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**Kwanongoma College of Music**  
**Rhodesian music centre for research and education**

*By Olof E. Axelsson*

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# Kwanongoma College of Music

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The aim of this report is not so much to present new results of research into African music, but rather to show the vast possibilities hidden in African music research, and how these can be utilized in music educational programmes suited to the African population, particularly in Southern Africa.

In this respect Kwanongoma College of Music is a unique institution, not only in Rhodesia, but perhaps on the whole African continent, as its primary objective is to foster and further promote the immense artistic values in African musical styles, and by so doing, prepare the way for the emergence of an African musicology in modern African societies.

## Brief historical notes

The name 'Kwanongoma' is a mixture of the two main indigenous languages spoken in Rhodesia, *Shona* and *Ndebele*, and since the time the College was established in 1961, it has come to mean "The Place of Music" or "The Place where Drums are played".

Inspired by the extensive work in collecting and classifying African traditional music over a long period done by Hugh Tracey,<sup>1</sup> Mr A. R. Sibson, Director of the Rhodesian Academy of Music, Bulawayo, Rhodesia, took the initiative in establishing Kwanongoma College of Music. It thus became a branch of the Rhodesian Academy of Music.

The main objective of the establishment of the College was to provide educational opportunities at primary school level for the African people of Rhodesia, and the College thus became a centre for the training of *music teachers* for this purpose. The Ministry of Education accepted such an approach, and during the first 10-year period of its existence the College trained a limited number of music teachers for primary schools.<sup>2</sup>

After a while, however, the approach was found to be uneconomic for the Ministry of Education, and as a result the intake to the College for the training of music

<sup>1</sup> Since about 1945 Dr Hugh Tracey has recorded indigenous music from different parts of Africa, and published his results through the African Music Society, initiated and established by him in 1947. From this society then emerged the International Library for African Music (ILAM), situated in Roodepoort, South Africa, of which Dr Tracey has been Director since its establishment.

<sup>2</sup> E. E. Carruthers-Smith, African education in Bulawayo from 1893. NADA, Vol. X, No. 3, 1971, p. 87. The Rhodesia Ministry of Internal Affairs Annual.

teachers was abandoned in 1971. Students who had enrolled at the beginning of that year were given the option of either accepting a transfer to the United College of Education for training as ordinary primary school teachers (T3 course), or carrying on with their musical training at Kwanongoma. Those who chose to do the latter were given no promise of employment after completing their music training, and the 3-year music teacher's course was re-named "The Music Performer's Course".

During the first period, when musical education for teachers was given, the authorities of the College also realized that a proper music education based on African indigenous musical idioms could not be efficiently carried out without research into the basic character of *Shona* and *Ndebele* music. Thus a research approach was initiated which, among other things, resulted in the collection of a considerable number of Shona and Ndebele songs found to be suitable for use in primary schools. At present the songs already collected are being revised and classified, and it is anticipated that they will later be published.

One of the most positive and conspicuous results of the work of the College in its first 10-year period is its approach to the manufacture of some African musical instruments found in and around Rhodesia. Two kinds of instruments have been emphasized, the *marimba*, an African xylophone, and the *mbira*, sometimes called the "thumb-piano" from the way it is played.

When the new United College of Education (UCE), a joint effort by seven different church denominations, was established in the late sixties for the education of primary school teachers in Rhodesia,<sup>3</sup> negotiations began between the Rhodesian Academy of Music and the UCE to prepare for the transfer of Kwanongoma College of Music to the latter, where it was to play the role of a faculty of music of the UCE. The official transfer took place in January, 1972.

As a department of music of the UCE, the main objective of Kwanongoma is to give adequate tuition in music teaching methods to the teacher students of the UCE.

In addition to its responsibility to the UCE, Kwanongoma also continues to act as an independent music centre, and the former 3-year music teacher's course, which was re-named "Music Performer's Course" in 1971 to suit the students who remained at the College, has now been modified and is called *The Music Instructor's Diploma Course*.

## Present activities and objectives

Up to present time interest in African music has mainly come from scholars and their research in the subject has been from a purely musicological or ethnomusicological point of view. Unfortunately this has led neither to a wider understanding of the broader environment of the highly artistic values embedded in African music, nor to an intensification of educational activity at any level. Generally speaking the educational authorities and the established churches have continued in their European-centred approach, and this in its turn has led to the neglect of a musical expression among Africans rooted in their own culture. Yet it must be

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 87–88.

emphasized that some church denominations—especially lately—have tried to change this Westernized concept of music in their Christian worship, and to a certain degree this has led to neo-African music styles becoming more and more established.<sup>4</sup>

Educational authorities, however, have lagged behind to a very large extent, and although the last few decades have witnessed some discussions and suggestions about music education, there have as yet been no visible results in which African musical ideas have been emphasized. Hence, primary music education in African schools continues to be a foreign element in the curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

Against this background it is encouraging to learn that the International Library for African Music (ILAM), South Africa, has recently initiated a project which is a sincere attempt to collect, classify and publish data about African music with a view to developing an African musicology the chief aim of which is "to discover the *practical* basis of the music of this continent"<sup>6</sup> (my italics).

It is within this framework that Kwanongoma wishes to work and to promote African music. The results of all research, in particular concerning Southern Africa, should be tested and experimented with in practice, i.e. how can this musical art-form be re-introduced to the larger African society, and by what educational methods. There is an immediate need for proper textbooks dealing with African musical theory, and, as far as possible, African musical history,<sup>7</sup> as an essential and predominant feature in an educational programme aimed at bringing African music into the artistic and functional field to which it rightly belongs. In this respect it

<sup>4</sup> Fairly extensive results have been obtained in Rhodesia in this respect by the Roman Catholic, the Evangelical Lutheran and the United Methodist Churches. See for instance the following issues of African music: Journal of the African Music Society, South Africa: R. Kauffman, The hymns of the Wabvuwi, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1960; R. Kauffman, Impressions of church music, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1964; Review of Ndwiyo Dzechechi Dzevu... edited by J. E. Kaemmer, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1966/67; Fr. J. Lenherr, Advancing indigenous church music, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1968. See also O. E. Axelsson, African music and European Christian mission, unpublished filosofie kandidatexamen thesis in Musicology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Sweden, 1971. Since about 1965, the Roman Catholic Church has recorded African church music for their Masses, as well as gospel songs and children's Sunday School songs on more than 38 records up to present time. (Mambo records, Mambo Press, Gwelo, Rhodesia.) The United Methodist and the Evangelical Lutheran Churches have issued some hymnbooks in staff notation containing hymns composed by young African musicians, which are now fairly extensively spread over the country. In addition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has also published its liturgical music in one staff notation edition (ELCR Head Office, Box 2175, Bulawayo).

<sup>5</sup> In Tina, a journal for African primary education published monthly, the 'New Approach' syllabuses for Grades 3–7 were recently published and although the objective of music education is rightly stated to be "designed to enable the child to enjoy music" (Tina, March, 1972, p. 7) the whole approach is almost completely based on research findings produced in England! Such research, which has been carried out among European children with a totally different musical background as compared to African children, cannot, quite obviously, be directly adapted to an African environment. Introducing such European conclusions is a complete dismissal of the artistic and functional values of African music.

<sup>6</sup> H. Tracey, African music. Codification and textbook project. Practical suggestions for field research. International Library for African Music, Roodepoort, South Africa. June, 1969, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Kwabena Nketia indicates interesting new approaches to the historical aspects of African music study in his essay "History and music in West Africa" (Essays on music and history in Africa ed. by Klaus P. Wachsmann, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1971), and he emphasizes that "We must face afresh the problems of change in the musical traditions of Africa within the larger framework of African history" instead of promoting the false idea that African music has been more or less static and isolated throughout the centuries (pp. 4 ff.).

is also highly essential that compilations of African vocal and/or instrumental music, printed in staff notation, be issued, and records produced and distributed.

For this reason Kwanongoma College of Music works according to three principles, *research*, *education* and the *manufacture* of African musical instruments, and these three are fully interrelated at every point.

## Research

Before educational programmes based on African musicological concepts can be planned, there must necessarily be thorough research. Late in 1971 ethnomusicologists from the University of Washington, USA, took part in a seminar on ethnomusicological topics at the University of Rhodesia, Salisbury. Kwanongoma College of Music was brought into the discussion, and it was stressed that a close relationship between the University of Rhodesia and the College should be established. As a result of the seminar, a Joint Committee for Ethnomusicology (JCE) was set up, comprising three members from each institution, for the purpose of pursuing research into African music in Southern Africa and as far as possible promoting such music through the use of new and up-to-date educational programmes.

The committee then recommended that Kwanongoma should pursue the following aspects if funds could be raised:

1. Kwanongoma College of Music should become the *main centre* in the country for ethnomusicological research.

The most essential aspect of this task is to collect, classify and build up an archive of recordings and documented observations of indigenous African music; this archive will then assist both national and international scholarly research in the specific field of ethnomusicology in Southern Africa.

2. Investigations should be carried out to find further possibilities for co-operation in ethnomusicological research and teaching, both at university and non-university levels.

This would mean that Kwanongoma should work out educational programmes at different levels, based on the results obtained from research. Such programmes should include the presentation of teaching methods as well as the production of suitable textbooks in music. The archive, mentioned under no. 1 above, will form the basis for the selection of suitable compilation of vocal and/or instrumental music to be used in the anticipated educational programmes.

3. The approach will further include initial musical training on certain types of the mbira and marimba to scholars who intend to do research in African music in Southern Africa. It is quite obvious that such possibilities offered to scholars will in a short time make them more prepared for actual field work, as they will be able to communicate with their African tutors at the College in a musically natural environment, and yet in a language understood by both parties, a factor which will not always be present out in the field, when an interpreter often is necessary. Along with the initial studies on an African instrument, indigenous language studies can also be offered at the language laboratory of the United College of Education.

## Education

The main principle guiding the educational approach at Kwanongoma is that the teaching methods and the music material used must be totally changed from a European to an African basis. And as already has been said, this cannot be done unless research is carried out. The music taught at all different levels must first and foremost be *for* the African and *by* the African.

The current educational programme of the College covers three different levels, and a fourth is anticipated:

1. Elementary music training, based as much as is at present possible on African musical idioms, is given to about 400 teacher students of the United College of Education. This programme also offers opportunities for interested students to learn how to play the mbira, the marimba or the guitar. From the beginning of 1974 all students will be given elementary tuition in how to play the *Kwanongoma mbira*. This instrument is introduced to give students a fuller understanding of staff notation, and how it can be modified to suit African vocal and instrumental music. Since 1972 the musical training of the UCE students has also been extended to cover the loss of the special music teachers, whose training the Ministry of Education closed down in 1971. With proper methods comprehensible to the African musical mind, and access to the right musical material appreciated by Africans, the standard of musical education in primary schools should be raised considerably in the years to come.

2. Kwanongoma College also runs a full-time 3-year course in music, which, since the start of 1972, has been called the *Music Instructor's Diploma Course*. It has been initiated in order to extend opportunities for musical education to a larger circle of the African community in Rhodesia, and it is anticipated that graduates from such courses will in the future serve within local authorities in Southern Africa, e.g. in municipalities, social welfare departments, rural councils, churches, mine companies and the like, as music instructors.

Furthermore, it is anticipated that a joint effort could be initiated by the Ministries of Education and Internal Affairs in Rhodesia to make use of such music instructors within the local councils now so widely being established in the rural areas. Such music instructors could be used both in the primary educational programme and on a voluntary basis outside the school curriculum.

3. In addition to the above internal music programmes, Kwanongoma College of Music offers private music tuition to individuals specially interested in African music. At present such tuition is given on the African instruments *marimba* and *mbira*. Guitar tuition is also provided in this programme. All private music students receive adequate training in music theory, which is based as much as possible on African musical concepts.

4. To make the music education adequate at teachers' training colleges and in secondary schools, Kwanongoma College also invites the Ministry of Education to accept a programme for education of music teachers for such institutions. With the meagre musical education taking place at such levels at present, there is little hope that musical standards will rise at any educational level. And whenever new

music syllabuses are presented in primary education—be it of a European or an African background—teachers must be able to fully understand and introduce such new approaches to their children—a fact that is sadly and consistently neglected by the educational authorities.

## Manufacture of African musical instruments

An educational programme based on characteristic African musical forms and ideas cannot be adequately pursued unless African musical instruments are taken into account. Unfortunately, in the African societies in Rhodesia of today such instruments are not easily obtainable. The impact of Western technological civilization and the general lack of interest in African music have meant that many instruments that were once wide spread in the country, are today more or less extinct. The few kinds of instruments still in use in the indigenous societies are scattered and isolated. Thus it must be regarded as of the utmost importance that those instruments, which once played an essential and indispensable role in the musical life of the societies, should be re-introduced, and their artistic and functional values clearly emphasized. With this in mind, Kwanongoma College, since its establishment in 1961, has stressed that the manufacture of some of the African instruments found in and around Rhodesia is an absolute necessity if an African musical educational programme is to be successful.

As previously mentioned, Kwanongoma College has its own carpentry workshop, where at present two kinds of instruments are manufactured and sold, mainly to educational institutions, churches and clubs, but also to private individuals.

Let us first shortly consider the *mbira*—an instrument with metal keys fastened onto a wooden board and played with the thumbs and index fingers. When played, the instrument is usually stuck into a gourd made out of a pumpkin shell in order to amplify the sound from the keyboard. On the gourd, and also often on the soundboard itself, landsnail shells or bottle tops are fastened to create a buzzing sound when the tones are struck. (Fig. 1.)

The term *mbira* is commonly accepted as an all-inclusive term for a number of different models and sizes from the small *kalimba* types with 8–12 keys to the large *Njari*, *dzaVadzimu* and *Matepe* mbiras with up to about 30 keys.<sup>8</sup>

At present the workshop manufactures three different kinds of mbiras, namely a) the Tapera mbira, b) the Mbira dzaVadzimu, and c) the Kwanongoma mbira. The Tapera mbira is named after its introducer, Mr Jege A. Tapera, an old *Muzezuru* man from the Mrewa district in Rhodesia. When young, he visited the Tete district in Moçambique and there learnt how to play an mbira instrument from the Sena/Nyungwe people called *chisansa* or *kasansi*.<sup>9</sup> Originally, the instrument he brought back to Rhodesia consisted of 13 keys, but Mr Tapera has, in co-operation with Andrew Tracey added two more keys, and the whole keyboard is laid out in a typical Sena/Shona fashion.<sup>10</sup> Although the scale structure of the instrument is



Fig. 1. The Kwanongoma mbira. In playing, the left-hand thumb and the right-hand thumb and index finger are used, the index finger usually plucking the key from above in a downward movement.

hexatonic, the vocal music sung to it is invariably heptatonic in a Sena/Shona tonality.

The second kind, the Mbira dzaVadzimu (lit. music for the ancestors), is probably one of the oldest mbiras found among the Shona people in Rhodesia, and its music is often very complex and elaborate.<sup>11</sup> It is also a fairly popular instrument and at present interest in the instrument has grown considerably. Generally the mbira dzaVadzimu has 22 keys, although occasionally 24 keys can be found, and the scale structure is heptatonic with a tendency towards equidistant intervals.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the Kwanongoma mbira is a modified and diminished version of the Tapera mbira described above. For a number of years this instrument has been manufactured and tuned to the European tempered major tonality (F major) but since the start of 1973 the instruments made have been tuned according to Mr Tapera's Sena/Shona tonality.

Recently, the Kwanongoma mbira was enlarged to comprise 19 keys with heptatonic scale structure. There are two reasons for the enlargement of the scale structure to heptatonicism, while retaining the traditional tonality concept; the instrument can be used for a wider variety of Shona music of heptatonic character, and by being heptatonic it will serve as one of the instruments used in musical education to introduce a modified version of staff notation suitable to the African musical mind. As such the instrument can be used with music scores in staff notation before the student goes over to the more complex music of the Mbira dzaVadzimu, some of which has been notated and published by Andrew Tracey.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> H. Tracey, A case for the name mbira. *African music*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1961, pp. 17–25.

<sup>9</sup> A. Tracey, The mbira music of Jege Tapera. *African Music*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1961, pp. 44–63.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> A. Tracey, Three tunes on the mbira dzaVadzimu. *African Music*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1963, pp. 23–26.

<sup>12</sup> A. Tracey, How to play the mbira (dzaVadzimu). *International Library for African Music*, 1970, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

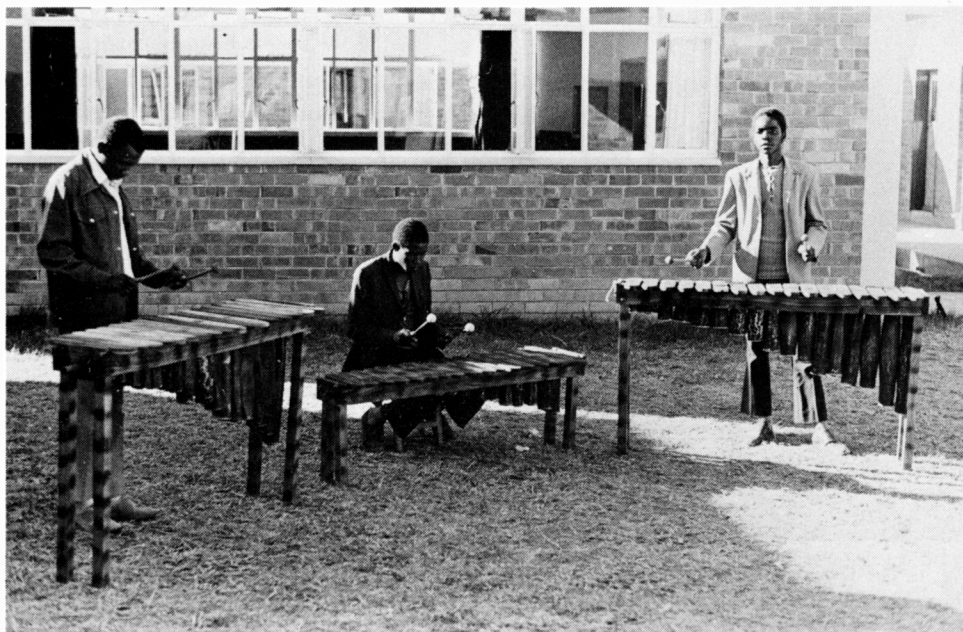


Fig. 2. Two tenor marimbas and one treble marima employed in ensemble playing.

Finally, investigations are at present carried out in order to prepare for the manufacture of the *Njari* mbira, possibly second in popularity among the Shona people of Rhodesia.

*Marimba* is the all-inclusive term for the African xylophone, of which there are number of different sizes, designs and tunings.<sup>14</sup> The construction of the *Kwanongoma marimba* is based on the traditional marimba instrument found among the *Lozi* people of Zambia and called *Selimba*, but the completed product is somewhat modified.

The principle followed in the manufacture of instruments is that the finished products must have a strong construction to stand the wear and tear. Thus, the resonating gourds, which were originally made from pumpkin shells of different sizes and of oval shape, have been dispensed with in favour of plastic tubing, which serves the same purpose and is unbreakable. Recently, a method has also been developed to change the cylindrical plastic tubes into a slightly oval shape by the use of an expanding device and heat. The heat also gives the white surface of the plastic a mottled brownish colour and makes it look much more like the natural materials used in the building of African instruments. Yet the tonal characteristics are not changed to any audible degree.

The marimbas are manufactured in four different sizes, namely *treble*, *tenor*, *baritone* and *bass* to make possible the ensemble playing that is so common in the indigenous societies. Although the tuning of the instruments is fairly close to the

Western tempered major scale, certain characteristics of the traditional tonality are retained. (Fig. 2.)

All the instruments manufactured at the workshop of the College are used in the present educational programmes, and in the Music Instructor's Diploma course the students must have a highly developed skill in playing the instruments before they are allowed to graduate.

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As stated already in the introduction to this article, Kwanongoma College of Music is no doubt a unique institution in Bantu-speaking Africa. To my knowledge there is no other College in Africa which so stresses the importance of an African approach to musical education, and which, for that reason, attempts to do further research into African music for the benefit of the African population. Furthermore, through the manufacture of African musical instruments, the College tries to emphasize the highly artistic values such instruments once had in African societies, and the necessity of safeguarding the continuity of their further development. In other words, the present attitude of Kwanongoma is not only to preserve African music and its instruments, but also to further encourage, develop and spread knowledge about all the artistic and functional values embedded in the music and musical instruments.

Through the establishment of the College, African music has now begun to give its contribution to the cultural life and education in Rhodesia, but so far only on a small scale due to lack of capital and current funds.

In the recent past a few articles have been published by scholars devoted to African music, and all have stressed the need to launch programmes of African musical education. So far nothing more than pious hopes and wishful thinking has come of this. With the establishment of the Kwanongoma College of Music a step in the right direction has at last been taken by some people of vision, and some organisations have come to accept this as a right, proper and highly desirable approach. Yet, what is now urgently needed is the full acceptance, recognition and support of national and international sources involved in research and education. If such recognition and financial support are given, the approach to music initiated and later developed at Kwanongoma, can be continued and advanced to its fullest extent for the benefit of the musical aspirations of the African communities. Kwanongoma College of Music will then serve in the continuing progress towards the establishment of an *African musicology*, which should always be the ultimate aim in the promotion campaign of African music in modern African nations.

<sup>14</sup> P. R. Kirby, *The musical instruments of the natives races of South Africa*. Witwatersrand University Press, 2nd ed., 1968, p. 47.