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Teaching Music and Dance of Namibia: A Review Essay

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Mans, M. (2004). *Discover musical cultures in the Kunene: A guide to the living music and dance of Namibia*. Windhoek, NA: Namibia Scientific Society.

140 pp. ISBN 99916-637-2-X

CD of musical examples (pp.120-140: tables, glossary, sources, list of tracks on CD).

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Preliminary Remarks

This review essay examines *Discover Musical Cultures in the Kunene: A Guide to the Living Music and Dance of Namibia* by Dr. Minette Mans. At the time of publication, Dr. Mans was an Associate Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at University of Namibia.¹ According to the book's preface it is "the first of a planned series of books for teachers and learners, describing aspects of the music and dance practised in Namibian societies today" (p. i). The book describes the musical activities of the Ovahimba and Ovazimba people in the Kunene Region of rural Northwestern Namibia.² It also presents lesson plans by which students in other nations may learn songs and dances of this region. Included are insightful descriptions of these two musical cultures, useful diagrams and musical transcriptions, and 93 attractive photographs. A CD recording of 29 musical examples is also enclosed to supplement the text, and additional video footage is available from the author. This book will not only be of interest to scholars of African

¹ University of Namibia [<http://www.unam.na/>].

² Namibia [<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/wa.html>].

studies, cultural anthropology and ethnomusicology, but also to any educators who seek to include lessons from southern Africa in their curriculum.

This remarkably approachable book offers a clear sense of the daily lives of people in this relatively neglected part of the world. Despite the challenging physical conditions, music and dance are shown to provide intensely meaningful moments of joyous social activity. Mans includes attractive images of children singing, dancing, and playing in ecstatic performance. She writes, “Musical play like *ondjongo*, *omukwenga* and *outetera* can go on for hours, until children get tired and go home to sleep. . . Really, children play in much the same way all around the world!” (p.39).

The photos that Mans has selected vividly demonstrate the beauty, dignity, and strength of the Ovahimba and Ovazimba people through intimate images of instrumental performance, dance movements, traditional clothing, neck ornamentation and intricate hair dresses. Rich details concerning the nomadic lifestyle and culturally significant events are also provided. Thus, the book has much to offer in terms of intercultural understanding as well as specific musical practices.

This review essay will focus on the sections of this book that discuss children’s musical behaviours and the suggested lesson plans. The review concludes with a Discussion section consisting of educational questions to which Professor Mans has kindly provided a response.

Overview of Contents

Discover Musical Cultures in the Kunene consists of an Introduction and three chapters: 1) Knowing the Kunene Region, 2) The Times When Ovahimba Sing and Play, and 3) The Times When Ovazimba Sing and Play. The Introduction discusses key musical themes, including the role of music in ritual behaviour and in the enculturation of children, and describes the pronunciation/transliteration and alternative music notation systems used throughout the publication. The first chapter provides a sense of the geographical and physical context, and introduces concepts associated with the nomadic lifestyle of the Ovahimba and Ovazimba people. The musical activities of children comprise approximately the first half of Chapters 2 and 3, while adult activities comprise most of the remainder of these two chapters.

The section of Chapter 2 entitled “Ovahimba children’s lives” describes musical activities associated with six specific contexts:

- (1) Birth
- (2) Naming
- (3) Childhood
- (4) Transformations & initiation
- (5) Working
- (6) Playing

At the end of this chapter, Mans presents three “Tasks for the class”:

- (1) Learning *omukwenga*, (2) Learning *ondjongo*, and (3) Learning *omakamba*.

The section of Chapter 3 entitled “Ovazimba children’s lives” describes musical activities associated with 7 specific contexts:

- (1) Birth
- (2) First haircut

- (3) Naming ceremony
- (4) Circumcision
- (5) Transformation
- (6) Working
- (7) Playing

Similar to the previous chapter, Mans presents another of her “Tasks for the class”:

- (1) Learning omutjopa (with “Mulimpanda” as the main example).

The “Tasks for the Class” presented at the conclusion of chapter 2 and 3 are designed to enable students from differing locations to develop a basic grasp of Ovahimba and Ovazimba music and dance traditions. The lifestyle and musical practices described will be quite unfamiliar to many students and schoolteachers in Western industrialized nations. It takes some dedicated reading and careful listening to learn how best to make use of the lesson plans provided, but this proves to be well worth the effort. On the companion CD, recorded tracks 2 (*Omukwenga-alternative*), 12 (*Ondjongo performance-“Tongotongo”*) and 28 (*Omutjopa*) seem to be the most useful for classroom music activities since they consist of relatively approachable songs that can reasonably be performed by students, although many of the other tracks are also helpful in illustrating particular concepts (such as instrument timbres) and as a soundtrack to general instruction regarding the culture and lifestyle of Kunene people.

Tasks for the Class

In addition to rich description of the musical traditions of these Namibian cultures, Mans’ book presents a total of four lessons for use in schools:

- (1) Omukwenga (p.61)
- (2) Ondjongo (p.64)
- (3) Omakamba (p.74)
- (4) Omutjopa (p.112)

The first lesson, on Omukwenga, establishes the pattern of five elements shared by most of these “tasks for the class”: (a) learning about the cultural context, (b) listening to the recording (c) learning a rhythmic clapping pattern, (d) learning some repeated vocal lines, and (e) learning some accompanying dance movements. Mans has included recordings of various songs to represent each genre on the CD, and it may be helpful for students to listen to a few examples prior to learning to perform particular songs. For example, although the text suggests that one listens to track 5 on the CD for the first lesson, track 2 may be even more useful for developing a clear sense of the clapped rhythm in Omukwenga before moving on to learning the song on track 5. The lesson on Ondjongo songs similarly introduces a clapping pattern and vocables, but is strengthened through use of a recording and transcription of a particularly amusing example from this genre. “Tongotongo” (track 12) is an undeniably fun Ondjongo song that makes use of a few untranslatable terms (apparently made up by the children). The images used in the song to describe these mysterious [entities] make them sound like utterly wild and peculiar creatures, as they “climb on a veranda” and crawl “on a tree” and have “urine like dogs” and “names like cattle” and so on. Surely children anywhere in the world can appreciate a song about such strange and wonderful things. Lessons using “Tongotongo” could also easily link to an informative classroom discussion of all the fascinating animal life that actually does inhabit much of southern Africa.

The lesson on Omakamba entails enactment of a movement activity that would probably best be done outdoors. Students stand in a semi-circle holding sticks or “spears” and take turns individually entering the middle of the circle, moving about and brandishing their stick while imitating animals to the whooping and encouragement of peers. Mans explains, “Omakamba is played when a person is happy or proud,” such as “when a man has performed a brave deed, like killing a lion” (p.55). The opportunity to imitate a wild animal or brave hunter in front of one’s peers is an activity that many children will surely enjoy.

The final lesson is on the Omutjopa genre of the Ovazimba people, featuring transcription, sound recording, and performance instructions for the enthusiastic song “Mulimpanda” (p.117). This is actually one of the most attractive lessons in the book, complete with multiple voice parts, interlocking rhythm patterns, dance movements, and even inspiring words:

*To the memory of our last performance
Be courageous, yee
My lovely darling
Be courageous, yee*

These elegant lyrics seem to inspire performers to strive for ever-greater expression in their collective singing, drumming, and dancing.

Summary

Discover Musical Cultures in the Kunene makes a significant contribution to knowledge of these unique cultures and musical traditions, and provides valuable lessons for music teachers in other lands. The combination of singing, drumming, and dancing offers a powerful form of holistic expression present in many traditional cultures throughout the world, and has recently been offered as an alternative model for intercultural music education.³ This book provides new insights into how this traditional form of expression is maintained among the youth of a relatively understudied and nomadic population. A substantial amount of cultural description is contained in the text, far beyond the details singled out for discussion in this review. Mans and her research partners have clearly devoted much time and energy to this important project, and it will be exciting to see additional books from this series as they are produced.

Discussion

Upon completing this review, it seemed useful to pose some questions to Mans that educators might entertain as they examine her book and consider using its proposed lesson plans. I contacted the author by email and she kindly offered some responses that are included below.

How accurate does the performance need to be?

It seems that some of these rhythms may be difficult for learners who are new to this music. Young students may try their best with these unfamiliar sounds, but is there any chance of causing offence, or even of reinforcing negative stereotypes, if the final result is a rather weak rendition alongside relatively familiar and accessible European melodies? If one of these songs were included in a multicultural concert of Canadian

³ Examples include the MUSE [<http://www.musekids.org/articles.html>] and Born to Groove projects [<http://borntogroove.org>].

primary school students, for example, is there any chance that a Namibian who happened to be in the audience would be irritated to find that song was chosen to “represent” her nation?

Reply from Professor Mans:

Well, perhaps the unfamiliar form of notation gives the impression that the rhythms are tricky when they are really pretty standard African rhythms. By practising them as clapping patterns they are not so difficult. Personally I believe that the vocal tones are more challenging, and so difficult to describe in words. Your concern is well founded though, as the Ovahimba songs, in particular, are difficult to recreate because so much of this music is personal. Through this book I have tried to capture one of the ways in which people in a specific context create music to enrich and complement their lives. So yes, some of these songs would not work very well for a multicultural concert. However, I think the children’s songs do work, and like children’s songs from anywhere in the world, should not be seen as a representation of nation or ethnic group, but of a style of musical performance.

How much of the cultural context must be taught?

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which a music teacher in Singapore, for example, may be attracted by the idea of spending more than a few lessons of a year-long music course on the music of Namibia. Ideally, one would hope that contemporary music teachers are increasingly interested in such possibilities, but time use will always be a concern to those who diligently seek to attain learning objectives from each moment of contact with their students. Hence, a relevant question is the extent to which the context of such traditions must be taught in order for the lessons to be meaningful. Teachers only have so much time. With that point in mind, there are some inherent difficulties involved in teaching musical activities and rituals associated with such complex themes as circumcision or one’s first menstrual period to young children of other nations, despite the enormous significance these may have in context. It is understandable that in some classrooms teachers prefer to only superficially discuss the context, or may even choose to focus only on activities that do not come from such complex backgrounds.

Reply from Professor Mans:

You are quite right that the context provided is more than required for normal music education classes. There are two sides to my answer to this question. In the first place, the book, as the first in a series on Namibia, is an attempt to publish for the first time information on the different musical cultures of our country. As such, it is primarily for Namibians to hopefully learn more about one another, as a post-struggle social reconstruction. Secondly, I have a concern about a tokenistic approach to multicultural music in the classroom, and believe that without understanding something about the meanings within the musical contexts, we teach “meaningless” music. Given, however, that primary school teachers definitely do not have the time to include this depth of information, it might merely be necessary for the teacher to read a few chapters, then select a story or musical example to share with the class. Even clapping a pattern while listening to one of the recorded tracks, or trying to construct and play a musical bow, might be useful as a learning “byte”.

Would it be feasible to form cultural exchanges with Kunene musicians?

Music educators are increasingly interested in the prospect of developing international partnerships and hosting tours of ensembles from diverse traditions. One recent project of this kind that I was involved in was a tour by the Thai Music Ensemble

of Chulalongkorn University to Te Wananga O Aotearoa (tr. University of New Zealand), where they simultaneously taught Thai music and learned Polynesian music traditions from students in the Bachelor of Maori Performing Arts programme. A uniquely rewarding educational experience may be attained through intercultural musical exchange projects of this kind. Would the infrastructure of Namibia be able to support musical exchange projects, or might there be opportunities for Namibian musicians to obtain support in order to tour other nations?

Reply from Professor Mans:

What a wonderful idea! The Kunene region itself is not very developed in terms of roads and communications, but matters are improving and the (only) town now also has internet connections. Some of the musicians I know are itinerant, but others are settled, working as teachers and nurses for example, and might well be very interested in international partnerships. The greatest difficulty is initial contact and transport, but especially for young people something of the kind you describe above could be a wonderful opportunity to engage with partners in the world.

As a researcher, what have been some of the more rewarding and challenging experiences in your studies of this music?

Prolonged periods of fieldwork among different cultures often involve many surprises, some of which are pleasant and some of which are not. It would be very interesting to hear a bit about some of your more memorable personal experiences “in the field”.

Reply from Professor Mans:

Because of the relative remoteness of this area, field work was not very easy – a lot of changing tires, walking, lack of food and water and heat had to be endured. However, once peoples’ initial reticence to talk was overcome, my learning experiences were so rich! I never ceased to be surprised at the natural way in which we, as strangers, were welcomed into peoples’ homes and lives. The Ovahimba extended family with whom I lived were experiencing some kind of illness (it was hard to tell whether it was physical or spiritual). They had called in a spiritual healer from Angola, who was also living there, performing all kinds of rituals, with singing and chanting throughout the night – very mysterious and interesting. My Ovazimba family, on my third visit, were celebrating the anniversary of a neighbour’s funeral. After an open-armed welcome by the widow, the singing and dancing in which my son and I could participate, went on for many hours – another wonderful experience. Stories told by ancient old women, a wedding of a young girl, gasping in heat with warm beer as the only available fluid, chewing on tough meat cooked from a goat that had been ritually taken apart for a healing and divination, digging water from a hole in the ground, these experiences were both challenging and rewarding in the sense that one rediscovers basic life values – sharing, working, and enjoying fully what you have.

In future publications, will it be possible to include some video content on a companion CD-ROM?

Particularly for the dances, it may be helpful for learners to have a precise visual image of the movements in time. The “ebook” format of publications such as *Dance and Drama in Uganda: The Pearl of Africa*⁴ offers some advantages in this regard. In recent

⁴ Some performing arts teachers might consider supplementing Mans’ book with a resource from another region of Africa, such as *Dance and Drama in Uganda: The Pearl of Africa*

years, the cost of video technology has greatly decreased and it seems this would be a useful medium to explore for publications of this kind, or perhaps as a supplemental publication for use with your book.

Reply from Professor Mans:

Indeed, this is really vital. I have in fact created an interactive CD ROM with music and video. Unfortunately, sponsors in Namibia are far and few between and I was able only to get funding for the book and CD, not the video which was supposed to have accompanied it.⁵ I still hope to publish some of the video recordings on my website.

This excellent book may be ordered through the Namibia Scientific Society, P. O. Box 67, Windhoek, Namibia, or by contacting them by email at nwg@iafrica.com.na. Readers may also be interested in examining Mans' article in the first volume of *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, "Exploring Namibian music and dance as a means of understanding other cultures" for which she received a nomination for an AERA-SIG Award in the category of best e-journal article for 2001.

About the Review Author

David G. Hebert holds a PhD in music from University of Washington, where he studied music education and ethnomusicology. He has taught music courses for Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russia) and Tokyo Gakugei University (Japan), and currently works as Head of Music for New Zealand's largest tertiary institution, Te Wananga O Aotearoa.

[<http://www.hushvideos.com/SB-Afr.shtml>]. There are also numerous educational resources available for the nation of South Africa, but a need remains for further arts curriculum development in many parts of Northern and Western Africa.

⁵ Financial constraints are a perennial issue for educators in developing nations. Considering its high quality, the research and curriculum development project that Mans has initiated would appear to be strong candidate for the sponsorship of arts foundations, educational trusts, and organizations concerned with community development in Africa.

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