

SOUTH AFRICAN SIDELIGHTS ON A MUSICAL PROBLEM

Maud Powell, the Distinguished American Violinist,
Tells of the Colored Man and His Love of Rhythm and Tune

The Language of music Speaks to the Native in Direct and Intelligible Terms — His Instruments
Mellow-toned and Sweet

By MAUD POWELL

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A recent trip to Tennessee has recalled impressions received in South Africa — impressions of the colored man and his love for rhythm and tune. There is an aesthetic susceptibility about the colored race that responds quickly to both beauty of color and of sound.

It was of frequent occurrence in my travels in 1905 in South Africa, to discover half-nude Kaffirs standing an hour at a time outside the hotel window listening to my violin practice. The knowledge of English speech amounts in the town-bred Negro of South Africa, to a vague understanding of so-called “kitchen-kaffir” (a most elemental speech adapted to his limited understanding), but the language of music speaks to him in direct and intelligible terms. Our own Southern darky brought his taste for folk-lore and song with him from Africa, when he came to us long ago, to help in the corn and cotton fields of Dixie land.

The love of beautiful line, color and sound is a racial instinct.

“No wonder the white man covers his nakedness,” says our black brother of the antipodes, “for he is ashamed of his deformities.”

As the South African native borrows his color schemes in his bead-work from the heavens or from the myriad-hued wild flowers that deck the great treeless Karroo, so he steals from the songbirds of the forbidding hills the secret of soft persuasive music.

His musical instruments are mellow-toned and sweet, being made of wood, bamboo, gourd (especially calabash) and of tinkling strips of metal, while his melodies, like those of the feathered creation, acquire a compelling charm from monotonous iteration and reiteration.

Even the intervals of the barbaric scale, if scale it can be called, are of such an indefinite and illusive character that they may very justly be thought to have their prototype in the throat of the songbird. So much do sounds of a gentle nature ravish the ear of the native African that he dons, when dancing, a belt of large dried bean-shells filled with softly rattling pebbles, which he strings together like beads and winds about his waist.

The lovable “ricksha” boys, curiously and gaudily costumed, oxhorn and feathers on their heads, imaginary stocking of amazing pattern painted on their bare legs, wear these dancing belts as anklets, and as they lope along in imitation of the native spring-buck, dragging their human load after them, anything more deliciously entrancing than the soft rhythmic “chink-chink” of these musical ornaments can hardly be imagined.

Another Kaffir ornament is a head-dress having beaded strings dangling between the eyes, with tiny bells crudely carved out of bits of horn jingling on the ends.

These dark-skinned, lithe-limbed natives possess also a delicacy of touch which they apply as readily to the manipulation of a musical instrument as to their quaint bead-stringing, plaited straw work and the like.

To hear a Kaffir boy play an instrument of the white man’s fashioning, an ordinary mouth organ or the plebeian concertina, is something of a revelation. I heard once in the solitude of the hills of Swatzkop, Natal, a Kaffir lad softly playing a concertina as he strolled barefoot along the narrow mountain path.

One little haunting phrase he repeated over and over again, producing a tone so sweet and seductive that I stood entranced. As he passed me, some pretty instinct of courtesy prompted him to subdue his tone to a mere breath of sweet sound, producing an effect in the stillness of the late afternoon that was indescribable.

I have since been informed by an Englishman who knows something of the Kaffir, by virtue of his long association with him in an official capacity, that a native man is known by the one tune that he always plays. (Here we have the *leit-motif* in embryo.)

Moreover, he has a way of repeating his tune in cycles in some manner unfathomed by the white man, and it seems that my boy of the concertina had some large rhythmic plan, which made him loath to stop playing, inasmuch as he would thereby lose count and perforce have to go back to the very beginning.

This same official also gave me some particulars about the natives of Bechuanaland, who have good voices and sing remarkably well in chorus. On one of those strangely clear nights under the Southern Cross they will congregate in scores or even hundreds, ranging themselves in groups around an enormous bonfire. Then they will sing in unison, in chorus and antiphonally.

The burden of their song may be some strange folk-lore or tribal history, or mayhap a rehearsal of all the daring feats and brave deeds of their honored and worshipful chief. One group will start off with a slow monotonous droning, a second will presently intone a sort of melody, which in turn will be taken up by a third group, and so on.

Each group will have its individual tune, while the various groups will answer each other or sing together in a sort of curious counter-point. And for a grand and glorious finale they will rise and sing together in a simple impressive unison.

It is not agreeable to learn that the white man's hymn, too often feeble in both tune and words, and unfortunately associated with the civilizing (?) introduction of the whiskey habit, is gradually usurping the place of the native song, romantic, fitting, thrilling as it is. Like the clothes of "civilized" cut that sit in repulsive filth and awkwardness on these splendid bronze figures, so the white man's song is also a mournful misfit.

In view of the much discussed question of an American school of composition arising out of the melodies of our Southern negro, these musical susceptibilities of his semi-savage brother across the South Atlantic are of some import. Certainly the aesthetic advantage of steeping one's self in the atmosphere of our Southern tradition and coming in touch with the lovable but fast disappearing "Uncle Remus" type, is considerable.

But, to my thinking, the overpowering influence of the great white race, and the tendency of these restless money-making times will kill outright the poetic possibilities in this direction. We Americans are more likely to live first through a phase of large intellectual, mechanical music-making before arriving at a real individuality of expression. And nothing will accrue through *copying* peculiarities of interval and rhythm of a race fast losing its charm of unspoiled, uneducated originality.

The passing epidemic of rag-time (with its individuality of rhythm) will have lived its course and have left its imprint, which in time will have become an idealized memory. This will be one element in the building of an American school of musical expression — and a vitally important element, inasmuch as rhythm stands at the very root of all musical structure. And inherent in ragtime is much more than merely structural quality. It has a soul of its own, quite apart from anything that has thus far been created. American history, literature of life "befoah de wah" and traditions tinted by the hand of time, will create "mood" — and this will be another element in the building.

It is a long process, but we shall achieve the artistic result ultimately. It must be remembered that the great Italian, Dutch and Belgian schools of painting thrived and blossomed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, during the great financial prosperity of the merchant kings of those days.

So, too, will time and history prove that American music, now in swaddling clothes, received great impetus and encouragement and consequently made great advancement during an era of prosperity that is the wonder of the whole civilized world.

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