



Kurt Huwiler. *Musical Instruments of Africa.* Gweru: Mambo Press, 1995. 156 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86922-614-8.

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Published on H-AfrArts (June, 2006)

Experiments and/or Explorations in African Sounds, Shapes and Colors

Many readers will receive this book with mixed feelings: although the text, in conception, structure, illustration, instrument construction activities, etc., is directed toward amateurs and classroom teachers, the last few pages, devoted to acoustic measurements, frequency calculations, and geometric proportions of keyboard instruments (marimba, mbira, for example) and drums, will present significant challenges to the ordinary reader in terms of the technical details presented. This interest in the “scientific” measurements of proportions is due mainly to Huwiler’s background in the engineering sciences and metalwork.

Kurt Huwiler, a Swiss who first served at the Vatican, began his mission work in 1958 in Gweru, Zimbabwe, and was first drawn to African musical traditions in 1959. The author does not pretend to present an exhaustive catalog of African musical instruments from the southern African region. Rather, he displays a basic sense of diversity by employing the quintessential Hornbostel-Sachs categories of musical instruments. He also indicates geographic distribution by drawing on examples from the eastern and southern regions of Africa. The comparative listing of terms across ethnic groups and languages is helpful, especially for readers who frequently deal with the literature on African music and dance.

The contexts as well as the music and dance traditions in which the musical instruments are employed are not discussed, mainly due to the author’s lack of advanced formal training in music theory and musicological analysis of African musical traditions. Similarly, most of the

significant statements and observations about the instruments are not discussed in the light of the relevant scholarly literature. For example, his descriptions of “iron gong” (or double bell) as “the symbol of kingship” (p. 37) is better understood in the light of Jan Vansina’s essay, “The Bells of Kings.”[1] Moreover, Huwiler’s observation that “there are rarely two octaves with the same structure ... [and] to bring them all in line with the tempered Major Scale we would do immeasurable harm to the musical expression of the respective peoples” (p. 84) only hints at the common emphasis on timbre (tone color) in African musical traditions, as shown in measurements and field studies by Gerhard Kubik, Peter Cooke, and Roderic Knight.[2]

Chapter 2 is wholly devoted to music in Christian worship, with attention to the varieties of musical instruments mentioned in the Old Testament, which is to be expected, given the author’s missionary background. However, this chapter shows an obvious lack of deeper knowledge of the existence of musical instruments that are historically related to the instruments of the Old Testament, and as documented in the publication by Jeremy Montagu, *Musical Instruments of the Bible* (2001).

The range, categories, and techniques of play and construction of musical instruments presented emphasize the great creativity and resiliency commonly encountered in African music and dance traditions and which defy the Hornbostel-Sachs scheme. Unfortunately, the author fails to highlight this important issue. Of all the instruments, the marimba receives special at-

tion, including complex construction details and measurements. This emphasis can be understood, in part, in relation to efforts by the author and his colleague Dave Dargie to remodel and revive the instrument, and in part to the author's commitment to a dissemination of African music, as shown further on specific websites devoted to his work.[3]

Huwiler believes indigenous African musical traditions are disappearing and very few skilled musicians are left. The author's interest in local arts and crafts, shapes, proportions, and colors are seen in his detailed reproduction, redesign and prescription of these in activities devoted to the construction of African musical instruments. Several pages are devoted to color patterns and shapes (pp. 134-151). This may be one of the most useful sections of the book, particularly to knowledgeable readers.

Overall, this book will serve some class activities devoted to exploring and experiencing African musical instruments and the arts. It may be very confusing, however, given the technical details that are beyond the level

of elementary school children. Among professionals, such details become meaningful only when they are related to the contemporary literature, which this the author fails to do.

Notes

[1]. Jan Vansina, "The Bells of Kings," *Journal of African History* 10, no. 2 (1967): pp. 187-197.

[2]. Gerhard Kubik, *A Theory of African Music*, vol. 1. (Wilhelmshaven, Germany: Florian Noetzel Verlag, 1994); Peter Cooke, "Report on Pitch Perception Experiments Carried Out in Buganda and Busoga-Uganda," *African Music: Journal of the International Library of African Music* 7, no. 2 (1992): pp. 119-125; and Roderic Knight, "Vibrato-Octaves: Tunings and Modes of the Mande Balo and Kora," *Progress Reports in Ethnomusicology* 3, no. 4 (1991): pp. 1-49.

[3]. See <http://www.stepin.org>; and <http://www.freemedia.ch/verlagsprogramm/shonaandndebelesongs.html>.

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Citation: Daniel Avorgbedor. Review of Huwiler, Kurt, *Musical Instruments of Africa*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

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