

The Soul of Mbira Twenty Years On: A Retrospect¹

This review of Paul Berliner's *The Soul of Mbira*² should probably be considered more an appreciation than a review. *The Soul of Mbira* is, to my mind, the best ethnography ever written about an African musical tradition. It is the book I propose whenever anyone asks me to recommend a book about African music. What makes it a complete classic are not only the treatments of the music and the repertoire, of performance and training practices, of the instrument and its range, but also and throughout, a deep sensitivity to the spirituality that sustains and is evoked by the musical tradition. There are many other books that are rightly regarded as classics in our field, but none of them elevates the spiritual elements as Berliner's book does. The *mbira* fascinates those who play it, and Berliner conveys that fascination on every page.

It is worth considering what an achievement this book is. Every chapter is a gem, a model of clarity and organization that conveys a tremendous amount of information while maintaining interest. The introduction contains a story that is must reading for anyone who would become engaged with a deep musical tradition or anyone who would appreciate what is involved: the account of Berliner's effort to learn the names of the *mbira* keys from an acknowledged master, Mubayiwa Bandambira. Reflecting on the proverb, "What is with an old man is not to be asked for; he gives what he likes," Berliner describes his impeccable interaction with the master and notes that "he decided that I was worthy of being entrusted with the single piece of information that I sought to collect from him only after six years of studying *mbira* music, three trips to Africa, and many rigorous tests."³ I knew my own drumming master, Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai of Tamale, Ghana, for four years before he started teaching me the meanings of some of the more serious Dagbamba dances, and it was seventeen years before I was taught with authority the final sections of the oral historical traditions I had sought, and there were many, many pitfalls and diversions along that road.

After his profound introduction, Berliner starts with a straightforward and rich description of the history of the African *mbira* and of the range of Shona music, followed by an equally informative discussion of the Shona *mbira* tradition. The

¹ Originally published in *African Music* 7, no. 3 (1996): 91-95.

² Paul F. Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [original publication by University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978]).

³ *The Soul of Mbira*, p. 7.

detailed discussion of the music itself is probably the most coherent description of an African idiom in the literature on African music: along with Roderic Knight's discussions of Mande *kora* music,¹ Berliner's discussion and analysis of the *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* parts in Shona mbira pieces are used by everybody I know who teaches African music. Of particular note to those who would attempt to pin down a type of music or do technical analysis of musical performances, this chapter includes a sentence that should be always in our minds. Even within such a historically well-established repertoire as Shona mbira music, Berliner prefaced his discussion with the following caveat: "An mbira piece itself is not a fixed musical structure with a specified beginning and end; it is a composition of certain characteristic cyclical patterns that provide a framework for elaboration and variation supporting the creative expression of the performer."² The same description might just as well apply to West African drumming ensembles. Typically in Africa, a piece of music has a name, a particular rhythmic configuration and a particular ensemble of instruments associated with it; but there will be considerable variety in how that piece is played from place to place, from musician to musician and from year to year. In order to analyze a piece of music, scholars are generally forced to reify either a single or a composite performance, and neither representation can adequately reflect the key element, that is, the piece's variability. One of Berliner's associates said that he could play one piece all night and that it would sound different as the night went on; one of my Dagbamba teachers told me that he could play a certain dance in such different ways that I would not think it was the same dance. Berliner's discussion of the musical characteristics of mbira music is a model of how one may achieve both splendid detail and distanced perspective in musicological description. There is no more difficult task in ethnomusicological writing.

As one who from the first has placed himself on the ethnographic side of ethnomusicology's interdisciplinary axis, I am more and more convinced that we should always be aware the music itself, as music, is not always the most important thing in people's minds when they gather to make it. When we assert that African music is "functional," we imply that the music is subordinate to other goals. To a great extent, discussions of musical decision-making must refer us to aspects of music's responsiveness to its performance context, such as its

¹ See, among his other works, Roderic Knight, "Music in Africa: The Manding Contexts," in *Performance Practice: Ethnomusicological Perspectives*, ed. by Gerard Béhague (Westport, Ct.: Contributions in Intercultural and Comparative Studies, Number 12; Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 53-90.

² *The Soul of Mbira*, pp. 52-53. See also John Blacking, cited in John M. Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 193.

integration with other arts, its relationship to the intensity and framing of events, and its elaboration of symbolic or social issues. Simply put, the types of musical decisions that musicians make are generally based on the situational or symbolic dimensions of the musical performance. Quite apart from such obvious factors as the relationship of music to language, as both speech and oral art, what a musician plays is generally determined by the specific people who are at a performance, why they are there, what they are doing at a given moment, what the musician is feeling, and even what is happening in the general society as it affects the context of the particular gathering. The dynamics of the performance reflect the dynamics of the ongoing event and even reflect unexpected developments and behavior. Although African musical performances are often characterized as improvisational, the improvisation generally has a social or situational reference that may be more important than any reference to generative musical structures.

Therefore, without an orientation grounded in a performance's social dimensions, matters as diverse as choice of repertoire or choice of improvisational motif cannot be understood. For example, at a dance gathering in Dagbamba society, what might sound like a complex rhythmic elaboration may rather be a proverbial praise-name articulated on a drum in recognition of a particular person's lineage, or perhaps represent an invocation for a particular ancestor. What might seem to be creative inspiration in changing a rhythmic or melodic line might turn out to be a musical allusion to another dance, inserted as a joke, as an experiment, or because of confusion. The specific types of dances played and their stylistic variations may vary from situation to situation as a reflection of the composition of the assembly. Particular pieces or even inserted motifs might reflect mythic or historical allusions, or they might reflect the presence of a particular dancer. Such contextual elements are the kinds of things many African musicians think about and focus on while making musical decisions, and what they are doing musically cannot be inferred from the musical elements that would be evident from an audio recording. In Africanist ethnomusicological contexts, people still venture purely musicological analyses; later, perhaps, someone who knows the social and cultural context of the performance, or who knows the musical repertoire in greater detail, will provide data to demonstrate that the first scholar overinterpreted the musical elements with the aid of an active and hopeful imagination.

It is to these issues of mbira music that Berliner devotes the next five chapters. Following the chapter on the nature of mbira music is the splendid chapter on performance and on the relationship between the mbira player and his instrument, a chapter that includes one of my favorite metaphors of African musicianship, the idea that the musician and the instrument are friends; this chapter also includes the

moving description of Hakurotwi Mude bringing himself to tears as he plays. More riches follow: the discussions of learning processes and poetic song texts, then the brilliantly nuanced description of a *bira* possession ceremony, which is certainly the equal of the best anthropological descriptions of ritual processes and sentiments. The last chapter brings everything together into a description of the themes that link the mbira tradition to Shona culture, the web of respect that binds the sanctity with which the instrument must be approached to the regeneration of the spirits of the ancestors, the ethical and aesthetic values that evoke appropriate character and behavior from the mbira's disciples, whose training and performance require respect, openness, modesty, dignity, and above all, a sense of how their role in community must comprehend and bring into communication the living and the dead. This chapter also contains beautiful and sympathetic portrayals of the lives of notable mbira players; these portraits still remain among the best examples of African musicians in the ethnomusicological literature; indeed, the stories of their lives are among the best biographical portraits in anthropological literature. All the chapters build upon one another, each illuminating a different aspect of the tradition, so that in the end, we cannot see it all at once but are left to comprehend it only through whatever experience of the music we may obtain.

All this is complemented by beautiful photographs and even by feasible instructions for building one's own mbira. In addition, Berliner released a number of fine recordings that present different levels of complexity in the *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* parts and progress to the full performance of a *bira* ceremony. The recordings take us all the way through the idiom and allow us to hear the musical elements discussed in the literature, broken down for students to hear the various parts and idiomatic forms. It is extremely rare for a fieldworker to document music so systematically in terms of pedagogical potential, and Berliner's recordings are a superb supplement to the text.

I know of no other musical instrument with the range of the mbira, and *The Soul of Mbira* shares the instrument's range. Although the book is a deeply focused ethnography, its insights touch the work of all of us; every turn of the page provides striking sociological and musicological affinities and parallels to research in other African musical traditions. Comparing the mbira and the kora, for example, in both cases a relatively simple ostinato provides both a counterrhythmic foundation for more elaborate patterns in vertical relation and also an essential signature that reemerges in alternation with improvised ornamented segments in horizontal relation. By the same token, a legitimate comparison may be made between Shona mbira players in Zimbabwe and the

Dagbamba drummers I worked with in Ghana.¹ First, the identifying patterns of a piece of music, or one of its known configurations, should be established clearly. After that, the tempo may increase gradually throughout the performance of that piece. Additional or individual variations should be introduced incrementally and not abruptly, and the variations should draw from a repertoire of conventions and to a lesser extent from personal innovation. Variations that depart too much from the basic patterns of the piece would jeopardize its identity. In this sense, the variations can be considered as essentially included within the sets of structures that comprise, in Berliner's words, "the kernel of a self-contained universe of musical ideas that performers elaborate through variation."² Berliner discusses the "continuous stream of subtly changing musical ideas"³ in mbira playing as emerging from consistent, continuous development of subtle shifts, substitutions, omissions and additions; the relation between repetition and variation in Dagbamba drumming was described to me as "steady-changing"⁴ in character. Such organic metaphors or metaphors of fluidity are broadly relevant in African musical idioms. As an additional point of interest, indigenous perspectives on variation seem to derive from a performance posture in which a musician and his or her instrument are united not by fusion but by dialogue. A Dagbamba musician emphasized that a drummer should listen to his drum to get ideas for variations, so that the variations would follow one another appropriately. This perspective resembles the mbira player's metaphoric advice to think of an mbira as a friend who makes suggestions in a relationship of sharing ideas; the musician must both give ideas to and take ideas from his instrument. In such a vein, even mistakes can imply new variations without implying the loss of aesthetic command.

From these considerations of musical dynamics and performance modes emerges a strengthened image of a unified stylistic sensibility in African music. When the music from West and East Africa, moreover the music of a kora, an mbira, and a drum ensemble, can be described with similar language, it is difficult to argue against the notion of a broad pool of cultural tendencies and potentials. From that perspective, the differentiation of musical forms in Africa presents an apparent paradox of musical meaning: the differentiation of form is superficial when considered against culture's deeper generative structures, yet it also continues to be the essential guide for distinguishing a given idiom's significance to the people who conceived it. It remains perhaps the most important task of ethnomusicology to augment the emergent emblematic image of African music

¹ *The Soul of Mbira*, pp. 52-135; *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, pp. 99-114, 117-27.

² *The Soul of Mbira*, p. 111.

³ *The Soul of Mbira*, p. 53.

⁴ *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, p. 111.

with a recognition of the intrinsic interest of individual traditions. The articulation of these tendencies and potentials into individual forms must be discussed with a sense of appreciation for the vicissitudes of history and the creative imagination of people who found serendipitous ways to interpret social needs musically by tapping into that pool. *The Soul of Mbira* is a beautiful model for anyone who would address this task.

Since *The Soul of Mbira* was published, Berliner has devoted many years to an ambitious and now magnificently realized study of jazz improvisation, recently published as *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*.¹ In many ways, *Thinking in Jazz* is a worthy successor to *The Soul of Mbira*, for it implicitly extends many of the ideas and methods Berliner developed during his work in Zimbabwe, and does so, most significantly, in the African-American context. Let us hope that in the future Berliner will once again feel interested to contribute his knowledge and clear thinking to issues in Africanist ethnomusicology. He was in such a sentient state when he did the research and wrote *The Soul of Mbira* that he could probably not do anything like it again, a thought that is all the more reason to want him back, in order to see what he might give us next.

-- John M. Chernoff

¹ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).