

Mbira and piano. A case-study of cross-cultural musical dialogue at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford

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Background

On 24 November 2022 a concert took place in the Sheldonian Theatre Oxford, combining Zimbabwean and European music traditions. The concert, organised as part of composer, performer, and Mbira specialist John Pfumojena's Visiting Fellowship at TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), transpired with the backdrop of years of heated debates concerning a push to decolonise the curriculum. A year earlier the Oxford Faculty of Music had made headlines, after a Freedom of Information Act request had reported on - and skewed - internal discussions about broadening the curriculum. News agencies such as *The Telegraph*, and *Fox News* released articles stating that Oxford had 'branded sheet music as colonialist'. Further, the somewhat inaccessible collection of Mbiras at the Pitt Rivers Museum, as well as the colonial history of the instrument gave rise to the project. Among others, John wished to educate people on the mbira, which the Oxford Dictionary of English still defines as 'another term for thumb piano' (Online Version 2015).

Aims

This paper explores the Sheldonian performance, examining the setting, staging as a ritual-like space, audience-feedback, as well as the rehearsal process, as a case-study of a constructive dialogue between different 'classical' music traditions. To achieve this aim, we use autoethnographic reflections from the performers, qualitative analysis of the performance, together with data collected from audience feedback forms by TORCH.

Main contribution

The concert aimed to create a dialogue between John's Zimbabwean music heritage, with him on the Mbira and vocals, and concert pianist Judith Valerie's European classical music education and can be seen as a push towards, what Robinson (2019) called, ending 'the dominance of Western hetero-patriarchal musical performance [and ...] white male leadership.' While the concert itself was a great success, simultaneously John was facing a lot of push-back regarding other 'checklist points' Robinson mentioned, namely a re-evaluation of 'what kinds of students [a] programme seeks to support.' Wishing to apply for a DPhil to explore mbira repertoire, as well as engage with the historical mbiras in the Pitt Rivers Museum, he did not receive particularly inviting feedback in talks with various members of the Faculty of Music. As the 'resident white European musician', part of the opportunity and challenge for Judith Valerie in this concert was to avoid 'performative allyship' (Robinson 2019). Both musically, as well as in the staging of the performance, the concert was a process of balancing between making and holding space, with an intersectional array of agencies and agendas, particularly concerning race and gender. This collision led to opportunities for new pathways of communicating objectives and ambitions. Agawu states, '[...] it seems important to at least acknowledge the self-serving nature of difference-the fact that, at the end of the day, the glance of the ethnomusicological enterprise is on itself-rather than to pretend to be engaged in a dialogue with the Other.' (1992, p. 261)

This self-serving nature was largely avoided through John's position as the main actor and the one extending the invitation to collaborate. It was his agency that made the concert happen, and he who made space for Western Classical music to be present. The performers appeared as artists in their own right, while also representing a set of traditions. The concert avoided becoming a musical 'fusion', but rather created a new platform for communication. Thus, their performance serves as a microcosm of a dialogue between cultures. Situating the concert in the historic Sheldonian Theatre that usually hosts Western Classical music concerts, as well as having been the site of Matriculation for Oxford students for centuries, inspired the 'matriculation' of the mbira at the very beginning of the concert. This emphasised the role of the concert as ritual (Boyce-Tillman, 2009), in which the mbira could be transformed into an equal participant. This explicitly granted agency to the mbira, challenging its traditional position in the university as an object of (not very much) study. One of the audience members noted that, 'music is not just a narrow, sonic practice whose framings and politics can be considered superfluous: as Pfumojena put it, "Mbira is not just an instrument, it's life".' The performers acknowledged, and played with, various traditions and rituals associated with both musical backgrounds, challenging and questioning them by reframing these rituals in this musical 'third space' (Bhabha, 2004, p. 55).

Discussion and contribution

Through this paper we recognise that music is never neutral nor should it be seen purely as an object of study. For, 'music as an object, when used to describe peoples, cultures, and histories, also colonizes them' (Bohlman 1993, p. 426). Performance is always political, but may also serve as ritual, creating a liminal space. This case study shows how the concert as ritual space may be used to transform music from object to agent, and with the potential to reshape concerts to agents of change. This case-study is localised to a specific time and place. It lays out both the opportunities and challenges faced surrounding the process of putting together this concert, as well as moments of success and frustration in dealing with institutional powers and their unique agendas. While this paper does not contain any universal claims, it may nevertheless serve as a model - to be adapted, and built upon - for future cross-cultural dialogues.

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