

A refreshing exploration of the musical make-up of apartheid

Grant Olwago (ed), *Composing Apartheid: Music for and against Apartheid*

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008

336 pp

ISBN 9781-86814-456-3

R220.00

Christine Lucia concludes “Back to the Future”, the first essay in *Composing Apartheid*, with a quotation by Jacques Attali: “music runs parallel to human society, is structured like it and changes when it does. It does not evolve in a linear fashion but is caught up in the complexity and circularity of the movements of history.”

Composing Apartheid is a collection of thirteen essays by a variety of scholars from a diversity of music domains and academic disciplines that are united through their investigation of the relationship/s that existed between South African musical endeavour and apartheid-dominated society; the ramifications of which still resonate today. As the editor puts it, “primarily, the book explores facets of the musical make-up of apartheid, but simultaneously, and more broadly, it reveals how, through this cultural composition, apartheid was variously made.” This dual perspective stimulates

a discourse that is inter-disciplinary. In addition to essays by renowned music scholars, the book has contributions from historians, sociologists and anthropologists. This illustrates a refreshing tendency towards a possibly uncharacteristic inclusivity in (ethno) musicological scholarship; much that is contained within the book is written in language that is accessible to non-musical scholars and some of the contents have the potential to arouse the interest of the more general reader.

The scope of the book is expansive with respect not only to the diversity of music that is covered but also the variety of contextual issues that are raised. Black choral music receives ample attention by way of the first three essays; were it not for the contrasting perspectives of the different authors, this could be construed as an imbalance. An essay by Gary Baines aligns South African popular music with “whiteness studies”; this articulates with Michael Drewett’s essay, “Packaging Desires”, which explores how “race, ethnicity, sex and gender were often integrally presented on album covers in a manner which reinforced a racist, ethnocentric, sexist and heterosexist view of South African society.”

The divergent musical domains of jazz and the Afrikaans “serious” music establishment receive due critical examination and the phenomenon of performers-in-exile is documented by Shirli Gilbert by way of an essay on ANC cultural groups (Mayibuye and Amandla) that functioned as a component of the international anti-apartheid struggle.

Carol Muller also, albeit indirectly, tackles the theme of musical exile in her paper on South African jazz entitled “Musical Echoes”. Given that I am a jazz musician and educator, I have a bias towards South African jazz and I was in accord with her challenge to the hegemony of American historiography. She aptly echoes Attali’s opinion when she contends that “we cannot simply keep writing a linearly conceived narrative of regional or even comparative and global pasts in jazz: one that starts in one place and that travels in a progressively circumscribed area.” She encourages us to “similarly reflect on the place of South African jazz history in conversation with the narrative of jazz history disseminated from and about the United States and to reflect on the stories about jazz as a truly global phenomenon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.”

Whether by accident or design, *Composing Apartheid* succeeds in finding unexpected areas of common ground within a variety of contrasting viewpoints. In the concluding essay – “Arnold van Wyk’s Hands” – Stephanus Muller expresses a wish for “narratives about apartheid that recognize both our need to tell, and our humble and honest recognition that we can never tell it all.” This was an unexpected turn in an essay that was coloured by his exasperation with the theme of the 2004 conference that gave rise to this book (he chose not to participate in the conference); he describes “apartheid-framed skirmishes and debates directed at audiences gathered together by a global English speaking consensus mentality” as being “indifferent if not antagonistic to [his] own research interests.”

It is possible that the finished product represents some degree of amelioration for Muller. The editor’s introduction provides an incisive framework that assiduously unites the diverse contributions that constitute *Composing Apartheid* and concludes with an “inconclusive conclusion”, namely that “the end of apartheid is of course not

Book Reviews

the end of the apartheid story” and “in an exploration of the past, the realities of the present cannot, and should not, be ignored.”

John Edwards
Port Elizabeth