

Nketia's *The Music of Africa* and the Foundations of African Musicology
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If there is a single book that has attained canonical status in the field of African musicology, it is probably J. H. Kwabena Nketia's *The Music of Africa*. Published in November 1974 by W. W. Norton & Company of New York, this 278-page volume has remained continuously in print for nearly thirty years. It has been translated into other languages, notably German (1979), Chinese (1982) and Italian (1986), but not--perhaps surprisingly--into the one other metropolitan language with a claim to canonical status in modern Africa, French. *The Music of Africa* was conceived as a textbook, to be used, typically, as the basis for a semester-long course on African music, or as part of a survey of so-called World Music. Its four sections cover, respectively, the social and cultural background (four chapters), musical instruments (five chapters), structures in African music (six chapters), and music and related arts (five chapters). The book ends with three appendixes featuring a selected discography, a list of the ethnic groups mentioned in the text, and African terms used. Although the demonstration of structural principles in Section 3 inevitably involves the use of technical language, the book is generally free of jargon and immediately accessible to the general reader. Many readers seeking an introduction to the place of music in African society, the kinds of instruments that Africans use, or the nature of the relationships between music, language and dance, frequently turn to this book. Its status as a foundational work is well earned, for Nketia's erudition, clarity of expression, and powers of synthesis are evident throughout.

What made *The Music of Africa* possible? Although research into African music had been underway for at least three quarters of a century—first, as part of comparative musicology, then, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, under the umbrellas of ethnomusicology and area studies—publications fell into one of two categories. One was a group of impressionistic, fantasy-driven accounts by non-specialists for whom Africa remained *terra incognita*, a mysterious, far-away place fundamentally different from the West. The other consisted of more narrowly focused scholarly studies aimed at advanced students and fellow scholars. With the possible exception of Francis Bebey's *African Music: A People's Art* (French original 1969, English version 1975), no other work managed to fill this middle space by combining the appreciative spirit of non-specialist accounts with a scholarly voice that incorporated research by ethnographers and theorists. The first thing that made *The Music of Africa* possible, then, was a simple need: the need for a single, modestly-priced volume in which the essentials of African musical function and structure are set out clearly and with convincing examples.

The Music of Africa makes ample use of specialized works by other ethnomusicologists, but it does so without losing the vision of Africa as a musical whole. Aided by generalizations throughout, the book portrays African music as idiomatically varied on the surface but unified at a deep level. Nketia remained undaunted by the heterogeneity of Africa's modes of expression. And this, in turn, was possible because, although the sum total of African musics may be accommodated within the oft-used tripartite scheme comprising art music, popular music and traditional music, the book

focuses on the traditional category, the thought being that it is in this realm that the African essence is most clearly displayed:

knowledge of traditional African music in its social context is . . . a prerequisite both for understanding the contemporary musical scene in Africa and for gaining some insight into the musical experience as it relates to the African in his personal and social life (1974:20).

A second thing that made The Music of Africa possible, then, was its strategic deafness to popular and art music.

Third, and finally, The Music of Africa attracted a significant readership because it spoke a metropolitan language. Not only was it written in English but it relied on concepts and ideas that were conventional in the field of Euro-American music theory. Terms like melody, polyphony, scale and mode facilitated analysis of African pitch structures, while divisive and additive rhythm, hemiola and cross rhythm shed light on the temporal dimension. Although Nketia did not provide a genealogy of these borrowings, their use made possible an immediate cross-cultural dialogue without—at least notionally--distorting African realities.

In the years since The Music of Africa appeared, African musicology has consolidated its resources and developed a distinctive, if somewhat complex, profile. Major reference works have appeared (Stone 1998, Wachsmann and Cooke 1980, and Kubik 2001) alongside a series of exciting monographs focused ethnographically (Rouget 1996, Friedson 1996, Charry 2000, Askew 2002, among others) or theoretically (Locke 1987, Arom 1991, Nzewi 1997, Scherzinger 2001, among others). The desire to name and name accurately, instead of consigning African specifics to generic categories, is nowhere better illustrated than in the on-going research of Gerhard Kubik (Kubik 1994). Moreover, the kinds of questions that scholars ask nowadays are different from those that were being asked in the 1960s and early 1970s. A new theoretical self-awareness has swept African philosophy and literary studies, while the Euro-American critique of anthropology has rendered its fundamental difference-producing mechanism somewhat suspect. And a diffuse process of intellectual decentralization has found a convenient—if opportunistic—label in “postcolonial theory” (Moore-Gilbert 1997). The fact that The Music of Africa has not disappeared from view during these turbulent intellectual times is partly testimony to the strength of its original conception, and partly a sign of the inherent conservatism of (African) musicology. Nevertheless, the seismographic shifts within the humanities suggest that conceptually as well as in its mode of execution, The Music of Africa would be impossible today.

The most obvious question to ask about the book concerns the very idea of Africa (Mudimbe 1994). Is Africa a place or an idea? And in whose imagination does it have which status? Some early reviewers—Jones, Pantaleoni, Blacking--expressed reservations about Nketia’s generalizations, thinking them premature, or not sufficiently reflective of the diversity of Africa’s modes of artistic expression. But only a superficial reading of the book will lead one to imagine that its generalizations are unsupported by a broad and impressive ethnographic awareness. While it is true that the quantity of material available for the study of African music in the late 1960s and early 1970s is inferior to what now exists, it is nevertheless the case that Nketia distilled an idea of Africa from a wide-ranging body of written and recorded data. (See Akrofi 2002 for an intellectual biography).

Putting aside the empirical question, there is a more important strategic one to consider. When is it appropriate to speak of “Ibo music”, “Kpelle music”, “Ewe music” or “Shona music” as opposed to “African music”? While some Euro-American scholars since the 1960s have moved towards geographic specificity (Blacking 1973), many African scholars continue to use the broader designation (Nzewi 1997, Anku 1992), thus implicitly returning to the generalizing impulse that shaped the representation of Africa during Europe’s earliest encounter with it. The fear that what unites us will be dissipated into so many “tribes” or “ethnic groups”, thus rendering us impotent for political action, may well lie behind the implicit refusal by leading scholars to avoid certain forms of specifying.

One subject that is most productively discussed in terms of specifics is that of language and its relation to music. The Music of Africa is especially good on cultural matters, whether these have to do with the place of music within traditional society, the character of language, or the role of song texts. For example, on the topic of the relation between speech tones and melody, Nketia provides some pertinent examples from Twi—his mother tongue—to demonstrate, on one hand, language’s constraining influence on the process of melodic construction, and, on the other, music’s resistance to this colonizing tendency. As fascinating as the Twi examples are, it would be premature to generalize from them, for we have as yet no way of assessing their paradigmatic status. We need many more studies, not dozens but hundreds, in order to arrive at a more accurate picture of the tone-tune question in Africa. Indeed, instead of aligning issues simplistically along a correspondence versus non-correspondence axis, we might note the different ways in which different African languages negotiate their influence on melodic contour. In the continuum from dependence to independence of speech tone and melody, languages occupy different positions. Without a series of careful ethnographic studies, we will not have a good appreciation of the complexity of these relations.

The Music of Africa’s unmarked use of social-scientific, linguistic and music-theoretical terms contributed much to its appeal. On the surface this was a wise decision, for it countered the widespread tendency, indigenous to anthropology but evident in ethnomusicology as well, to assume a priori differences between Africa and the West. But an uncritical embrace of Euro-American concepts could also reinforce their presumed universality and manifest an attendant intellectual imperialism. Every conventional construct has a cultural origin, and it is precisely at the moment in which we begin to question the ostensible universality of standard concepts brought to bear on African music that we are alerted to the baggage that Nketia’s theoretical framework carries.

Consider, for example, the five chapters on musical instruments (5-9). In classifying indigenous African musical instruments, Nketia borrowed a scheme developed by two German scholars, Erich von Hornbostel (1877-1935), a comparative musicologist who wrote about African music as well (Hornbostel 1928), and Curt Sachs (1881-1959), a musicologist with a wide reach who wrote world histories of dance and music instruments, among numerous other publications (Sachs 1933, Sachs 1940). Originally published in German in 1914, the Sachs-Hornbostel classification system was available to Nketia in a 1961 English translation by Anthony Baines and Klaus Wachsmann. Hornbostel and Sachs were in turn indebted to Belgian instrument curator Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841-1924), who developed the essence of the scheme in 1880.

(Mahillon himself had borrowed from an ancient Indian classification system). Nketia ignores all this ancestry and treats the scheme as an accepted convention.

In its broadest outlines, the scheme provides (long) names for familiar categories, aiming to distinguish between modes of sound production. The four families are: idiophones or self-sounding instruments (like rattles, castanets, the mbira, and xylophones); membranophones or drums; aerophones or wind instruments (like flutes, horns and trumpets); and chordophones or stringed instruments (like the musical bow, the kora and the one-stringed fiddle). Nketia's neat chapters define and exemplify each category, and confirm that this scheme can accommodate the material structure and mode of playing of African instruments. Indeed, these are among the most efficient chapters in The Music of Africa.

But behind this elegance lurk a number of potentially disruptive issues. Suppose, for example, that we look beyond the physical or material level, and consider what these instruments mean within their communities of use: what do they symbolize, and how do they signify? And suppose we draw our categories of classification from these ideas, not from an externally-imposed scheme such as that of Hornbostel and Sachs. We would then be exposed to a fascinating world in which instruments are regarded as things, forces, or deities,, are understood in relation to the music they perform, or take on personifying roles (Kartomi 1990). This is not to suggest that indigenous classification is always at odds with the Hornbostel-Sachs scheme; it is only to say, rather, that the African conceptions will be seen as plural, as based on priorities of naming within individual cultures that are sometimes arbitrary, reflect power relations, or are systematic according to their own logic. By decentering the hegemonic Hornbostel-Sachs scheme, we pave the way for a fuller understanding of Africans ways of proceeding. And it is through actions like these that we can hope to inflect metropolitan categories in ways that will enable them account more felicitously for African realities.

None of this is to suggest that indigenous ideas about musical instruments are missing from Nketia's book. It is only to imagine a reversal of the scheme of priorities: what if the Hornbostel-Sachs system was incorporated into African naming systems, rather than the other way round? Perhaps individuals with a stronger desire to produce an Africa-centered scheme will be tempted by this alternative approach.

The Music of Africa gives no consideration to urban popular music. You will not find a single reference to afrobeat or Fela Anikulapo Kuti, 'King' Sunny Ade or jùjú. Highlife receives a passing mention, but the king of highlife, E.T. Mensah, is nowhere to be found. Neither Makossa nor soukous occurs in the index. (See Graham 1988, Erlmann 1991, Collins 1992, Agawu 2003:117-50). From today's perspective, such a consistent absence is striking, perhaps surprising. The reason for this particular bias is the belief that the traditional music of the continent embodies most succinctly that which is typically or essentially African. Thoroughly imbricated in the institutions of precolonial origin, traditional music, be it dance, ritual drumming or dirge singing, announces the African difference spontaneously and vividly. Unlike popular music it is not overtly hybrid; its hybridity has presumably evolved to a point where it has become linguistically unmarked. And even if closer inspection unveils residual elements of hybridity, they will seem less jarring with the original, less distant, less exotic than those associated with Africa's encounter with Europe.

Also missing from The Music of Africa is a sustained discussion of so-called art or élite music, a tradition to which the dedicatee of the book, Dr. Ephraim Amu (1899-1995), contributed significantly. (See Euba 1993 and Omojola 1995). Although “modern developments” are acknowledged, nothing is made, for example, of the vibrant choral tradition found in Ghana, a tradition pioneered by Amu, to which Nketia himself has contributed. Nor is reference made to Fela Sowande who was instrumental in developing the Nigerian art music tradition. Certainly, it could be argued that taking note of such developments at the end of the 1960s would have been premature. Moreover, from an ideological standpoint, traditional music does not share art music’s imitative desire. Whereas a composer of art music unapologetically sees himself as copying directly a European practice, that of traditional music models practice from within an authentic African experience. European music is thus banished completely from the realm of traditional African music, and this allows the African elements to be displayed effectively.

It is hard not to see the pragmatic sense in privileging traditional music in a project like this, for we risk underestimating the variety and structural subtlety of indigenous African resources. These include the structural asymmetry, historical depth and creative potential of so-called time lines found in West and Central Africa (Pressing 1983), the polyphonic intricacy of various vocal practices, notably those of the so-called Pygmy populations in Central Africa (Kubik 1997), the virtuosic abilities of communities of xylophone players in Uganda and Mozambique, and the fertile rhythmic imagination displayed by so-called master drummers in Ghana and Togo (Jones 1959, Locke 1987, Anku 1992). If nostalgia for a pure, traditional music discourages investigation of how this layer is itself constituted cross-ethnically, then such attachment needs to be repudiated. If, however, it inspires students to explore, among other things, the migration patterns within Africa and how they influenced the historical trade in musical ideas, then it is most welcome (Wachsmann 1971, Kubik 1998).

Many people hear in African music a comforting human centredness, a sense of communality and kinship that contrasts with the egotism and individualism of European performing practices. The link between musical structure and social structure is thus thought to be especially strong in Africa. By beginning with the social and cultural background to traditional African music, The Music of Africa affirms its irreducibly social nature. While Nketia does not dramatize this point using, for example, Alan Lomax’s empirical and comparative methodology (Lomax 1968), he nonetheless manages to issue an implicit challenge to those who might be tempted to think of African music as music alone, as autonomous structure that escapes a social trace at some level.

This challenge is salutary, of course, but it also has the disadvantage of discouraging the embrace of the contemplative dimension of functional music--the ‘purely musical’, as an older discourse had it. All African music works in and through the ears, both real and metaphorical. Stated so baldly, this claim may seem noisy or polemical. But it is a necessary antidote to the emphasis on the social. The most functional African musics are still music; without aural engagement, their functionality cannot be recognized, let alone appreciated. Aural engagement is therefore not a dispensable condition in any analysis of African music. Those who embrace African music in order to escape the wordless discourses of European symphonies and sonatas

may well end up encountering some of the very same ghosts from which they thought they had escaped.

The gap between the social and the musical is upheld rather than problematized in The Music of Africa. (But see Nketia 1981 for in-depth treatment.). This is a pity in a way, for it forgoes an opportunity to dispel certain myths about African music. Nketia's exposition of the structures of African music (chapters 10-15) does not build in any obvious way on the discussion of the social and cultural background in the book's opening chapters. Yet, one must ask whether technique is not socially based, whether it ever transcends cultural particularities. By generalizing the theoretical exposition of polyphonic and rhythmic structures, The Music of Africa lends credence to the transcendental view of musical technique. Perhaps this will be one of the aspects of the book that contemporary scholars take up in light of today's more sophisticated understanding of such dichotomies, thanks to the work of Derrida (1976) and Adorno (1976).

Missing from The Music of Africa is any explicit discussion of the ideological dimension in knowledge construction. This is not a criticism, only an acknowledgment of self-imposed limits in 1974. The book was conceived as a textbook after all, not a monograph for specialists. As such, efficient dissemination of basic information was a more pressing goal than the excavation of prejudices that historically determined authorial stances with respect to African music. In a recent article (1998), Nketia recounts in detail the history of African music scholarship, offering some of what is missing from his book of nearly a quarter century earlier. Although the tenor of this later account pales besides the radical critiques of knowledge production associated with writers like Hountondji (1983), Mudimbe (1988), Mbembe (2001) and Wiredu (1980), it manages, nevertheless, to overcome the author's earlier reticence. To describe this as a critical turn in Nketia's intellectual biography may be premature, but it rhymes with an increasingly widespread view that disseminating knowledge without at the same time reflecting on the props of knowledge formation is unsatisfactory. This, then, is another respect in which The Music of Africa would be impossible today. (See Scherzinger 2001).

A forward-looking feature of the book that has, however, not featured prominently in its reception is the material gathered in the third appendix (pp. 254-62) under the title "African terms used in the text." Nketia's own training in linguistics, his numerous writings in both Twi and English, and his sensitivity—as composer and analyst—to matters arising from the complex interactions between words and music provide the conditions of possibility for an authoritative statement about the limits of the linguistic analogy as well as the language of African musical criticism. What is attempted here, however, is far more modest: an inventory of African terms that aided the main exposition in the book. This provides an opportunity to convey aspects of indigenous thinking about music, performance and related phenomena enshrined in our languages. In one respect, assembling this inventory was an atypical gesture for an African scholar; the tendency had been to use the metropolitan metalanguage and to find equivalents to indigenous concepts. And the motivation for this deferential gesture probably lay in an anxiety about demonstrating competence, and in a naïve confidence in the ability of the metropolitan language to convey African realities. Non-African scholars, on the other hand, partly because they possess little of this sort of baggage, tend to value the 'color'

and semantic reach of specific terms and concepts (Ames and King 1971, Monts 1990, Zemp 1971).

A list of African terms together with definitions represents only the beginning of a rigorous exploration of the language-music nexus. Equally important is to develop categories into which the conceptual fields signaled by these terms may be distributed. And if the context for this exercise happens to be an introductory survey of the music of Africa, then it will be further necessary to provide some basis for comparative analysis by directly juxtaposing terms from different languages to show invariance as well as divergence. Again, it is unlikely that today's author, especially one who regards the language-music nexus in Africa as fundamental, would consign such a task to an appendix, rather than confront it in the main text and with marked ethnographic specificity.

One final issue raised by The Music of Africa is the very nature of the texts that form the basis of study of African music. What exactly are we studying when we study African music? Performances—recorded, remembered or imagined? Transcriptions—descriptive or prescriptive on the basis of specified cultural norms? Recordings—on cassette, compact disk, video or DVD? Thirty years ago, it was not yet standard practice to include a corroborating sound source in a book on music, especially one that dealt with an unfamiliar repertory. Today, however, books about non-Western or unfamiliar musics are routinely published with CDs, CD-Roms, videos, and DVDs. In this way, something of the immediacy of performance is conveyed to readers/listeners. This does not render superfluous the challenge of crafting imaginative prose to convey the sense of music, for a good writer is capable of bringing us to the threshold of meaningful musical experience without ever presuming to be able to duplicate it. The sense of music, however foreign, can be made real in language, not as a substitute for experiencing the real thing but as a supplement, an approximation. Language about music reports or fosters a mediated, perhaps intellectual engagement, even in cases where the aim is simply descriptive. This contrasts with what is in principle an unmediated or phenomenological experience deriving from direct exposure to the sounds, words and images themselves. So, the fact that advances in technology have enabled recorded supplements to be magnified is not an unequivocally positive development. Still, it seems unlikely that anyone attempting to introduce the music of an entire continent today will be inclined to withhold supplementary sound or visual sources designed to aid the work of words, photographs and diagrams.

Focusing on the canonical works of various disciplines within the African humanities can prove to be a revealing dramatization of the shaping influence of one or two key texts. For African musicology, I believe that Nketia's The Music of Africa of 1974 embodies the ideals of such canonical texts. By noting some of what was possible in 1974 but no longer in 2003, I have tried to suggest a context for assessing Nketia's achievement. As a work of synthesis, a bird's eye view of the continent's music, The Music of Africa remains a valuable point of reference. As a textbook that unavoidably skates over certain landscapes, however, it does its share of violence to the portrayal of African musical life. Given the multiplicity and fragmentary nature of the agendas that inform contemporary scholarship, it seems likely that a comparably-conceived project today will retain an irreducibly plural conceptual base, focus description and interpretation on the musical styles that animate Africa's soundscapes, and incorporate

information about popular and art music. It seems likely, too, that such a project will find it necessary to attend to ideologies of representation.

The Music of Africa is not dead; nor has it outlived its pedagogical usefulness. It stands as an exemplary encapsulation of the dimensions of the possible in African musicology around 1974 and, perhaps more profoundly, as a constructive network of signals to roads that should not to be taken.

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