

REVIEWS AND REPORTS

REVIEW ARTICLE: VOICES OF A NATION: RECENT RECORDINGS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Sibongile Khumalo Brahms' Alto Rhapsody, Princess Magogo – Haya Mntwan' Omkhulu and more (CDHEITA009, 2005)

Carlo Mombelli and the Prisoners of Strange I Stared into My Head (INS011, 2007)

Old Mutual/Telkom National Choir Festival 2005 (DVD – No label, no number)

Philip Miller Black Box/Chambre Noir (Artlogic – no number, no date); and Music from William Kentridge's 9 Drawings for Projection (Artlogic – no number, no date)

Whereas review articles in the previous issue of *SAMUS* (25, Harrop-Allin 2005, 109-25; Blake 2005, 126-43) were concerned with recent books and scores respectively, the present article considers recent recordings. For the sake of narrowing a very large field, only non-commercial recordings are reviewed, and only a sample of these. Indeed, with so few non-commercial record companies in South Africa compared to overseas (NMC, Black Box, Etcetera, Musical Observations, Matchless Recordings, and so on), no reviewer is ever going to have a regular range of new releases to discuss. On the other hand there are so many commercial releases each year in South Africa that even in one area (such as jazz or kwaito or gospel) making a representative selection is almost impossible.

The present selection of non-commercial recordings reflects on what musicians seem to be doing beyond the commercial, occupying a space that is neither classical nor popular, neither wholly 'serious' nor wholly 'light'. The latter terms are used with caution for they have become tainted in apartheid South Africa as synonymous with 'upper class/under class' or 'white/black'. If they serve a purposes here it is in the terms ascribed to them by Theodor Adorno, as being less to do with taste or race than with class, relating to serious and light music as representing what he referred to as the 'torn halves of an integral freedom' (Adorno 1936 in Bernstein 2006, 2). The larger halves are nothing less than artistic modernism and the culture industry, the split between the two generating a crisis in twentieth-century music that is a constant subtext in Adorno's writing and especially in his essay 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' (2006[1938], 29-60). On a musical level, the two halves of serious and light music were 'torn apart', Adorno argues, through their increasing commoditisation in the nineteenth century, the light becoming banal and the serious becoming so demanding, so challenging (as for example in the case of Schoenberg) that it was virtually unmarketable (Ibid, 31-35). There is no going back to the 'whole' because in effect this would be going back to a historical moment that can never be repeated. There is only a constant state of tension

between the two halves, serious and light, music as artistry and music as entertainment. A unity or grey area between them, with which all five items reviewed here are somehow involved, is not something that can be achieved in Adorno's terms: it remains an 'unresolved contradiction' (Ibid, 34). He makes a claim that there was once a balance between light/popular and serious/classical, perfectly achieved for a moment in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, 'in which the utopia of the enlightenment and the pleasure of a light opera comic song precisely coincide. After *The Magic Flute* it was never again possible to force serious and light music together' (Ibid, 32); this is an idea that I shall revisit later.

In looking at this selection of recordings on the cusp of classical and popular music, my hope is to show that in them something of this irresolvable tension remains but that it is endemic to our time and place, and to be welcomed rather than lamented. I begin by noting that the very culture industry that created the separation, still – now as a much larger recorded music industry – has difficulty marketing anything that lies on the cusp. This is reflected in the way these recordings were released: only two of the CDs/DVDs in this batch were issued on a label – Khumalo on Heita, and Mombelli on Instinct Africaine – and even those are small labels. Mombelli attracts his own very particular and loyal audience, and even the Khumalo CD is not likely to appeal to the kind of consumers that her 'lighter' CDs do.

Confronted with this eclectic sample, I searched for a connecting thread running through them, apart from the fact that they were all produced in South Africa, performed by South Africans and most of the music on them is composed by South Africans. One possible thread is the voice, whether choral, solo (straight or with extended techniques), sampled, or perhaps not even present as human voice but embedded in instrumental writing; and one may extend it to ask what these recordings 'voice' as texts. A second possible thread – following from that – is social comment or indicator: what do these recordings tell us about our society, its problems and aspirations? A third thread, and related to the last again, is more complex: the very reason they are unusual in the larger field of the SA recording industry *is* the fact that they are on the cusp, on the borderline between classical and popular, or non-commercial and commercial, and even on the edge of one style and another. It is this borderline zone that attracted Adorno's critique, too, because he saw in the separated halves of serious and light music a 'demarcation line [that] *varies*' (35; my emphasis) and it is the variety itself, as manifest in these recordings, that is worthy of closer examination.

It is this thread, then, that I will pull at the hardest although it will inevitably bring parts of the other two along with it. Voice, in particular, remains the most obvious surface element in most of these recordings, and notwithstanding Adorno's scathing remarks about listeners who cannot tell a good voice from a bad one since voices have become 'material' rather than 'expression', or 'holy properties, like a national trademark' (Ibid, 37), the power of the voice in South Africa remains strong and authentic. For ours is a singing culture. The voice has become marketed, yes, but we can still tell a great voice from a

concrete mixer and although notions of ‘good’ vocality are constantly changing (for example in the adjudication of African choirs), we are proud of our best exports precisely *because* they are marketable ‘holy properties’. Voice is a constant window into the main thread, then, which is an exploration of the borderline between serious and light *music*, for this review is as much about music as it is about performance, and it is music that reflects some of the diversity of a nation in which culture is still extremely diverse.

SIBONGILE KHUMALO

The title of this album celebrates the singer, the voice: *Sibongile Khumalo* is the main title, and the subtitle *Brahms’ Alto Rhapsody, Princess Magogo – Haya Mntwan’ Omkhulu and more*. Sibongile Khumalo is a classically trained singer who has performed operatic roles on stage (as Carmen in Bizet’s opera, for example) and sings oratorio and art songs. Yet she is probably more widely known in South Africa as a singer of light music. This is partly because as South Africa came out of the closet so did her voice, and she sings what she likes and what people expect from her, which is most often ‘light’. Her previous recordings, such as *Ancient Evenings* (1996) are thought of as jazz, although in the sense that Khumalo was less trained in jazz improvisation than she was in classical techniques this is not quite true. She does, however, straddle the serious-light spheres with great ease in terms of her repertoire, and another sphere too, folk music; for on the latest album pride of place is given to a song-cycle based on the Zulu *ugubhu* ‘traditional’ songs of the late Princess Constance Magogo. She brings a different vocal inflection to each style, drawing on her ‘extraordinary vocal gene-pool’, as Mary Rörich puts it in her sleeve notes to this album (2005, [3]) – a reference to the fact that all the styles she sings on this album have been familiar to her from childhood and that both her voice and her eclecticism were inherited from her parents.

Few singers in the world can move between vocal styles with such ease. There is a long tradition of classical singers performing light music: even the ‘three tenor’ concept that gave rise to several three tenors here in South Africa, is at heart an interface concept, bridging serious and light. Sibongile Khumalo belongs to this interface tradition but also extends it. She describes the collection of Brahms, Bokwe, Tyamzashe, Moerane, and Magogo/Khumalo/Klatzow on *Sibongile Khumalo*, however, as her first ‘classical’ CD (see McLea 2005, [8]). This is interesting. Calling it ‘classical’ is a way of setting it apart from her previous albums; yet this is not the first time she has performed South African classics: Track 4 on *Ancient Evenings* (1996), for example, is a light-music arrangement of J.P. Mohapeloa’s (1934) choral classic ‘U Ea Kae?’. This is a jazz arrangement of a piece written in an African choral genre recently claimed as serious music – particularly by Mzilikazi Khumalo (see Khumalo, James Mzilikazi 1998 and 2005). Despite its jazz content, however, the artwork on Sibongile’s 1996 album is full of images of her clad Eurydice-like in a white satin dress posing amid Doric columns: more classical visual clues can hardly be imagined, even though she did not call this a ‘classical’ album.

The first piece on the 2005 album is the Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* for solo voice, chorus, and orchestra. The chorus is the University of Pretoria Concert Choir and the orchestra the Chamber Orchestra of South Africa (COSA) conducted by Arjan Tien. This piece has long been in Khumalo's repertoire and it is timely that this superb and unique artist has recorded it. One of the things she or the producer decided to do with the Brahms is put it on two tracks: the first (solo) part is on Track 1, but when the key changes to C major and the chorus enters we move to Track 2. Perhaps this was a shrewd move, to help market the CD among a choral community for whom Track 2 could conceivably become a 'prescribed composition' for the national (adult) choir competition.

The other major composition on this album is the set of eight songs originally sung and played on the *ugubhu* by Princess Magogo, arranged by Mzilikazi Khumalo and Peter Klatzow and accompanied/orchestrated by Peter Klatzow: the 'Magogo' song cycle. Between these two numbers are two classic(al) African choral pieces arranged for alto solo and orchestra: *Isithandwa Sam* by Benjamin J.P. Tyamzashe (1890-1978) orchestrated by the producer of the album, Peter McLea; and *Della* by Michael M. Moerane (1909-1980) orchestrated by Susan Cock. Both pieces have been staples in the African choral sphere for many years, where they were (and still are) enjoyed for their respective composers' rich integration of European musical qualities within a long African tradition. Whatever African qualities were present in the original versions, however, have been played down so that these songs follow Brahms without any sense of hiatus. The Tyamzashe (his first song, composed in 1917; see Hansen 1968, 13 and 30-31) is arranged in such a way as to emphasise its Purcellian, almost madigalesque quality. The contrapuntal entries, diatonic harmonies, light texture, and somewhat high register of the original, when played by a string orchestra rather than sung with the timbre of a 4-part African choir, all sound more 'European'. The interesting cross-rhythm in the final bars now sounds like a hemiola in the new context, and incipient classicism is generally pushed to the fore.

Michael Moerane's charming and tender *Della* composed in 1969 (see Huskisson 1969, 158) is harmonically reminiscent of Mendelssohn but with Moerane's own particular quirks: anyone who has heard the a cappella choral setting can recognise the original voice that is Moerane's. It has been more skilfully arranged than the Tyamzashe (which is literally a transcription for solo voice and strings), yet comes across like an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century part song. Both songs are thus thoroughly classicised and hence Westernised, and the effect is somehow to relocate them in a mythical past where they sound almost as forebears to the sound-world of Brahms, rather than its inheritors: a past that was musically known in part (and consciously or unconsciously) to the composers, but not referenced at either surface or background level in their work as much as it is here. It feels slightly odd to package the music in this arcane way although there is nothing wrong with orchestrating choral music to increase its value as cultural capital, if this does indeed become the case. Perhaps one of the main problems with what has been done is the emphasis on African style as 'early' Western style. As Grant Olwage in his work on John Knox Bokwe has noted, this is precisely the view of commentators such as

Percival Kirby fifty years ago, when, ‘near the end of his life, ordering his knowledge according to an evolutionary scheme, Kirby detected in black choral composition European music in its ‘elementary stages’ (2003, 132).

A third choral song, the beautiful and moving *Plea for Africa* (1892) by Bokwe (1855-1922), ends the album. This takes on even more strongly its attire of an evangelical hymn in a fairly simple arrangement by Susan Cock in which the brass are prominent and the plodding rhythm reinforced. It becomes even more what it grew out of: the Victorian revivalist hymn as popularised by Sankey and Moody (see Olwage 2003 Chapter 5, 153-58 and 163 for a detailed musical and cultural analysis of *Plea*). In the process of orchestrating *Plea*, Bokwe’s pan-African Christian sentiments of more than a century ago are revived, too. It was in fact Walter Sisulu who first drew ‘modern’ attention to *Plea*:

Sisulu [even] suggested, though he gave no evidence, that ‘JK [Bokwe] inspired the composition of our “Nkosi Sikilel’ iAfrica” by his own composition “Give a Thought to Africa”, the first line of ‘Plea’. Perhaps the textual affinity suggested the influence; the chorus in ‘Plea’ ends with the benediction ‘God bless Africa’, also the preferred translation of the ANC anthem’s title line. From this Sisulu concluded that it was ‘obvious’ that Bokwe was ‘concerned with the whole of Africa’, ‘a forward-looking outlook much advanced for his time’ (Sisulu quoted in [Frieda] Bokwe Matthews 1995, 105-6; in Olwage 2003, 163).

All three arrangements tell us more about our times and about the arrangers, perhaps, than the African composers; and as almost always with such collaborations (whether contemporary or posthumous), the result is imbalanced in favour of the arranger: so much so that from the point of view of ownership and copyright the African composers have been fast-tracked into the Public Domain (according to the back of the liner notes), and therefore no royalties will reach Tyamzashe and Moerane’s estates (the Bokwe is out of copyright anyway). But what is going on here in terms of Adorno’s tension between serious and light music? What these arrangements do, I suggest, is underline the tendency of one sphere to become like the other. For ‘[j]ust as the history of serious music since Mozart as a flight from the banal reflects in reverse the outlines of light music, so today, in its key representatives, it gives an account of the ominous experiences which appear even in the unsuspecting innocence of light music’ (1991, 34). African choral music is a complex case: once regarded by apartheid institutions such as the SABC and SAMRO as light music, it is now claimed as serious *African* art music (Khumalo, James Mzilikazi 2005). In their new orchestral arrangements these choral classics from 1892, 1917, and 1969 are reinscribed as *Western* orchestral songs, but in somewhat light vein. Are these arrangements directed towards the South African or overseas market? It is hard to tell, but they do raise issues of style and identity, bring out the contradictions Adorno refers to, and highlight – strikingly – the difference between Brahms and Magogo/Klatzow.

How different to hear the master orchestrator Peter Klatzow at work in the eight songs originally sung by Princess Magogo. While they may sometimes also remind us of an earlier time – but no earlier than the early twentieth century – and another place, they

come much closer to contemporary South Africa in the way they interpret the Magogo songs. I prefer these orchestrations to the piano accompaniments with which this cycle is already known, too, because the orchestra substitutes much more imaginatively for the bow harmonies of the original. It is as if Klatzow has taken cognisance of the fact that the listener cannot hear all of the highest or potential overtones in her recordings, and has supplied a realisation of them. While Magogo was a composer 'in indigenous-religious and traditional idiom' (sic) (Huskiison 1969, 20), David Rycroft has pointed out that many of her recorded songs are arrangements of traditional ones – cover versions, in pop music parlance – so that Mzilikazi Khumalo's 'transcriptions' of the vocal lines only represent a particular performance of each song. Several of these are included in David Rycroft's collection (1975/76), and I imagine that Mzilikazi Khumalo would have referred to these, as well as other sources, to guide him in his work. What the Khumalo/Klatzow recomposition does in addition to 'paying tribute' to the old, however, is bring something *new* to Magogo's work; it reimagines it imaginatively. By contrast, the Tyamazhe, Moerane, and Bokwe arrangements seem to reinforce and almost caricature something perceived in the original.

Sibongile Khumalo sings beautifully throughout, although the orchestral playing does not always match up to her vocal artistry (in *Della* for example the conductor Arjen Tien rarely manages to keep the orchestra together with the singer). Hers is an interesting case as South African voices go: she was taught very carefully in her youth, not exposed to the competitiveness of a South African Tirisano schools' competition or an opera school before her voice was ready, and consequently her voice has been allowed to grow incrementally. She is only now coming into her professional prime and her voice will be good for decades to come. It is the most distinctive voice of the nation – yes, a 'national trademark' – yet also stands up in an international arena without any need to be marketed as coming 'from South Africa'. As Mary Rörich puts it, her voice 'frequently brings to mind a Jessye Norman or a Grace Bumbry' (2005, [3]). She is a singer who 'could have been the star of any major European or American operatic stage' (Ibid); but she has thankfully preferred to work in South Africa, and mix her Brahms with Magogo and Moerane.

There is a poignancy running through the whole album, which comes from the artwork and textual references to Khumalo's parents, who gave her the eclectic musical environment that has made her so at home with musical borderlands. One of Khumalo's earliest memories was listening to her mother sing the *Alto Rhapsody*: 'My mother, Grace Mngoma, was the alto soloist who sang it with the Ionian Male Choir, started by my late father Khabi Mngoma, in 1959/60' and it remained in their repertoire until 1964/65 (Ibid). There is a haunting photograph of Grace (Khumalo 2005, [10]) that speaks poignantly to the ethos of 'revisiting history' underlying the whole album.

CARLO MOMBELLI

Mombelli has always occupied the grey area between jazz and new music, fitting much more easily into the latter although his musicians all come from the jazz tradition. Mombelli himself comes from a jazz-rock background, with the group Weather Report as one of his first idols. He has always been experimental (see his previous albums such as *Abstractions* (1989), *Bats in the Belfry* (2000), *When Serious Babies Dance* (2002), taking what Gwen Ansell calls ‘musical risks’:

Carlo Mombelli, in his group Prisoners of Strange, has used unexpected instrumental combinations that are drum-free, or pair two trumpets in place of a conventional front line, or feature a club dance drummer. There are samples: a child’s dreamy voice; legendary operatic soprano Mimi Coertze [sic]. Texture, harmonies, and pulse displace catchy melodic riffs, and vocalist/trombonist Siya Makuzeni swoops, shrieks, and declaims as much as she sings. It is not music designed to be mass-marketed (Ansell 2004, 285).

There was a time about six years ago when he was considered too avant-garde for the Standard Bank National Jazz Festival and instead made his National Arts Festival debut at the New Music Indaba in Grahamstown (2001). Times have changed, but not Mombelli: the jazz world has merely caught up with him. A regular jazz performer with his bands Prisoners of Strange and Abstractions Revisited and thus a ‘jazz’ composer by virtue of those outfits, in the last few years he has also been composing for classical players: wind quintet, saxophone quartet, solo piano. This has spread to his latest CD, *I Stared Into My Head*, where tracks such as ‘Mr Battiss’ (after the legendary South African artist) feature strings alone, and in addition to the usual Prisoners line-up of Marcus Wyatt (trumpet), Sydney Mnisi (sax), Lloyd Martin (drums) and Siya Makuzeni (voice) he uses concert cellist Jessica Bailey and string players from the Johannesburg Musical Initiative. I think of Mombelli as a maverick, an Erik Satie figure in South African music – a quality expressed for example in the quirky humour of his titles (‘Ethical Sam’s Cookery School’, ‘The Procession March of King Ferd the 3rd’), but also in his commitment to an unswervingly eclectic artistic goal.

Mombelli is a light music composer-performer with a serious social message. In ‘Ethical Sam’s Cookery School’ (Track 4) we hear about the exploits of one Ethical Sam (a not-too-oblique reference to Uncle Sam) who ‘travels the world advising everyone how to cook their own traditional food’ (CD cover). The piece is ironic, underpinned very simply by an ostinato bass over which Siya Makuzeni’s trained jazz voice is used like an instrument, without text, purely for its colour and expressiveness (and not just as ‘material’ either). The ostinato eventually acquires the text ‘We come in peace’, chanted by the whole band as an ironic mantra. Aside from differences between this and other compositions reviewed so far, this song points up very sharply how differently the voice is explored in a more experimental setting. In ‘Gito’ (Track 3) he laments the death of fellow bassist Gito Baloyi, who was tragically murdered in Hillbrow in 2004 on his way home from a gig. ‘Malunde – Street Child’ (Track 6) observes another social ill particularly visible in Johannesburg:

homeless people. 'Malunde', the song asks, 'where is your home? / running from your memory / the life you left behind / the streets / the corners / visions of another world / children searching for love' (liner notes).

In contrast to these ensemble pieces are Mombelli's more soloistic sonic designs, again with Satiesque titles like 'Meditations in my back yard' or 'The rights of springs', the latter showing a recently-discovered fascination of Mombelli's with sounds made by springs of all kinds. What is also Satiesque about these pieces is the absence of harmonic teleology – a harmonic goal – which is what also made Satie revolutionary in his time, so that he became a model for John Cage and English experimental composers such as John White and Howard Skempton. This is Mombelli at perhaps his most daring, and the pieces are 'spare': they are played by Mombelli on bass, with phrases 'looped' (repeated electronically) like machines that stop only when the loops run out. They have their own rules and therefore a fairly strong margin for error – a wrong note in one of the loops becomes part of the composition – which is what makes them so radical compared to some of the more goal-directed and structured ensemble compositions on this album.

While the pieces using strings explore some unusual (for Mombelli) harmonic regions, they seem conventional rhythmically and fairly restricted in the actual writing for strings. 'Mr Battiss', however, has delightfully disjointed and jaunty pizzicato material, always sounding as though it is going to fall apart. In 'Trance by chance' the strings are joined by Makuzeni's voice, and then supplanted by members of the ensemble, developing material over another of Mombelli's simple but effective ostinatos. The structure is a gradual accretion of instruments, texture, and volume; and then the gradual removal of these. The opening string music turns out to have been a red herring: it never returns, and its strange harmonic quality is never taken up by the band. Quite an unusual and original structure for a South African jazz track. Of all Mombelli's albums so far, this is the most borderline – between jazz (light) and new music (serious). Improvisation is there as scene setting; there are few opportunities for the usual improvising over chord changes in the conventional jazz sense. 'The Procession March of King Ferd the 3rd' is an exception, a saxophone solo by Sidney Mnisi and extensive extended vocal techniques from Siya Makuzeni (swoops, shrieks, and declamations); and the listener is reminded how exciting the Prisoners can still be in this ensemble format.

We are in the presence here of a brilliant musician, who is not content to rest on his compositional laurels. Some of the familiar trademarks in Mombelli's music are present, but there are new avenues not previously explored. This CD runs the gamut from classical string orchestra to jazz ensemble to almost pure electronics. I don't know who else does that in South Africa, and not on one album in any case. In comparison with Sibongile Khumalo, Carlo Mombelli is in control of the whole CD as a composer, too, and perhaps this is what allows him to express more directly and freely the 'ominous experiences' of contemporary life that Adorno may have been alluding to.

OLD MUTUAL/TELKOM NATIONAL CHOIR FESTIVAL 2005

This disc is essentially an edited document of the Old Mutual/Telkom National Choir Festival finals in late 2005, a competition that features the finalists in two categories, Standard (9 choirs) and Large (7 choirs). This is a live performance event, the culmination of many similar events throughout the year, and not recorded in a studio, making it the ‘odd one out’ in this review. But the DVD also makes a very good point here as it rests on the cusp in many ways, presenting an extremely widely performed genre, and problematising in interesting ways the contradictions that Adorno talks about.

The long established indigenous choral competition, with ‘Western’ and ‘African’ prescribed categories of music, is a venerable institution in South Africa ostensibly presenting both musical tendencies – serious and light – in terms of repertoire and performance style. However, both categories can be seen as both serious and light. The prescribed Western pieces in 2005 were by de Rille (1828-1915), Genée (1823-1895), and Pinsuti (1829-1888): composers regarded in the ‘West’ as lightweight. The prescribed African pieces were by Motuba (1920-1982) and Mamabolo (b.1918), who are not lightweights at all. The third category seems to be ‘own choice’ and is traditional – with movement, dance, regional costumes, and instruments. This, too, is difficult to see as ‘light’. The ‘torn halves’ have thus not in any way been reunited but they do seem to have changed places and without any difficulty, and brought along with them (as in the case of the Khumalo CD) a third ‘half’, the traditional.

I borrowed an album of scores (thanks to Thembele Vokwana) of the six prescribed songs in the Large Choir category, which occupies the second half of the DVD. There was a choice of three ‘prescribed African’ pieces and three ‘prescribed Western’ pieces (Old Mutual/Telkom 2005, [ii]), and there are several performances of some on the DVD. Given the number of composers in South Africa currently writing music for choirs (never mind composers over the last 100 years), it is puzzling as to why two of the three African pieces are by the same composer, Joseph Solomon P(erise) Motuba. His *Moresedimosetsi* (Our Light; n.d.) is a praise song to Unisa (University of South Africa, the distance-learning institution). Unlike many songs written for choir festivals and competitions in South Africa with an A-B-A structure and a slower B section, this piece starts with an ‘Andantino’ leading to a ‘Maestoso’ and about halfway through jumps headlong into an ‘Allegro brillante’. The music is somewhat like *Plea for Africa* in its homophonic, hymn-like texture, but Motuba also uses several interesting solo/choral effects: in the ‘Maestoso’ a soprano solo (marked ‘amabile’) is accompanied by the rest of the choir alternating between humming and repeating the word ‘Unisa’ (puzzlingly marked ‘acciaccatura’); and in the ‘Allegro brillante’ he extracts a double quartet (indicated ‘with reverence’) from the ranks of the choir. He also cocks a snook at Western composers who would criticise the voice-leading technique of African composers, by employing lots of delicious parallel fifths and octaves, and he intensifies the harmonic language with some chromatic melody notes and chords such as secondary dominants and diminished sevenths.

But this is where problems seem to arise with the performance: even these prize-winning choirs, who are so adept at the traditional and Western categories, seem less at home here. Most are not able to truly master Motuba's harmonic language. Together with the powerful use of vibrato this often leads to a situation where the music sounds very different from how it looks on the page – which raises interesting questions about whether this is a written or oral tradition. It sounds almost avant-garde, as if it were composed by György Ligeti. Motuba's other song, *E Mang Logatong?* (I could not determine the date) is a slow song, also harmonically demanding, and mostly in at least six parts, using a double choir scoring. *Bjatladi* by P(odu) H(udson) B(right) Mamabolo must have been composed before 1969, because it is mentioned in Huskisson 1969 (95; spelled as '*Byatladi*'). It is homophonic with call-and-response sections, syncopation, and less chromaticism than in the other two songs.

The harmonic language of these African pieces has some similarities with that of the Western pieces, which are from the nineteenth century, although one must also bear in mind that throughout the African choral tradition there were compositions in both serious and light (jazzy) vein. The repressive world of Victorian Britain in which Pinsuti worked (de Rille was French, Genée Austrian) was one in which the amateur performance of light-hearted part-songs thrived. These are, however, much better examples from this repertoire, by Mendelssohn for example, or Sullivan, or Parry. It is difficult to speculate, but I suggest that all the compositions were probably published in the 1880s and '90s as free supplements in the (then) monthly-issued *Musical Times* in London – a great disseminator in Europe and the colonies, of vocal music. Having been brought to South Africa probably very early in the twentieth century they and many songs like them have remained in the competition repertoire year after year. Pinsuti's *The Sea Hath Its Pearls* certainly was. With its words by Longfellow translated from Heine, and its publication by Novello, Ewer & Co. [1884] (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/smhtml/smpop.html>, accessed 18 November 2007) it is a typical *Musical Times* supplement of the day.

The question is: why are young black choirs, made up of working class and professional people from towns and townships all over South Africa, meeting several times a week in the evening to practice very old-fashioned sentimental songs like Frenchman Laurent de Rille's *The Martyrs of the Arena*, Austrian librettist and composer Richard Genée's *Italian Salad*, or Rossini pupil Ciro Pinsuti's *The Sea Hath its Pearls*? The answer surely lies in the tradition of choral practice as an inscriber of social identity – this is music that is comfortably familiar in style, having been prescribed for many years. It *is* the tradition. This *is* what is 'prescribed', too, and if the choir wants to win the competition they must sing it. A more difficult question is how the content of the songs – the lyrics especially – articulate or reflect something of contemporary township life and its daily struggles. What do they tell us – as I asked earlier – about our current society, our problems, our aspirations?

Like so much music it is a form of escapism, I suggest, a way of having a kind of separate and ideal life through music of an earlier age. The choirs sometimes emphasise the earlier

quaintness in their costumes. In de Rille's *The Martyrs of the Arena* therefore we find the Gauteng Choristers – African city slickers who make an excellent and frequently prize-winning choir – presenting the piece in terracotta robes, which help them dramatise the text and perhaps identify with the martyrs. It obviously does have a greater meaning for the choirs, but it would be a much greater project than I can achieve here to find it. Genée's *Italian Salad* ('Insalata Italiana') is a nonsense text consisting of a string of Italian musical terms ('Crescendo, crescendo, sforzando, sforzando, forte fortissimo! ... strettii!') in an arrangement by H. Elliot Button. It inspired a good performance by the African Choir, who brought out the humour and paid close attention to dynamics.¹ And musical terms *are* important in the African choral tradition – compositions from all eras are full of them. The point of the original may have been instructive: Genée wrote it at a time when large numbers of people in Europe and especially Britain were learning tonic solfa and even staff notation, and Italian terms were part of basic 'rudiments', then as now. Its humour may even have been a ploy to lighten the labour of learning the names, or on the other hand the song might simply have been a send-up. There are thus different possible ways to interpret it in performance, and to understand its meanings for choirs today.

Both Western and African pieces on this DVD are unfortunately marred by two problems of performance practice common among choirs: intonation – sometimes it is not easy to get a sense of the tonality; and too liberal a use of 'hairpin' dynamic swells. The hairpin is probably another device (like the Italian terms) borrowed from the many Western compositions, especially older ones, sung by choirs. On the other hand, it may be an expressive trope associated with traditional music – it is difficult to say because it comes everywhere. One aspect of the DVD that was handled with more originality and a greater sense of freedom than the 'serious' and 'light' music *was* the traditional or indigenous section. The choirs were musically and visually excellent, displaying a wealth of traditional music from various parts of the country, in most cases with dancing and instruments.

This DVD comes as a promotional or in-house item – and this is an interesting point: it is difficult to tell who it is made for, although what is clear from the cover is that the names of the choirs are all important. There are no liner notes giving the context (for someone who is not in the know) or saying what the compositions are, and no other information on the box. This strongly suggests that the DVD is targeted at people who were at the finals or took part in earlier rounds: i.e. choirs themselves. The composers are not mentioned on the DVD either – so once again they (or their estates) will get no royalties: on the DVD only the names of the choirs are shown, as inter-titles edited into the collage. The DVD author has each choir cross-fade into the next, sometimes even before the songs have completely finished. This is a record of choral music as 'a show', and also a valuable record

¹ There is an even better performance of it by the Youth Choir Balsis from Riga at 'YouTube' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHQHLNoWGE0, accessed 10 October 2007).

of tradition at a certain moment in history, one that leaves music as ‘composition’ in many ways incidental to music as ‘voice’.

PHILIP MILLER

It is interesting to compare film composer Philip Miller’s musical background with that of Carlo Mombelli. Neither has had a classical music training as such; Miller is a trained lawyer who took a course in film music composition in the UK and then moved into that sphere professionally, continuing with composition studies locally. Miller plays the keyboard but is not a professional performer like Mombelli, who has been a jazz bassist all his working life, leading his own bands and playing in bands led by the late Johnny Fourie and others. Miller composes in a completely different way, not improvising compositions but constructing and experimenting with sounds and samples in his studio. His music on an earlier CD, *Philip Miller: Music for the Films of William Kentridge* (1999, Krut 002 CD) shows his particular voice: a (re)mix of Shostakovitch, Kurt Weill and Philip Glass. Four of the original recorded soundtracks from the earlier CD reappear on *Music from William Kentridge’s 9 Drawings for Projection Composed by Philip Miller* [n.d.], reworked for live performers (Sontonga String Quartet, Jill Richards and others) together with music for four other films. This multimedia presentation ‘Nine Drawings for Projection’ was enjoyed around South Africa and in several other countries during 2004.

William Kentridge’s films were never really intended to be packaged as a set and when I saw them I did not feel they worked in that form. While there is a thread running through them – the tragic-comic figure of industrialist Soho Eckstein – they were produced individually over a period of several years and originally seen one at a time. As such – individually – they did make something of a statement, and the music written for them by Philip Miller fulfilled its customary role as film music. The music was considerably reimagined for live presentation – including the use of prepared piano – and in the process was foregrounded in a way that was perhaps never intended. Heard outside of the film altogether, on CD, and as a series of compositions the music is exposed to more searching criticism.

The first two tracks (for piano, and string quartet, piano, and trumpet respectively), for example, sound minimalist – Nymanesque – in that they use repetitions and patterns of motifs and accompaniment over two or three chords. The music constantly builds up in short energetic bursts, then starts again, clearly running narrative-like alongside the images. But they are images we cannot see, and as with Michael Nyman’s film music heard on its own as pure music, the repetitiveness loses its effect – one is made too aware of it, in my view. This continues into the third track together with more sentimental moments. One has the feeling in these pieces that the music is trying hard to be ‘different’, to stand alone as artistic composition rather than being like off-the-shelf film music. This is far less commercial than most film music, including Miller’s own music for feature films and TV. The influence on Miller of working with an artist such as Kentridge clearly nudges him towards writing something more serious and ‘classical’. Track 4 *is*

classical, and it is not even a paraphrase: it is the 2nd movement from Dvořák's String Quartet in F Op. 96 ('The American') overlaid with Miller's commentaries played on other instruments. Tumelo Moloi's voice is a pleasant addition to the string quartet writing in Track 5, 'Felix in Exile', which is classical in style. Track 6, 'Weighing and Wanting', pays passing homage to the bleak later chamber works of Shostakovich and to passages in Philip Glass. Track 7, 'Stereoscope', is the most conventional film 'mood' music on the album, presenting an emptier canvass and short motifs that are repeated and developed in a typically filmic way.

The *Black Box/Chambre Noir* project, exhibited at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2006, was shown in the 250th year of Mozart's birth (in 1756) and may have been a preparatory study for William Kentridge when he came to do his full-scale 2007 production of Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). Philip Miller draws on fragments from the 1937 Thomas Beecham recording of Mozart's opera (Geldenhuys 2006, 42), as well as a Herero lament and samples from indigenous Namibian music, to create a series of short sound-scapes using live instruments (trombone, euphonium, cello, and acoustic bass) and voices. A beautiful example of indigenising Mozart is a solo performance on Track 12 of the 'Marsch der Priester' (March of the Priests) by Alfred Makgalemele, a 'Johannesburg street singer' (Ibid). (His is the same haunting voice that we hear on Miller's earlier CD *Philip Miller: Music for the Films of William Kentridge*, singing 'What a Friend We have in Jesus'.) A recurring sound is that of plodding low instruments such as trombone and euphonium, as used in the last track ('Berlin Waltz') as a kind of homage to Kurt Weill. Indeed, the instrumentation makes this kind of reminiscence inevitable. The Namibian connection relates to Kentridge's treatment of the Herero holocaust (in which the German General von Trotter ordered the deaths of 75% of the Herero population in 1904 (Ibid, 41), here treated as a spectacle in images and sound. It is a powerful and emotional subject, yet for me does not match up to Aryan Kaganof's film *Western 4.33*, a darker and more profound essay on the same appalling event in southern African history.

Miller's music is tentative, as if trying to find the spaces left in Kentridge's work: a very difficult task (Kentridge's is a very powerful and controlling hand) and perhaps Miller tries too hard or too obviously at times. Indeed – with hindsight – one is tempted to think that Kentridge has imagined Mozart already in those spaces. Personally I think Kentridge has finally found his musical match – not in any contemporary South African composer (and even one with so strong a compositional voice as Kevin Volans yielded to Kentridge, in *Confessions of Zeno* (2002)) – but in Mozart himself. As the director of *Die Zauberflöte* (2007) Kentridge has given us a richly imaginative and multi-layered production, drawing on the combined symbolism of the African safari, Baroque theatrical illusion, scientific acoutrements of the enlightenment, and Masonic tropes about humanity, brotherhood and masculinity, that still have the power to challenge. And perhaps the theatre is where his art succeeds best, re-imagining the dimensions of the often two-dimensional operatic stage, and adding visual layers in an almost painterly way that few stage directors have

done. It is hard on Miller, to be usurped by Mozart, but there is some comfort in being displaced by one of the best composers 'alive'.

As noted earlier, while Adorno felt that Haydn subsumed popular music into the (serious) symphony and sonata, both came beautifully into balance in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, and this production can be seen to have reinforced this point at many levels. Yet the items reviewed here overall do not match up to Adorno's critique of the culture industry as an embodiment of the split between entertainment on the one hand and music with social value on the other. Most of them have an element of both; most are examples of music from South Africa that uncomfortably and boldly straddle the serious-light divide; they are exemplars of something that is not 'art music' (the world of Hofmeyr, Klatzow, Grové, Volans) but neither is it kwaito, 'house music', or *isicathamiya*. It is somewhere between that celebrates ambiguity; something that voices, however imperfectly, our own contradictions as a nation.

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SUMMARY

The voice has played a major role in South African music: the majority of compositions are vocal as are many performers of popular music, for example. The cross-section of recordings reviewed in this article attempts to trace the voice in all its manifestations – including voice as compositional identity and voice as instrumental timbre – as a connecting thread, in order to compare and critique new sounds that have recently emerged from South Africa. The eclectic mix of recordings embraces African choral music, progressive jazz, film music, and the latest ‘classical’ album by Sibongile Khumalo, arguably South Africa’s most distinctive national ‘voice’.