



“Here is our blood. It is serving for us,” was said of the tragic *Mendi* disaster

AT 5 O’CLOCK ON THE MORNING of 21 February 1917, the 4,300-ton screw-steamer *Mendi* was rammed by the 11,000-ton steamer *Darro* of Belfast, off St. Catherine’s Point, when she was a few hours out of Portsmouth and bound for Le Havre. The *Mendi*, with 822 men aboard, sank in 20 minutes. In the calm but icy waters (8° above freezing point) 627 perished, 617 of them members of the South African Native Labour Corps on their way to serve in the ports and factories of France.

Nearly 4,000 of the 93,000 African troops South Africa sent to the First World War lost their lives on service. There were other great sea tragedies, in that war and in the Second World War, involving the Africans who had gone to war because the white people persuaded their chiefs and leaders they should do so. There were brave things done and a few of these are remembered. Yet the *Mendi* stands alone for the “deeds of wonderful chivalry” that South Africa’s maritime historian Marischal Murray noted. The behaviour of the doomed volunteers and crew was called “one of the noblest demonstrations ever given of human heroism” by Lawrence Green, a writer not otherwise respectful towards his African fellow-countrymen. Among the community of South Africa the *Mendi* tragedy is a theme of song and verse — Mqhayi, E. C. Mango, J. S. M. Matsebula, Ben Tyamzashe are among many poets who have published poetic requiems or acclamations for the men who died when the *Mendi* went down. “The ship *Mendi* today we have given in marriage”, wrote Mqhayi in Xhosa, “Here is our blood. It is serving for us.” Up and down the country, for almost fifty years it has been commemorated at 21 February services in city “locations” and in country places.

There is perhaps one great *Mendi* story overshadowing the others, but which nevertheless typifies the spirit of that terrible morning.

WHEN THE *Darro*’s bows crashed into the *Mendi*’s side, the volunteers of the Labour Corps were sleeping, using their life-jackets as pillows as they had done on the month-long voyage from Cape Town. Some were killed by the impact, others drowned the moment the *Darro*’s master reversed his engines, pulling the ship’s

bows out to let an overwhelming, fatal rush of the sea into the doomed *Mendi*. But most of the men were on deck within a few minutes of the collision and the four blasts of the hooter that was the emergency signal, “going to their places unhurriedly” as a ship’s officer later stated. One large group, before the bridge, must have seen at once that the tilt of the decks and then the rapid sinking of the ship made the lowering of the lifeboats impossible and death in the freezing waters inescapable. They were at once called to order by a chaplain, a distinguished South African who had volunteered despite advanced years to accompany the African troops to France. The Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha should form the subject of a separate article. Born near Uitenhage in 1852 he had been on the Livingstonia mission in present-day Malawi in 1876 and had served his people in South Africa faithfully as missionary, teacher and minister for forty years after that. He was a man of great kindness and piety; he was also chiefly in bearing, and indeed by birth. The many accounts of his words to the men vary slightly, and I have never found the original source of them. With all their possible mistakes, they ring as nobly and prophetically today as they did when he cried out to the trapped men facing death in the sea:

“Be quiet and calm my countrymen, for what is taking place now is exactly what you came to do. You are going to die, but that is what you came to do. Brothers, we are drilling the drill of death. I, a Xhosa, say you are all my brothers. Zulus, Swazis, Pondos, Basutos, we die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our weapons at our homes, our voices are left with our bodies.”

Men who managed to scramble into the four boats that reached the escort destroyer or the *Darro* herself (one was spotted off the Dorset coast next day with 81 on board, almost dead from exposure) recalled hearing singing, and cries of “O God, help us”.

Some accounts say the men slipped off their heavy boots and danced a dance of death on the deck, others that they sang as they waited for the sea to swallow them up. All speak of the unflinching calm of the men Wauchope Dyobha addressed.

IN THE WATER, the struggling men in their black uniforms with red piping — “looking like flies in the milk” a survivor remembered forty years later — drowned in hundreds as boats sank or could not be freed. Dr. Hertslet who had been a medical missionary in Zululand and a doctor in the mine compounds and was now medical officer to the Corps, could not swim, but managed to hang on to the side of a boat. As he was about to let go through exhaustion, one of the men came across and held him by the wrists until he could persuade the rowers to stop and allow another into the boat. At the enquiry held in Portsmouth in July 1917 the heroism of the men — and of the *Mendi*’s crew as well — was recorded, and stories of self-sacrifice were told. One of the officers who survived later wrote: “the majority died like heroes. Even when life hung in the balance and the groans of the injured were ringing in our ears, there was a general calmness. After my experience in the wreck I no longer believe that self-preservation is the first law of life. Many of these brave men suffered a hundred deaths in the intense concern they felt for the women and dear ones they had left behind.” Another recalled the men slipping into the water: “Still no cries nor panic, but calls from one to another as they swam . . . And soon even these voices of the night ceased to be heard. Could everything that occurred that night be told it would be a record of undying fame for our South Africans.” R. H. W. Shepherd tells a story of a Pondo chief who was seen bobbing about in the dark water by a subject. The latter called out “*Nkosi, upila njani?*” (Chief, how are you?). “The answer came back across the icy cold water, the familiar Xhosa phrase: ‘*Akukabiko ’nto*’. (There is nothing the matter yet.) He was never seen again but his comrade was rescued and lived to tell the tale. The courage, the courtesy in that can hardly be surpassed.”

He was not the only chief: there was a son of the Tembu paramount, Dalindyebo, a grandson of the Barolong chief Moroka I and a grandson of Moshoeshe I of Lesotho. The men were from

many parts of the country, indeed of all the peoples and more that Wauchope Dyobha addressed. They had been recruited in their villages and locations, often bidden by a chief or headman to go and serve, in the tragically mistaken belief, fostered by the seven-year-old Union Government, that they would prove their loyalty to the new country and to the King of England by serving.

THE NEWS OF THE *Mendi* disaster was announced by General Louis Botha, the Prime Minister in Parliament in Cape Town and the whole house stood in silence as a mark of respect. But it did not go much beyond that. Some compensation was paid to those disabled in the wreck (and many were permanently harmed by exposure), others got nothing. The Union Government refused to allow war medals to be issued to members of the Native Labour Corps although a special issue of these medals to colonial troops

had been made by Britain (and the South Africans were singled out for praise by Lord Haig and others in France.) Mendi Day has long been accompanied by speeches by white administrators and "sell-out" advisory boardmen pointing out the loyalty to the Government shown by those who were lost with the *Mendi* and praising their discipline and obedience.

But the lesson of the *Mendi* was that sacrifice by the sons of Africa would not bring those at home recognition of their humanity in the eyes of their rulers. No doubt for many years men like Mqhayi still said of the *Mendi* "here is our blood. It is serving for us." If the *Mendi* is still to be remembered with honour, and next February will be the fiftieth anniversary, it will be for the courage of the men, for the glory they brought to Africa by their courage and calm, and for the prophetic call of Wauchope Dyobha, affirmed by the men he made it to, for the men of all those then very distinct tribes to "die like brothers . . . sons of Africa". ●

JAZZ EPISTLE

7

CECIL TAYLOR:
MOTION AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL SOUL

LINDSAY BARRETT

CECIL TAYLOR IS A YOUNG Afro-American pianist and on the evidence of his very sparse but brilliant recording output, he is one of the most important musicians of recent years, and probably of this century. He is also wonderfully articulate and clear in his thinking. He has absorbed, and subdued without pretensions, technical methods and advances within the frame of modern Western music. But the most remarkable achievement of his playing is his virtual inability not to swing. Every note or half-note or crashing percussive chord cluster that he plays is rooted firmly in the tradition of the black experience. In other words the blues and its extensions are the vital beginnings and foundations of all his musical experience.

He is extremely gifted in transferring personal ideas to the open practical field of playing them, and his phrases are always clean and brittle when loud, and furry when soft. This quality of texture is evident not only in his phrasing but also in his sound conception. Juxtaposing them and setting them off constantly against one another with various tonal colours and related rhythmic changes he manages to produce an almost orchestral effect in his solos.

And when he accompanies other instrumentalists his music comes alive in a unique way, giving the effect of continuous motion to the piece being played. Instead of riding the rhythm or hanging behind it, his music exists within it and as a result he is always propelled by it in his playing. This is another subtle reason for his perpetual swing. The development of this overall rhythmic panorama in all his music is then a kind of gathering momentum. Is in fact the skeleton process of momentum. Under his fingers the piano murmurs, whispers, roars and rushes, a veritable river of sound.

CECIL TAYLOR HAS ARTICULATED the depths of his conscious social attachment to music in two talks with the critic Nat Hentoff and although both these talks were seven years apart his ideas remained remarkably consistent. "I am not afraid of European influences," he has said, "The point is to use them — as Ellington did — as part of my life as an American Negro." And again, speaking about his blues 'Luyah! The Glorious Step!' he said "I feel any jazz

artist who is important must be able to play the blues well, no matter in what style he plays it." To which one can only reply with a hearty and thankful "Amen."

AFTER CLOSE LISTENING it would seem that in terms of musical influences from the mainstream of the pianistic development in jazz, Taylor has appropriated on the one hand the technical virtuosity of Bud Powell and on the other the spare emotional rawness of Monk and centralised them into a musical form that is more traditional in voice than Powell and yet more modern in its use of virtuoso width and range than the music of the arch-traditionalist Monk. At the same time his percussive tendency is remarkably like Ellington's whose orchestral piano work he obviously admires.

But influences, it must be remembered are often unconscious especially when they only contribute towards the strengthening of a highly personal creative vision, and Powell and Monk may only be representative masters of two areas of pianistic history that he has digested in the historical whole. In this case, to Taylor whose originality and brilliance of concept (or vision) is outstandingly in the vanguard of his work, even the consequence of these influences and experiences in his music must be in part unconscious. This is so because he is a "living" artist, by which I mean that he is obviously driven by the actual motion of his work and in consequence he discovers new things constantly and feeds them back into the music that revealed them in order to root out even more revelations. In this manner his music is at times cerebral.

Or to say this even better, he is a genuine gutbucket pianist, and grass-root personality. His sophistication is the sophistication of the soul and the soil. And in this quality in his music is found the most remarkable kinship with the liturgical music of traditional West African religions and social ceremonies.

In fact having said this we can examine the surface technique of his music in terms of interweaving instrumental movement and there again we find similarities of concept between Taylor and the balofon orchestras of Guinea, upper Volta, Ivory Coast, and Ghana, among others. But again this is