

CD COMPANION INTRODUCTION

Southern Cones: Music out of Africa and South America

*The North seems to be all form and no content,
the South all content and no form.*

—A colleague returning from a contemporary arts conference in Europe

Gathered here in this virtual performance space are composers of the African continent and South America and citizens of other regions for whom these Southern cultures have been musically significant. Some have “voyaged in” from the sprawling cities of the South to the metropolitan centers of the North with their internal “Third Worlds,” their own Souths; some have voyaged into the Molochs of the Southern Cones, places with pockets of unimaginable wealth protected by fortress walls, their own Norths; while others are oscillating in-between, crossing many borders, touching upon other urban flows, joining the urban sprawls.

We don't wear shoes, we're African kids.

—My daughter Hannah (then 5),
born and raised in Durban, South Africa,
to her insisting grandmother in Germany

Once “there,” learning to dream in a new language, diluting the mother tongue, unable to completely sever links with their culture of origin but coming to terms with a nomadic identity, the uprooting of once-comforting traditions and meanings, composing different sounds in their place, bearing a small part from “the periphery” to places where hybridization of cultures happens and where the emergence of new cultural forms is demanded: exploring alternatives, utopias.

Dad, when are we going home?

—Hannah (then 7) after
4 days of visiting Germany

Unhoused, unbelonging? Or, is “the home” a fluid concept?
Suspended, through “the labyrinth,” existence adjustment—in neighborhoods where “a person is a person because of other people,” and other neighborhoods where each one is for oneself—“living on both sides, trying to mediate between them.”
And in both places, history presses at the craft:

Great Zimbabwe and Machu Picchu
Pedro Alvares Cabral and Vasco da Gama
Atlantic slave trade and Entradas
Tupac Amaru and Bambatha
Nelson Mandela and Che Guevara
São Paulo and Lagos
Maskanda and Vallenato

diamond mines, cane estates
coffee beans, tobacco leaves
rubber, ivory, crude oil haciendas
precious timber (sliced or fried)
arms dealers left, cocaine traders right

plant the landmines, harvest the landmines (repeat)
mercedes viva benz
authentic world music trafficking
hail the tourists (repeat)

Floods (much-needed helicopters are fighting a war elsewhere)
Famines (more helicopters on order to irrigate the fields)
Child soldiers, massacres, mutilations, mass graves, refugees
The slums (and dump us our daily toxic waste)
The tyrants (we know which despot to dispose of just to usher in the next)
Elite corruption and IMF-prescribed poverty
The cries of “Pachakuteq! Inkallay!” and “Mayebuye! Afrika!”

After every shock: foraging through the rubble
After every blow: retuning the guitars
After every coup: sifting the ashes
After “Things [have] Fall[en] Apart”: picking up the pieces
“The Inhabitant and His Hope,” this “Stubborn Hope,” insists “I hope still, therefore I am.”

Music with its built-in long-term memory works through each collapse and tries to digest the past. It gives sustenance, soothes the “Nervous Conditions” and the pain, but, at the same time, rebels against complacency, maps the messy reality. Providing relief or comment, the craft manifests itself in this contention. The chants of “Amandla ngawethu siyonqoba simunye” and “Venceremos, la miseria sabremos vencer” recollect the other 500 years, the disappeared, the silenced voices, the mistakes and the traumas, fight amnesia and defeat blindness. Despite different histories there are common traits, music travels well between the Cones.

*I'm an African of German descent.
My favorite musician is
Looksmart Herwitz Msimang.*
—Hannah (16 in the year 2006)

Through music we try to speak (on occasions even the unspeakable). And circumventing the TenaciousNeoColonialists’ “gobbling-up-the-globe” drive, the global(ized) Southern composers with laptop or “tecno povre” and balafon or vocal chords communicate, interact, approach each other’s “othered other,” cooperate, cross-fertilize, transform, reconstruct, explore the possibilities of an ecologically just world, and . . . entertain. But, perhaps more than anything else, they learn to live with the countless Southern contradictions.

It’s Southern life and texture. Here is a very small collection of Southern music. Press ►.

Acknowledgments

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JÜRGEN BRÄUNINGER
Southern Cones CD Curator
Music
University of Natal
Durban 4041
South Africa
E-mail: <brauning@mtb.und.ac.za>