The World of South African Music
To Michael
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Above all I thank authors and copyright holders of extracts used in this book for allowing me to use their valuable intellectual property. Sometimes cuts were made in their work, indicated by ellipses or square brackets (ellipses in authors’ quotations are however their own). The sign […] indicates a longer cut than those shown by a simple ellipsis. In a few cases the extract has been edited or shortened.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading South African music

We face the challenge of creating a unique South African musicology, [and] have the opportunity, that other nations can envy, of building our own monuments in this ‘last Paradise’ (Malan 1983, 34).

For any ethnomusicologist interested in the music of the slums, streets, harbours, and mines of Africa, South Africa constitutes something of an Eldorado (Erlmann 1991, 1).

The subject of this book, South African music, tells many stories. It is a work of meta-fiction, a narration of voices constantly interrupting each other with diversions and contradictions, vying to construct itself from the remnants of a remote or recent past in much the same way that we as human subjects have the tendency (as Umberto Eco once noted) to construct our lives around the narrative conceit of the novel (1995, 131). One might argue that the stories narrated here are not fictional but infused with tangible reality through their historical, geographical, generic or cultural location: the story of African traditional music, for example, or the story of Afrikaans song, marabi piano, or Zulu choralism. Perhaps, even, there is only one subject told in many different ways according to the writer’s perspective.

The quotations that head this Introduction tell of two such perspectives: in the case of Afrikaner musicologist Jacques Malan writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, South Africa was a paradise, a tabula rasa waiting for the possibilities of a new kind of (white) critical inscription. For German-born ethnomusicologist Veit Erllmann ten years later the country was ‘something of’ an Eldorado, provided one was prepared to explore the byways of the (black) working-class poor. However different, each view is underscored by an alluring notion of paradise, a notion that comes not from the language of musicology or ethnomusicology but from the world of fiction.

Taking this view of the world of South African music as a play of narratives, a musical biography of a country, the first question to ask perhaps, is how does the story begin? Whether told through academic discourses in musicology or ethnomusicology, or related discourses of a more creative kind such as autobiography, news feature, travel journal, lecture, poetry - all represented in this Reader - there is a tendency to want to evoke a certain myth of origin. Such myths have been present throughout the written history of music in South Africa, a history that goes back to travel accounts of the fifteenth century, tales of miracle and wonder. Since South Africa’s political changes began in 1994 however there has been a shift towards reclaiming the more immediate past, reimagining it and
even seeming to romanticise its darkest days. The musical life of the apartheid township of Sophiatown of the 1950s, for example, is retold repeatedly in current films, television series and books as if this was a golden age. A slightly different example of reinvention is the alignment of Western classical music with new bedfellows. South Africa’s ‘First International Classical Music Festival’ (known locally as the ICMF) was held in Johannesburg and Pretoria in 2001 to show such alignment bringing together (according to a media release) “the widely acclaimed English Chamber Orchestra, Xhosa-woman overtone singing, Schubert lieder [sic], African drum-singing [and] the ever-popular Ladysmith Black Mambazo” (quoted in Ansell 2003).

In this kind of narration the entire history of orchestras, symphony concerts, recitals, music festivals, competitions, arts councils, censored state radio and television and the unimaginable damage of unequal education and cultural opportunities that drove this Western hegemonic order along under grand apartheid (and before that British colonial rule), are here erased - with the stroke of a pen - as if they had never existed. The origins are remade and classical music reborn with a new link forged between the classical (Schubert and the ECO), the traditional (Xhosa-woman and African ‘drum-singing’), and the popular (Ladysmith Black Mambazo). With such reinvention of the past, music has fallen, to use Lacan’s term, out of the imaginary register into the symbolic. What under Western hegemonic discourse before 1994 was just ‘music’ because it was music of the dominant minority has, reasserting itself under the pressure of post-apartheid South Africa, renamed itself (Classical Music) and redrawn its boundaries (International).

Behind this recent transformation of music by the wand of classicism, however, lie many other historical moments similarly driven by the imperative of changing ideologies, whose complex relationships preclude the very notion of a single narrative of South African music. The monolithic Europe-driven cultural institutions of twentieth-century South Africa so clouded the view of this plurality for the past 100 years that, until 1994 Western music seemed indeed to constitute a homogenous block, supporting the Nationalist edifice both metaphorically (through legislation) and literally (the State Theatre in Pretoria for example). Now South African music sees itself differently, as part of a set of interlocked histories, a patchwork of collective initiatives and individual efforts. In this optimistic view South Africa is Eldorado: flowing with gold not only musically but also (as this book itself shows) in terms of critical readings of that music - biographies, autobiographies, dissertations, articles, books - telling their stories through the eyes of composers, critics, performers, institutions of all kinds, even through the musical lens of small towns.

Such a radical rethink inevitably begins to show more and more clearly that the notion of a South African musical territory and set of practices before the first significant European settlement in the seventeenth century, before colonialism,
urbanisation, apartheid or globalisation, with their attendant musical impositions - Dutch psalms, Wesleyan hymns, German folksong, British music education, American jazz, house music - is fictitious; the precondition for its existence being precisely the absence that cannot be imagined. There is no timeless and unproblematic past where cultural contact never occurred. This myth of origin, persisting in South African discourse even to the present day and clung to by many overseas visitors, hints at a freedom that once existed and might somehow come again: once a South African liberation myth with political teeth, now reinvented as an African Renaissance myth - it remains nonetheless a myth.

There is also no continuum in these stories - this Reader is not a ‘music history’ despite the way the readings are arranged chronologically - but there is a sense of both continuity and discontinuity in these pages moving inexorably towards the present moment. A definition of ‘South African’ in the title is linked to political history, of course, and for the purposes of this book it means music that exists or once existed within the current political borders of South Africa. Constraints of time and place are daunting in a region that has several centuries of recorded history, approximately 43 million inhabitants, covers an area of 1, 400 000 square kilometres and is bordered by six countries (Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland) with whom it has a shared cultural history and some shared languages. Further, South Africa has a terrain and climate almost as varied as Argentina or Australia, an ecological multi-environment that has profoundly shaped the development of its indigenous musical instruments and practices (see Tracey 1996). It has eleven official languages and many religious practices, including more than 200 indigenous Christian churches ranging from a few hundred to millions of members (the Zionist Church for example). Its music has been affected by successive waves of acculturation, some brutal, all causing major cultural transformations and retransformations.

Selecting the readings

The literature in which music emerging out of such cultural polyphony is explained or in other ways ‘read’ is enormous. Well over 1000 items are available, not including at least twice this number in print media articles as well as hundreds of plays, poems, short stories, travel fictions and novels in which South African music is represented. The simplest way to make a selection from this vast aggregation of motifs would have been to take the ‘top ten’ academic articles on South African music from the last 15 to 20 years. I resisted this approach, however: partly because such writing is well known in academic circles, but mainly because such a selection would have biased the book strongly in favour of black South African popular music and jazz, and privileged white writers. The number of pieces I
included here, ultimately, came in at about 60, whittled down from 200, and even those left standing were ruthlessly pruned.

Informing this process were several criteria. First, I favoured extracts that dealt with musical material directly - whether by example, analysis, or description - so that music would have a strong ‘presence’. This means that there are differences in music notation and several indigenous languages used (in song texts) although in most cases these are translated. Second, I tried to introduce as fair a distribution of gender, age and cultural background as I could manage, given the imbalance that exists. South African writers of colour are few in number despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population is not white. Texts are nevertheless there, and they have been included - not for the political purpose of incorporating what Kofi Agawu has called “native discourse” (Agawu 1995, 394) - but because, as Agawu indeed has shown, such discourse often speaks of music not discussed elsewhere with a voice that is not dominant.

Third was the criterion of coverage. Some areas of music are far better covered in the literature than others (indigenous music and twentieth-century popular music for example); there is far less on African choral music and almost nothing (in English) on Afrikaans music. Aside from studies of individual composers or histories of towns, there is no writing on the meanings of Western classical music in South Africa as distinct from writing published elsewhere. Taking stock of classical music as a cultural phenomenon within a Southern African rather than European context - and taking it right back to the seventeenth century - is a long overdue project, but few writers have taken the ethnographic or post-colonial view of such music that a reading like this requires. Some gold has been well mined - the Zulu male-voice genre isicathamiya for example - while other texts only graze the surface of their subject and may be seen as first attempts to define a field. In making a selection there was no attempt to make up for inadequacies or unevenness in the literature by commissioning further research.

What I aimed for, rather, was a reasonable spread of topics given that unevenness. This involved excluding some well-known pieces and authors, which I did with great regret, the compensation being, I hope, a wider range of both musics and voices. Gaps in the research field are there for all to see – and there are many challenges both empirical and theoretical for young researchers to take up. Finally, the scholarship (but not necessarily its authors) emerges from within the present political borders of South Africa. One exception to this general rule is the work of Emmanuelle Olivier on the Ju′hoansi, who live in the (Botswanan) Kalahari (Olivier 1997). It is included mainly because it demythologises so effectively the imaginary of nomadic ‘bushmen’ that haunts some of the earlier writing in the book; and because the multivocal techniques she analyses relate tellingly to contemporary studies of Xhosa music. Olivier also deals in a way most other writers do not, with vernacular terminology and concepts.
This representation of musical practices from immigrant, urban, peri-urban, migrant and rural communities covering large geographical areas of the country is paralleled by an equally wide representation of views and ideologies, ranging from those of 200 years ago (the earliest writing is from 1806) to writing of the present. Many different kinds of discourse emerge, and the rest of this Introduction highlights some of the issues of origin, history, ideology, representation, identity, and language that are a feature of the writing.

**Origin**

In her (1995) analysis of post-colonial literary criticism, Karin Barber exposes paradigms of binarism that inform both the imaginary *tabular rasa* of a South African musical paradise and the aspirations of the ever-changing Eldorado: oppositions such as traditional-modern, oral-written, past-contemporary, local-international (11). Such binarisms recall evolutionist views of music in nineteenth-century writing, predicated on the fundamental binary, self-other. As John McCall has summarised it, the view promoted in 1893 by Richard Wallascheck for example, is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European Music</th>
<th>African Music</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>modern</td>
<td>primitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>melodic</td>
<td>rhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complex</td>
<td>simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aesthetic</td>
<td>functional</td>
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<tr>
<td>mental</td>
<td>physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intellectual</td>
<td>emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creative</td>
<td>expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>product of culture</td>
<td>product of nature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although we are alert to Victorian ideologies of ‘ancient and modern’ or ‘savage and civilised’ implicit in this list (see for example Erlmann 1994), the traditional-modern and African-Western dichotomy persists in current thinking about music in South Africa, as do other frequently encountered pairs such as individual-communal, urban-rural. The difficulty in moving away from binaries is compounded by the degree to which they are constantly re-inscribed, if only to be manipulated afresh (as the ICMF has shown), the problem with them being precisely that they are so much part of the way South Africans think about themselves musically. In the global context, such dichotomies place us automatically in another country, another hemisphere, another culture, from that of the imagined West. They reduce the historical and economic contingencies of a more nuanced reading of South African music - where the West has been part of
the script for several centuries - to secondary status. A single word in any pair operates mainly in relation to its opposite and becomes a signifier of difference, one that contemporary music education and composition continually seek to undermine but ultimately reinforce, locked as they are into the symbolic order of naming.

An example of this problem is choral music, or *amakwaya* or *makwaya* (competition) music, which originated from black mission-educated composers in the eastern Cape and Natal. Choral works in this tradition are written in tonic solfa notation and become scores; but such scores are not necessarily read or even owned by those who perform them. They are scarce commodities (it takes a serious researcher to make a substantial and diverse collection); few choristers are fully literate in solfa notation, and choral songs are often taught by rote over many rehearsals comprising constantly shifting groups of attendees. Composers themselves strain against the expressive, tonal and rhythmic limitations of working in solfa notation. Unavailability of scores, even when they have been prescribed for competitions, confirms their low status as ‘texts’. Yet fidelity to notes and instructions on the ‘score’ is a criterion that adjudicators use in assessment, and the few scores that exist are treated as classics by committees who organise the major national competitions, forming over time a canon of musical works inscribed in the consciousness of those involved in choralism. Furthermore, choralism is phenomenally popular, involving almost half the country’s population (see Mngoma 1986, 116-117).

In the midst of such ambiguity, to bring Barber into service again, it seems that whatever state of literacy choirs uphold, they all “access texts in one way or another” (1995, 12). Just as she cites the potential 30 million Hausa or Swahili ‘readers’ of texts, I would estimate that there are close on 20 million members of choirs in South Africa who ‘read’ choral songs. Where does such music fit into the oral-written paradigm? The three categories of competition songs (traditional, Western, vernacular) have themselves changed since 1994. The ‘vernacular’ was designed in the earlier twentieth century to cater for music written in solfa script by composers using African-language texts, but now includes songs in Afrikaans; thus it challenges the African-Western binary while at the same time exposing the problematic of placing Afrikaans songs alongside African solfa pieces, in the category ‘indigenous’.

There are many other examples where South African music defies neat categorisation. Constantly re-narrated and re-read, the very difficulties in conceptualising it (for this *Reader*) are part of its story. If presenting it as an anthology in the way this *Reader* presents an ‘overview’ brings out (rather than obscures) the underlying dichotomies, it also affords an opportunity to look at it precisely for those differences and anomalies, as an archaeological site in which layers of practice and meaning are encrusted together and occasionally thrown up into strangely tilted conjunctions. This enables a view of South African music as a
set of differently constituted practices resonating with each other as they develop(ed) - simultaneously as well as sequentially and with resulting discontinuities as well as continuities. With this Foucaultian notion in mind, we come to a discussion of history.

History and ideology

The music of South Africa has evolved by a series of migrations - from many parts of the world over several centuries (Europe, the Malay Archipelago, south-east Asia, the Middle East, the US, Canada and South America), and, within the country, over several millennia. Thus its story has a number of possible ways to ‘begin’. In the search for origins South African music has been particularly well served by Xhosa prophet Ntsikana Gaba (died c1821). His story is referred to several times in this Reader, and always he is presented as ‘the first’ - the first Christian convert in the eastern Cape, the first Xhosa composer, creator of the “first Christian hymn composed and sung in Kaffirland to real native music” (Bokwe [n.d. c1904], 28). His surviving hymns provide ample material for an evolutionist consideration of something that lies on the border between history and myth, to prove that “origin is there so that history can begin” (Barber 1995, 7).

One can argue that there were concrete beginnings, and inescapable historical facts, such as the establishment of the first permanent mission station among the Xhosa by Rev Brownlee in 1820 (Dargie 1982, 7). The building of this mission - mud, stone, hardship, prayer - and the sudden death of Brownlee shortly afterwards took place at a certain time and place, profoundly affecting the detail of some everyday lives. But such bald realities do not explain music, or tell us what moved Ntsikana and what his community of onlookers experienced. What ‘text’, for example, did those early congregations access in Ntsikana’s chants?

There are only partial answers. The oldest account we have is by John Knox Bokwe from the late 1870s: the version given in this Reader was published around 1904 and was intended for a readership in Victorian Britain (the publisher was the London Missionary Society), for whom Ntsikana is domesticated as ‘ab-original’ Christian rather than - during frontier wars he was deeply involved in - as politicised being (see Olwage 2003, 139-42). Bokwe’s myth goes thus: looking over his cattle one morning he is excited (Bokwe calls it a ‘trance’) by the sight of a glowing light striking his favourite ox ([n.d. c1904], 19). Returning with his family from an umdudo or ceremonial dance a few hours later, Ntsikana passed a stream where he unexpectedly “washed off the heathen clay from his body”, the signature of conversion (Ibid., 19-20). The next morning Ntsikana sang a strange new chant and told his startled relatives that “the thing that had entered within him directed that all men should pray” (Ibid., 19-20). According to Bokwe, then, Ntsikana’s hymn - his first utterance as a Christian convert - ‘entered’ him at night,
having been dreamt. First the flash of enlightenment, then the discarding of the past, the dream-song, and a prophecy.

This historic moment - Ntsikana’s altered state of consciousness resembling for Bokwe St Paul on the road to Damascus - was captured very differently by Methodist leaders in 1923, celebrating a century of success in the South African mission fields. The origin of Ntsikana’s music lay for them not in a mystical moment between sleeping and waking, past and future, but in a typically African spontaneous “outburst”.

We can imagine how these first converts, rejoicing in the new and wonderful life that had sprung up within them, would croon, in quiet and low monotones, the message that had appealed to them, until the heart would swell and unconsciously burst into melody and praise God. Ntsikana … has given us such an illustration. It is just a natural outburst of feeling and joy as we should expect from one emerging from the bondage of a cruel heathenism into the freedom and liberty of the children of God (Househam 1923, 53).

In his recounting of the myth, Househam downgrades song (the most ardent expression of Xhosa culture) to ‘crooning’, reiterates the litany of primitive music’s qualities as did Wallaschek; and speaks of the great prophet Ntsikana as illustration or mere ‘example’ of an early convert. His distancing strategy (aside from its racial overtones) pushes the event away from the tenor of the fictional account Bokwe wrote for the metropole, leading it towards a crude evangelistic ethnography. Employing quite another register, David Dargie’s (1982) account explores the musical side of this experience, as if it were not so much a religious awakening as a great creative moment in which Ntsikana juggles old and new. Dargie places his account in the context of performance: while Ntsikana was dancing at the umdudo - the night before he supposedly dreamed the first of his hymns - he “became aware that the Holy Spirit had entered him” (1982, 7). Dargie, like Bokwe, imagines what was said and by whom, writing his account almost as fiction. “The next day he continued to act strangely, telling people that something had entered him … He began to sing strange chants, using the words ‘elelele homna’” (Ibid.).

Dargie’s account also signals the focus on difference: he is fascinated by the merging of European and African cultural traditions into what has come to be viewed as the first South African composition (Blake 2000, 13). Here, then, Ntsikana is not so much exemplary convert as composer articulating a new musical expression. Concern for what is often seen as a ‘reconciliation’ between the African and Western in compositional discourse (although it often re-inscribes difference) places Dargie’s account at an interesting tangent alongside other writers in this volume who have tackled the same issue, such as Bongani Mthethwa (on Alfred Assegai Kumalo [sic]), Erlmann (on Reuben Caluza), and Stephanus Muller.
(on Stefans Grové). All four writers examine the interface, or in Leon de Kock’s apt phrase, the ‘seam’ (de Kock 2001) that holds together compositional strands in the post-colony. The interweaving of these strands has, over time, been theorised under various names: in the 1970s and 80s it was called syncretism, in the 90s hybridity; in popular music or jazz discourse it might be fusion or cross-over. In terms of Ntsikana’s music, such hybridity was extremely awkward, ‘unlikely’, as Grant Olwage puts it, revealing (through Bokwe’s harmonisation) both Xhosa music ‘reformed’ and Victorian hymnody ‘deformed’ - and thereby, spawning few successors (Olwage 2003, 138). The claim for Ntsikana as compositional origin rests on his symbolic significance, then, rather than on his music. And where the music is claimed it is partly in error: the version of his hymn that Bokwe transcribes as the ‘Great Hymn’ is not what is now seen as the originating Great Hymn (transcribed by Bokwe as the ‘Round Hymn’ (Olwage 2003, 136)). The claim rests, moreover, on two massive conceptual leaps: from what Ntsikana actually chanted in the early nineteenth century to Bokwe’s early twentieth-century arrangements; and again to what we choose to find original a century later.

The myth of Ntsikana as origin owes its different inflections to historical undercurrents that inevitably changed during the course of the 200-year span of this volume. The dividing line between different sections of the present book mark some of the most important moments of change in South African history: 1806-1930s, 1940s-80s, late-1980s-mid-90s, and mid-1990s to the present. They broadly define four projections that have been of over-arching significance in South African political ideology: British imperialism and its aftermath in a tangle of rapidly urbanising modernisms, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the philosophy of apartheid, the often violent politics of transformation, and the post-apartheid democracy. This does not mean, however, that the four sections are movements of a national symphony that move inexorably forward in time without reminiscent themes. The ideology of the colonial nineteenth century contained many elements (romanticism and nationalism being two) that persist to the present day; apartheid laws may have crumbled but their stifling impact on musical development is still felt; transformation was a long and painful stage in the South African psyche that occupied a surprisingly short span of chronological time and still has not yet ended; and although 1994 was a new beginning, even in ‘the new South Africa’ cultural terrain remains highly contested. The texts represented in this book reflect changing historical and ideological imperatives in ways far more complex than can be grasped by surveying the (chronological) list of contents, and some examples must now be given.

In the work of some writers (such as Melveen Jackson on South-Asian music from the 1860s to 1948) historical sensibility is very much to the fore. In others it is an insignificant aspect of the writing - some extracts seem almost to exist in a historical (or ideological) vacuum. Most of the writing cannot be fully understood, however, without knowing something of the socio-political events that surrounded
it; for example Barrow’s *Account of a Journey, Made in the Years 1801 and 1802...* (Barrow 1806b), Alberti’s *Tribal Life & Customs of the Xhosa in 1807...* (Alberti 1968[1815]), and Barrow’s *[Travels] in Southern Africa...* (1813). All three were written during the British-Dutch war over the Cape Colony during which, briefly: the British wrenched the Colony from Dutch control in 1795 to prevent it falling into French hands during the Napoleonic wars, handed it back to the (Dutch) Batavian Republic in 1803, seized it again after the Battle of Blaauwberg in January 1806 and confirmed their control through the London Convention of August 1814 (Saunders and Southey 1998, 31). Barrow was a significant player in this tug of war. He published at least five accounts of two visits to south-western Africa in 1797-98 and 1801-02, rewriting his narrative to suit the expectations of readers in London and his employer, the British Admiralty. Their appearance was timed conveniently in terms of the unfolding of political events (1801, 1804, 1806 and 1813). His accounts of 1806 and 1813 (detailed and shrewd observations including many references to music) lent narrative solidity to the centre’s possession and re-possession of a distant ‘other’ (Pratt 1992, 58). Music provided Barrow with evidence of ‘civilisation’ among the inhabitants sufficient for their subjugation: “here a plentiful harvest is offered to the first reapers who may present themselves” (1806b, 400). The full titles of his books themselves speak to the imperial agenda (see List of Sources); while his changing signature (John, John Esq, Sir John ...) traces a career whose ascendancy between 1801 and 1813 was arguably due in large part to his work on ‘the colonies’.

A counterpoint to this narrative is German-born Ludwig Alberti’s popular *Tribal Life...* published first in Dutch (1810) then French (1811) and German (1815) - an English translation appeared only in 1968. Alberti’s work as a professional soldier took him to the Cape in 1803-1806 (the Dutch period between British rule) on the Batavian Republic rather than British side. His view of music is as ‘other’ as Barrow’s; but it is not so much the tale as his dour telling of it, that marks a major contrast. Not for Alberti are the literary allusions that make Barrow’s text readable as (travel) fiction quite aside from its references to music. Alberti manages to reduce a great Xhosa creation myth to the following bland ‘poem’:

In the land in which the sun rises, there
is a cavern, from which the first
Kaffirs, and in fact All peoples, as also
the stock of every kind of animal, came
forth. At the same time, the sun and
moon came into being, to shed their
light, and trees, grass and other
plants to provide food for man and cattle (1968[1815], 13).