A Welcome Look at Gospel and Zimbabwe

As anyone who has traveled to Zimbabwe over the past ten years can attest, gospel music has become a ubiquitous element in the Zimbabwean soundscape. In shops, private homes, and the emergency taxis, gospel competes with more widely known styles of popular music for airspace and recognition. Yet the ever-expanding literature on Zimbabwean music and popular culture has made little mention of gospel’s obvious importance to late twentieth-century Zimbabweans. Ezra Chitando attempts, and largely succeeds, to fill this gap with his recent text, *Singing Culture*. Chitando unites his previous experience as a scholar of religion with his more recent interest in popular culture to contextualize, historicize, and analyze gospel’s place in Zimbabwean Christianity and popular music. Rather than focusing on specific performers, denominations, or time periods, Chitando provides a broad introduction to gospel music in Zimbabwe, its antecedents, and its religious significance. Despite its many strengths, his text pays too little attention to sound, relies too little on his interview data, and moves too quickly from one topic to the next. Aside from these minor concerns, this serves as a welcome addition to the study of Zimbabwean music and a sufficient introduction to gospel music in Zimbabwe.

Chitando’s straightforward organization moves sensibly from his introduction and methodological framework to individual chapters on the history of music in Zimbabwe, the rise of gospel music, gospel’s relationship with local disadvantaged groups, his own interpretation of gospel’s increasing presence, and some concluding remarks on gospel’s role in negotiating identity for many contemporary Africans. As mentioned throughout, Chitando seeks to apply historical, sociological, and phenomenological methods in his research. None of these methods is applied very rigorously but collectively they contribute to a broadly appealing work. He rejects stereotypical notions of African authenticity steeped in an ancestral past threatened by colonialism. Chitando successfully realizes this laudable goal by showing gospel’s increasing significance for a range of Zimbabweans. He contends that “gospel music has created alternative space for social groups that had been rendered invisible” (p. 6), referring to women and young people. His attention to women and the unique performance space gospel creates for them is one of the more successful themes Chitando addresses.

In chapter 2, Chitando reflects on his own framework and techniques of interpretation. He addresses the importance of sociology, history, and phenomenology in turn. However, he draws little from the literature of continental phenomenology and rarely explains his own use. He attends to an impressive range of sources and addresses the important role of individual churches, the recording industry, related trends in Zimbabwean popular music, political relevance, and the important influence of key individuals. He has interviewed many of gospel’s most important performers, including Charles and Olivia Charamba, Machanic Manyeruke, Zexie Manatsa, Shu-
Chitando’s historical overview is unlike most accounts of Zimbabwean music because of its privileged attention to the church, as well as the development of commercialization in Zimbabwe and the changing role of women in musical performance. His summary of pre-colonial styles and indigenous styles is cursory, often conflated, and he strangely laments the lack of literature on rural Zimbabwean music. While there are certainly gaps in the literature, several excellent works on indigenous musical styles in Zimbabwe do exist. His claim that “a major limitation in the literature available on music is the preoccupation with the urban history of music in Zimbabwe” (p. 28) is incongruous with the body of work on the mbira and drumming traditions, as is his admission that his own text is based entirely on work in Harare.[1]

He re-addresses certain orthodoxies that are a welcome alternative to common knowledge about music in Zimbabwe. For one, he suggests that Shona society is not as patriarchal as typically thought, but historically has included women in several important domestic and spiritual roles. He also claims, provocatively, that “musicians from a Shona cultural background were not traumatized by the experience of colonialism” (p. 26). Chitando’s strength here lies in his appraisal of churches and their impact. Musically, he suggests that church choirs were essential to introducing ideas of talent, inventing understandings of the audience, and introducing new instruments like the guitar and piano. However, his interest in Christian music and his determination to make contemporary Zimbabwean identities vibrant and relevant lead him to trivialize alternative views. As he says, “African music could no longer be viewed in terms of its communal and spiritual value: the forces of urbanization and commercialization now required creative packaging and marketing strategies” (p. 35), a somewhat exaggerated dismissal of music’s continued spiritual salience in many Zimbabwean communities. Despite this, he successfully documents the role Christianity played during Zimbabwe’s colonial era, the well-documented war of independence, and the rise in commercialization, setting the stage for his subsequent analysis of gospel’s rise and importance.

Chitando gets to the heart of his book in chapter 4 with an examination of gospel’s rise, dominance, and thematic material. This is Chitando’s most successful and enjoyable chapter. He addresses gospel’s historical antecedents, early pioneers, and rise in prominence during the 1990s. His attention to gospel’s early pioneers, such as Jordan Chataika and Machanic Manyeruke, is especially rewarding. Chitando suggests that gospel’s increasing popularity is connected to musicians’ incorporation of sungura stylistic features, thus connecting gospel’s trajectory with that of Zimbabwe’s popular music industry—a subtle, yet crucial, point.[2] During these formative years, gospel incorporated influences from a wide range of musical and ideological sources. Chitando implies a dialectical relationship between gospel artists’ attempts at pan-Christian ecumenism and their interest in expanding their own audiences. Musicians’ desires for popularity and their recognition of music-industry pressures demanding mass appeal partially contribute to the expression of consistent themes in gospel. More data from the recording industry and direct commentary from gospel singers would have enriched these conclusions. Chitando’s analysis of gospel themes is thorough yet frustrating. He suggests that gospel’s rise in popularity is closely connected to Zimbabwe’s own deteriorating social situation. Gospel artists sing about salvation, death, heaven and earth, economic struggles, ethics and morality, prosperity, ecumenism, and national sentiment. As Zimbabweans struggle with political corruption, economic hardship, and the growing threat of AIDS, gospel provides an alternative vision that suggests solutions rather than merely accounting for problems. I found much of Chitando’s analysis here provocative and suggestive. Unfortunately, his “textual” analysis looks primarily at the themes suggested in titles. When Chitando does examine passages of text, his conclusions are much more convincing.

Chapter 5 addresses those social groups who have benefited the most from gospel’s rise in prominence. He focuses primarily on women and young people. Chitando suggests that the combined patriarchies of Shona society and colonial occupation largely excluded women from most performance opportunities. Women in gospel could avoid the widespread stigmatization of performance by relying on Christian morality and singing God’s praise. As Chitando says, “Since they [women] are understood as carrying out the religious task of spreading the word of God, female musicians who play gospel music appear to receive greater social acceptance than female pop artists” (p. 72). The evidence clearly suggests that there are more female performers in gospel than any
other genre in Zimbabwe. The rest of the chapter is less convincing. Youth culture has had a strong presence on Zimbabwe’s soundscape since the 1960s. In this sense, gospel music is no different from hip-hop or sungura in its strong youth contingent. While it is true that middle-aged men, such as Mapfumo and Mtukudzi, have dominated the music scene, there have always been young contenders. Industry conservatism has as much to do with their marginal presence as a genuine lack of involvement.

Chitando offers his interpretation of the data in chapter 6. He suggests that the close relationship between Christianity and colonialism contributed to Christianity’s continued dominance of Zimbabwe’s communication infrastructure, thus setting the stage for gospel’s eventual prominence. His analysis of gospel’s contradictory assessment of prosperity and profit is enlightening and sounds vaguely Weberian, although Chitando does little more than suggest these connections. He contends, but does little to confirm, that gospel has an inherent appeal regardless of its market appeal or the class status of successful performers. I would have liked more interpretation on how different churches have been involved in and responded to gospel’s popularity. Although Chitando briefly addresses the complicated relationship between mission churches, African Independent Churches, and newer Pentecostal churches, he leaves a more thorough analysis for future scholars.

Chitando’s main points are important and accurate. Gospel does provide a musical means for locals to negotiate and construct identities at odds with stereotypical notions of African authenticity. Being a Zimbabwean Christian performing sungura-inspired gospel music is as African as being a rural mbira player. Chitando suggests that African society has always been changing and has never been “irreducible.” His claim that gospel is a vibrant and influential presence in Zimbabwe is timely and refreshing, and will hopefully inspire future studies of Zimbabwe’s gospel scene. Unfortunately, at a concise 105 pages, he does little more than scratch the surface. Despite his numerous interviews, recognition of denominational differences, and the role of individual creativity, Chitando presents gospel as a single, if amorphous, musical genre. There is a wealth of literature on Christianity and music in southern Africa that complements Chitando’s work and problematizes his generalizations.[3] He addresses and emphasizes gospel’s reliance on sungura and the role this reliance had on gospel’s popularity, but never attends to the musical features that made it so popular. Manyeruke and Charamba, two of gospel’s seminal figures, both draw upon sungura influences, but it is difficult to discern from Chitando’s analysis how significant this reliance is for their respective audiences. He often relies on Peter Manuel and Wolfgang Bender for information about Zimbabwean popular music, neither of whom has ever professed an expertise in Zimbabwean music.[4] As a side note, Chitando frequently refers to Zexie Manatsa as Zacks Manatsa and also refers to Susan Mapfumo as Susan Chenjerai, neither of which detracts from Chitando’s argument.

Overall, I was excited to read Chitando’s book and this excitement never waned. He goes a long way towards filling a glaring hole in the literature of southern African music and includes an impressive array of perspectives. His perceptive critique of stereotypical notions of African authenticity and his attention to shifts in identity negotiation are consistent with much recent literature in Africanist history, anthropology, and ethnomusicology. His summary of gospel music in Zimbabwe is comprehensive and effectively supports these broader claims. With Singing Culture, Chitando provides the first book-length treatment of Zimbabwean gospel music. His conclusions are sound and much of it is enlightening—I only longed for more music, more local voices, and more depth.

Notes


[2]. Sungura is a common name for a Zimbabwean style of popular music that draws heavily from Congolese rumba. It is arguably the most popular style of music in Zimbabwe, perhaps rivaled only by gospel.

[3]. Examples include Matthew Engelke, Live and Direct: History, Ritual, and Biblical Authority in an African Christian Church (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2002); and Carol Muller, Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1999).


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