

BOOK REVIEWS

Sounding the Cape: Music, Identity and Politics in South Africa. Denis-Constant Martin. 2013. Somerset West, South Africa: African Minds. 444pp.

Because the colonisation of South Africa began at the Cape, because slavery developed at the Cape, because all kinds of people, coming from a great many places within and without the borders of contemporary South Africa, met and mingled there, Cape Town was the first outpost of creolisation in what was to become South Africa. From there, creolisation processes eventually embraced every part of the country. Musics that were invented at the Cape, because of the particular mix of people who found themselves in the Mother City from the middle of the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th, decisively influenced the creation of all 20th century South African musics. This implies that any history of South African modern music necessarily begins at the Cape. (Denis-Constant Martin: 382)

When, in the mid-1990s, I relocated from Durban to the Department of Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch close to Cape Town, Denis-Constant Martin, who was living in Cape Town at the time, spoke about similarities between Reunion Island, Mauritius and Cape Town, similarities that he captured in the notion of *métissage*. This French term translates – albeit incompletely – into the notion of creolisation. I find it useful to think of creolisation as signalling intermingling, interweaving, syncretism (the bringing forth of something new) and as signalling all of these characteristics within a historical context simultaneously of violence and of creativity. So, a discussion of creolisation in the Cape involves the intermingling of people during slavery, during colonisation and apartheid as well as after. It has to do both with identity and with politics. Music, Denis then argues in this book, may be used as a window, an aperture, an earhole to consider the extent and nature of creolisation that has taken place in Cape Town since the establishment of a dense settlement some three hundred and fifty years ago.

The historical trajectory of musics of the Cape is presented by identifying the legacy of creolisation in the early years, by the ‘dialectics of separation and interweaving’ during the middle passage, and by the need for teaching and healing after the end of apartheid. The voices of a number of musicians are also heard, three in detail: Vincent Kolbe was a librarian, activist and musician, born in District Six. I met him through Denis in France and then at the District Six Museum in Cape Town where he was a trustee. The other two case studies are based on interviews Denis conducted in 1971 in England with Chris McGregor and in 1981 in Johannesburg with Rashid Vally. These attest to the interest Denis has had in the subject over the past 40 years, an interest during both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras.

The identification of the musics of three periods in Cape Town’s history - its establishment under circumstances of conquest and slavery, colonial times through to apartheid, and the post-apartheid period – are treated separately. Music, it is argued, is a system of audible differences. Accordingly, there are two interlinked ways of identifying musics. The first is in terms of musical categories: pitch, duration, intensity, timbre and so on. The second is in terms of social categories: different music repertoires

for women, or for men, or for youth subcultures. Or, jazz for African-Americans and tango for Argentinians, for instance. Since this reviewer is not musically educated, I will focus on the second alone, on the shifting social categories of the musics of the Cape. In addition, I will use the author's and others' voices to illustrate these shifts.

There is little historical material available during the first period. The social setting sketched accordingly is a general one:

When music was played at the Cape at the times of the Dutch East India Company, it always involved people belonging to different categories: Europeans, the Khoikhoi and slaves, as musicians, dancers or listeners. There is every reason to believe that in places where the poorest colonists, sailors, slaves and Khoikoi intermingled, they made music and dance together, and therefore began to invent new musical modes of expression. (74)

Rural Dutch and later Afrikaans-speaking (Boer) folk musicians participated in ... musical innovations by sharing with their coloured neighbours the **velvool**, made by stretching a steenbok skin over a wooden frame. It was on such instruments that Euro-Khoi syncretic music was played in the hearing of Bantu-speaking Africans, including Xhosa and Tswana. (Coplan 2008: 14-15)

There is much more evidence available and marshalled for the colonial and apartheid phases of Cape Town's history. The social identities of music were constructed from two strains: that which was melded from elements of European, Asian, Madagascan and African musics at the Cape, on the one hand, and that which relied on the appropriation of overseas repertoires, particularly from Holland, the United Kingdom and the United States, on the other. As colonisation moved toward apartheid, moreover, it becomes clear – at least regarding South African music – that a form of dialectics took root, that separation could not be disassociated from intertwining, and accordingly that, in a survey of musics that were created within groups separated and labelled African, coloured and white, these have to be considered separately and subsequently together.

During this period – effectively the twentieth century up to 1994, the date that heralded the end of apartheid South Africa – musics and associated musical activities among Coloureds in the Cape included various extremely popular musical forms shown in local cinemas, diverse bands (including Muslim *qasidah* bands), Christmas choirs, *langarm* dancing and *vastrap*, vocal groups such as the *moppies*, *nederlandsliedjies*, and music of the Kaapse Klopse (Cape minstrels). Denis-Constant Martin in fact researched and wrote a history of the *Kaapse Klopse* some ten years before the publication of this present work (Martin 1999). Musics and associated musical activities among Africans in the Cape included *amakwaya* hymns, marabi songs, concert and dance, as well as African jazz and kwela. Among Whites, *boeremusiek* and *vastrap*, pop musics, the rock and roll revolution, and the *Voëlvy* movement are addressed.

These enforced separations proved 'futile' over time: creolisation is a never-ending process of intermingling, of interweaving, and of fusion. Among White musicians during this period, David Kramer is mentioned as an increasingly popular fusion artist. In the words of the author, "barriers erected to divide and isolate people included in racial categories were never totally waterproof. Music offered the means by which to

cross boundaries, and opened up spaces for creative cooperation and blending”.(105) Nonetheless, the politics and imposed identities of the period left indelible marks on the development of Cape musics. Three case studies of such inscriptions will be mentioned. They are the Eoan Group, the *Voëlvy* Movement and MAPP (Music Action for People’s Power).

The Eoan Group established in 1933 was an opera company that staged full length Italian operas by South African singers who were Coloured. They were a great success in the 1950s and 1960s but as both separation along apartheid lines and grassroots opposition to such division took root, the Group found itself politically marginalised, particularly in terms of its need for state funding. This first proved dangerous to its reputation and finally fatal. The *Voëlvy* Movement of the 1980s involved white Afrikaner musicians and was marked by irreverence and iconoclasm within *Afrikanerdom*. Its appeal was cultural rather than political contestation among Afrikaner youth and accordingly its music neither ‘broke new ground’ nor ‘linked up with other styles performed by African or coloured musicians.’ In sharp contradistinction is the case of MAPP, a group of musicians in the Cape who affiliated themselves with the United Democratic Front (UDF), an anti-apartheid organisation launched in Cape Town in the early 1980s. In the words of a musician and teacher who coordinated the MAPP music school in the 1980s:

Mapp, when it started, it was an affiliate of the UDF, it was Music Action for People’s Power, it was to use music as a vehicle for liberation. Also to subvert the government through music, for instance, meetings were banned, but concerts were not banned so through concerts you could have these rallies without the authorities knowing. (242)

The post-apartheid phase of the Cape’s musical history is characterised by using the Afrikaans term *potjiekos* – literally meaning *little pot food*, it is traditionally cooked in a pot outside over an open fire and the ingredients used can be as varied and diverse as the cooks prefer. The author interviewed some forty Cape-based musicians toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century. They came from diverse backgrounds whilst being rooted in the Cape musical traditions described above. Some argued with passion for additional teaching of music, particularly to underprivileged children; others for the healing quality of music, healing in particular for all those whose histories have been scarred by apartheid activities in the Cape. All, on the other hand, considered that Cape musics share two attributes: a diversity of elements and roots, and a direct relation to the *ghoema* beat. This beat that underlies implicitly most Cape tunes of a fast tempo is mainly played on a *ghoema* drum although it is also played as a rhythmic formula on banjos and guitars. Simply put, it is emblematic of Cape musics.

After the end of apartheid, however, the first and paradoxical sequel for musical and cultural development was the need for commercialisation. A large number of foreign NGOs had, during the 1980s, supported anti-apartheid musical and cultural organisations – MAPP was one example that ended its activities in 1994. The post-apartheid South African state did not fill the gap left as these sources of finances dried up. Consequently, musicians were required to seek commercial success or rely on

sponsorships. This led to increasingly market-related tendencies as well as to a significant out-migration of musicians toward Gauteng and Johannesburg, the commercial capital of the country. In Cape Town two musicians who gained prominence in their separate searches for cross-fertilisation of different traditions are Hendrik Hofmeyr and Michael Blake. An illustration of this quest for experimental music, Michael Blake cross-fertilizes 18th and 19th century European compositions, American music and African pieces from Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The second sequel was the search among many musicians for a balance between the quest for universality in their music and a longing to preserve roots, both in the Cape as well as in the country as a whole. The late South African saxophonist Zim Ngqawana (1959-2011) when visiting France some time back expressed these sentiments succinctly

“I don’t care about musical theories; they’re only noise. I’m interested in the sound and it does not matter to me if it is African (or French)... However, the recordings I have done use sounds of the street, of the church, of the people I interact with... There is no way we can forget about our history. I know what it means to be black in South Africa.” (270)

Today, South Africa and Cape Town as its ‘Mother City’ no longer enjoy reputations of successful transitions from apartheid to democracy. As a scholar trained in political science and anthropology, Denis-Constant Martin is more than aware of the shortcomings of each, their negligence regarding cultural policies in particular. It is appropriate accordingly, in this work on the historical trajectory of identities and of politics formed and wielded at the Cape; a trajectory explored through the experimentation, the intermixing, and the fusion of musics (a form of creolisation that emerges as a process the author deeply values) to give him the last word:

In this situation, music cannot be thought of as a panacea... Music will be worthless if inequalities and unemployment are not seriously tackled by government policies. Yet, music can contribute to the idea that what binds South Africans is strong, and has always offered a platform where all inhabitants of South Africa could meet and create together. Music provides indisputable evidence that South Africa is a creolised and creolising society. (380)

Sounding the Cape will be of enduring interest to social science students and researchers of Cape Town, to scholars of African music, and to all who have heard, participated in, and developed affection for the various musics of the Cape.

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