join me then. For now, it's the sparkle of diamonds and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye.

MUSIC - MY LOVE IS LIKE A DIAMOND