

University-Based Music Training and Current South African Musical Praxis: Notes and Tones

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Abstract: Music pedagogy places a premium on written notation, sometimes to the detriment of orality. This, in the main, explains the disjuncture between South African university-based music education and music praxis obtaining within black communities. It is for this reason that most African students coming from an oral tradition background struggle to adjust quickly enough to make a success of their university study periods. Those who eventually succeed often are “over-educated,” thus ending up estranged from their musical communities; or “mis- or over-educated” for most of the local music industry career requirements. This paper aims to appraise the pros and cons of university-based music training in relation to South African musical praxis. It does so through engaging various contemporary qualitative research methodologies largely predicated on the grounded theory framework. Data was collected through interviews with individual black African musicians. The sampling procedure was purposive in that it sought to capture abstractions and explications from predetermined sets of musicians; university-educated on the one hand, and the “self-taughts” on the other. After inductive analysis of data, the study clarifies what seems to shape music skill acquisition in South Africa; scant regard for local music industries and community settings; and the impact of the sudden availability of a multiplicity of alternative sources information and avenues to acquire music knowledge and skills.

Introduction

Whereas written notation is at the heart of formal university-based music education, most Africans, and indeed many other societies acquire music-making skills aurally, orally; and through participation in the many rituals and socialisation processes commonly considered “informal.”¹ The transition from the so-called “traditional” or “informal” to the supposed “formal” music training paradigms, especially at university level, has, for most black South Africans, been a relatively new experience, fraught with challenges.

In the South African context, fully functional music qualification programs were and are still offered in historically whites-only universities (HWOUs). In the late 1980s, when these universities were forced to open their doors to all races, a few otherwise talented African students, but with little or less than adequate preparation from the erstwhile Bantu education system, gained access to university education. In doing so, however, many abandoned or suppressed their culturally acquired Africa-sensed ways of music learning in order to venture into the fashionable literary approaches wherein music is, according to scholars such as Cook, reduced to scores or written notations.² This situation arguably represents one major cultural discontinuity for these students. Despite their admirable ability to learn through what Primos likens to “osmosis,” many unknowingly suppress these natural aural-oral sensibilities as they understandably strive to “fit in” with or conform to

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what they, like most, are made to believe is the defining feature of university-based music education and training.³

It is widely known that the tradition of music education, including the accompanying repertoire, is gravely foreign.⁴ It is unashamedly western and out-rightly colonial and imperialist in that it, necessarily, privileges and perpetuates the canonisation of music traditions and aspirations of the northern worlds. As Akrofi and Flofu posit, “no African country south of the Sahara can boast of a music education system which is uniquely African and which fulfils its national aspirations.”⁵ Put succinctly, university-based music curriculum designs are never intended for an African or the African environment. African ways of acquiring and circulating music-making knowledge and skills for that matter hardly feature in or inform university curricula. This explains why students interested in the study of African music are not a perfect fit in these programs; rendering universities as the last places one should resort to when intending to study African music.

To pursue music studies at any South African university, for instance, the prerequisite grades are still derived from western classical and/or, lately, jazz musics. Only recently can students, once accepted into the system, elect to specialize in African music—a development that mainly appears to be a politically correct than a genuine recognition of the status of African music systems. Since the entry into these programs is via western music, a student, assuming he or she is African, wishing to study African music at a South African university has to, first, musically and culturally excommunicate him or herself from the music of birth; almost suspending the self until completion of the study course. This way, accumulated musical heritages are violently supplanted.

For young black South Africans to be accepted into a university music program is hard. This is due to the neglect of music education at the school level by authorities. Nevertheless, some bridging interventions, with various degree of success, have been devised. In most cases, non-governmental arts schools and some historically black only universities, out of necessity, become the de facto bridging or feeder organisations to universities running the so-called established music training programs. For some time now, universities such as the University of Venda found themselves, and not by intent or design, as mere feeders institutions to the HWOUs, which, post-1994, have been racing to meet the student racial demographic imperatives of the new South African dispensation. By playing along, such universities unknowingly became accomplices in the act of the cultural onslaught visited on the African music genius. As soon as mostly poorly exposed African students developed some facility in reading and writing music, or acquire junior degrees, they progress to the so-called elite universities.⁶ In some instances, talented African students are literally poached, only to be systematically de-Africanized.

Ideally, the interest as represented by the increasing numbers of African students enrolling to study music at South African universities should validate the incorporation of African music systems into mainstream music programs. After all, these universities remain African institutions and should in the main champion African art, methodologies, and epistemologies. Little progress has arguably been made towards this ideal. South African universities could still do more to meaningfully fashion articulation with African music-making praxis. The thesis of this paper, therefore, is: university-based music training is misaligned with current South African musical praxis. Specifically, privileging the written notation over the aural-oral approach to music education and training disadvantages the African student.

Methodology

To further unravel the above-mentioned thesis, the study enlists a mixture of contemporary qualitative research methodologies associated with the sociology of music and music education. Primarily, it adopts a personal, self-narrative or self-reflective research paradigm commonly referred to as autoethnography, which draws from personal experiences of musicians, mine included, as both “freshers” and later “seniors” at various South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of the late 1970s and 80s; and universities in a transforming society.⁷

The population of the study comprised sixteen musicians; eight with university music qualifications and eight without.⁸ The majority of those with music qualifications are now mainly involved at various levels in the education sector. Despite the hostility towards the informed and educated musicians by captains of the industry, a few still persevere as recording and performing artists or in related entrepreneurial fields. Even fewer work for the South African government departments as technocrats. Generally, this group mostly holds similar experiences and understanding of the dynamics of being educated in South Africa. They are also articulate in expressing their views and opinions.⁹

The other group comprised musicians who, although articulate, either loathe the idea of university education or simply did not have the opportunity to study even if they had wanted to. What is noteworthy is that a significant number of musicians in the self-trained group have some association with church music apprenticeship; with a few others being part of professional or secular bands. Likewise, musicians in this category largely hold more or less similar opinions but collectively seem ill exposed to music education issues. They, therefore, choose not to comment on experiences they do not have but rather on their personal experiences. For this reason, only those with telling comments are mentioned (with permission) in this essay.

In sum, the study yielding this paper represents, to some extent, a cross-section of views on the subject under investigation. The central research question is: why do an alarming number of African students find it difficult to acquire heightened musical knowledge and skills; and to graduate from South African universities? What then is the value of university-based education in an African context? On the other side, why do some African musicians loathe the idea of studying music at universities? From those who went to university, subsequent questions sought to harvest personal reflections and respective experiences with the purpose of establishing whether the education and training received play any significant part in their present occupations.

Considering the Evolution of Music-Making Skills Acquisition

Although music making is omnipresent in all societies, the acquisition of musical knowledge and skills today occurs in at least four identifiable fashions. In the West, including the United States, music education is part of the schooling culture.¹⁰ Western classical music—a pure cultural product of the west—is almost entirely taught in classroom situations and thus highly institutionalized. In South Africa and other countries on the African continent, even private lessons are adjudicated by institutions such as the United Kingdom-based Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) in order for students to obtain “formal” graded certification.¹¹

For the greater part of the last century, “formal” jazz education, which first thrived in conservatories modelled on the template of the Hoch in Frankfurt, Germany, has also found

a place in institutions such as universities. The first such development occurred at the University of North Texas, which started offering a BMus jazz degree in 1947.¹² Whereas western classical music training is strictly classroom-based and institutionalised, jazz education continues to straddle what may be regarded as the “formal” and the “informal” pedagogical approaches in that some education still occurs outside the so-called formal institutions wherein concepts such as “bandstand learning,” and “self-taught” musicians continue to enjoy some currency.¹³

Suffice to say, western classical music and jazz have historically been the only two established music genres informing music curricula in South Africa. Indigenous African music (IAM), a late comer in this regard, represents a different tradition in that acquisition of musical skills is, as it is the case in most communities, a by-product of other putatively primary activities or rituals; meaning that acquisition of musical knowledge and skills is societally prevalent and usually ritual bound.¹⁴

Whilst there is a degree of commonality in how the western classical music and jazz styles have been treated in education and generally in academe, IAM is in a precarious position in that it has largely been more of an ethnomusicologist’s and/or anthropologist’s object of study than a self-contained discipline aimed at imparting performative skills to musicians who upon graduation, would ply their musical trade in an African socio-economic environment.¹⁵ Arguably, music education specialists do not know yet what to do with and about IAM, hence the failure in the last quarter of a century to properly include it in curricula.¹⁶ The lack of “buy-in” from credible African musicologists and a lack of genuine engagement with cultural practitioners means no meaningful progress in the inclusion of African music education systems can be expected.

Of the two genres taught in institutions of higher learning in South Africa, it would seem jazz is more preferable, accessible and to some extent usable for most African students because its “...harmony at its structural and aesthetic level is based predominantly on African matrices,” even though the way it is taught in the classroom seems to fall short of representing its own “soul.”¹⁷ About this predicament, Gatién laments: “the traditional ways of transmitting this music have been changed, compromised, or subverted to formal methods of instruction that fit more comfortably in the formal habitat, or are more efficient (perhaps even more effective, at least in achieving certain results) in the context of classroom or group settings.”¹⁸

Springing from this truism, it is, therefore, not surprising that a significant number of musicians who went the classroom route to acquire jazz education express the need to undergo a lengthy processes of what Selaelo Selota and Madimabe Mapaya respectively term the “de-education” and the “detoxing” process in order to break free from imposed rules and, thereby readying themselves musically to access IAM practices and Africa-specific nuances.¹⁹ This quest is not an African peculiarity. Rolf Jardemark, one of the most prolific Swedish jazz guitarists, once remarked that he was, at the time of the interview, in the process of ridding himself of the limitations that come with immersion in music theory; adding that he preferred to deal with music only at a spiritual as opposed to technical and intellectual levels.²⁰ He cites Wes Montgomery, a pioneering master jazz guitarist with no “formal training” as his principal role model. He is convinced that the manner in which Montgomery acquired his skills is a revelation to him and to all who aspire to reach Montgomery’s level of artistry.

Granted, transference of music-making skills is not the sole competency of “formal” institution or universities. All cultures and nations have sustained their age-old music

traditions through cross-generational skills transfer processes. With the exception of the western classical music tradition, most alternatives to these traditions are yet to be recognised for their pedagogical worth. Jazz is perhaps the latest music genre from which universities were humble enough to learn and to incorporate into educational methodologies. Also, due to its confinement to the “new world,” side by side with the western classical music, jazz had no choice but to trade off some of its traits in order for it to evolve into an art form it is today; and to subsequently gain acceptance within mainstream educational systems.²¹ Suffice to say; other precolonial ways are still ignored and literally excluded in the formulation of the so-called mainstream music education paradigms even though ignoring what works is not sustainable.

In the twenty-first century, technology, with its defining feature being a break away from established norms, has become omnipresent even in music education. Its power lies in enabling those itching to access all kinds of knowledge and skills. Acquisition of musical knowledge and skill, therefore, become less dependent on institutions. Lessons can now be accessed freely on the internet, and through platforms such as YouTube, Skype, and other forms of social media. These unrelenting technological advancements significantly render the advocacy for a university-based approach to music training almost obsolete.

The downside of this development, though, is that virtual instruments (VSTIs), often endowed with the highest order of musical proficiency, are rapidly rendering the very musician obsolete. With the help of technology, the amateur is capable of producing a high-end artistic product often at a fraction of the cost of traditional music production.²² One does not need any musical skills to produce expert sound from a virtual instrument. In some instances, record producers prefer these VSTIs to real musicians because of the cost-effectiveness, the ability to simulate big costly studio environments, and the availability and ease of operation they afford. The whole notion of music making has thus taken a different direction in which manipulation of “gadgets” seems to supersede the ability to read and write music, let alone play a musical instrument. Even for those who still prefer to learn the traditional way, different applications such as transcription software are in abundance.²³ Lifting licks off records, as it were, is easier due to the capability of advanced transcription software that easily loops and slows down sections of any piece of music with little deterioration of the sound quality.

From the vinyl, through the compact disc, and into the solid-state digital devices such as the universal serial buses technological eras, transference of artistic skill from a master musician to a student has become easier, cheaper, and much more convenient. Today, any dedicated aspirant musician can download and use a computer application to slow down videos of their favourite musicians for study purposes. This includes exploring even peculiar ineffable nuances and individualised physical movements of the masters. The need for face-to-face instrumental tuition has thus become significantly diminished. The upload facility has enabled most aspirant musicians to rewind, loop, and woodshed musical etudes, which were traditionally only available in print or locked in some inaccessible university or community library. These technological advancements continue to redefine the very meaning of music and the notion of being a musician.

With the above advancements in mind, it is appropriate to state the areas that are beyond contention. Firstly, music scholars are agreed that “music is a social construct” and as such often reflects the tradition from which it originates.²⁴ Secondly, the fact that music pedagogy is to date founded on what many consider the elitist traditions of the West with

an unfounded superiority complex is no secret.²⁵ Thirdly, the assertion that “familiarity with musical notation and the powers of analysis that follow are vital for an ‘understanding’ of music,” is proven otherwise.²⁶ Only ignorant musicologists still subscribe to this view. That “the aural experience is the central core of musicianship” is a fact we are, today, fortunate to appreciate.²⁷

Regarding the Local Music Industries and Community Settings

In order for university training to continue being or become relevant, curriculum planners should be cognizant of trends and contexts, that have a bearing on the career prospects of music graduates. When entering the recording industry and/or the live music sector, for instance, graduates need to be aware of several issues working against their potential successes.

Multinational record companies dominate most of the world’s recording industry. These companies have their origins and headquarters in the developed countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States. Whilst contributing to local economies in terms of providing employment opportunities and paying taxes, the fact that their *raison d’être* is mainly to promote and serve as conduits for products from countries of origin should not be ignored.²⁸ A South African peculiarity is that these multinational record companies recruit local, usually black African, lawyers to deal with the vulnerable African musicians. In this environment, a talented music graduate with some knowledge of the inner workings of the music industry is less than desirable for he or she would demand what is commonly due to him or her.

Furthermore, musicians, whether or not they are graduates, do not enjoy free rein. First, through their Artist and Repertoire (A&Rs) agents, record companies dictate to musicians insofar as the music that, based on some questionable market research, is believed to be most viable in terms of sales. This often means promoting the kind of music that is devoid of academic or artistic value; thus undermining artistic freedom and the initial idea of acquiring music education in the first place. Often musically illiterate producers are imposed on schooled musicians, a practice that often leads to sour working relations. Second, musical directions are dictated by compilers of music working for radio stations on the one hand, and the type of audiences patronizing shows on the other.²⁹ A cursory appraisal of audiences attending open-air concerts, commonly referred to as festivals in the South African parlance, reveals that these events are more of social gatherings than music appreciation-oriented encounters. The splendour of female audiences, the *braairoleis* (South African version of the American barbeque), and the drinking clubs are the attracting factors in the eye of the sponsors. As a result, the so-called jazz festivals in South Africa have degenerated into Afro-pop concerts, thus rendering studied musics such as jazz irrelevant.

The same pattern can be witnessed with the so-called jazz clubs or jazz appreciating societies.³⁰ Like the open-air concerts, they have become social clubs. The interesting factor, though, is that the jazz tag is maintained, more as a marker of social class than a music genre. In some instances, smooth jazz and/or Afro-pop, both considered diluted versions of jazz by the jazz connoisseurs, have been the most viable music choices before the advent of gospel music popularity after 2005 and are associated with the urban black South African population of the 25-45 age group today.³¹ Understandably, commercially driven musicians compose music focusing partially on servicing these “markets” as a way of sustaining their careers and egos.

Sometimes satisfying all the forces becomes a challenging balancing act, especially for a thinking and gifted musician. Selaelo Selota, for instance, observes that songs written in Zulu are the most played, with a distant second being instrumental compositions.³² But when it comes to live performances, the audiences call for Northern Sotho songs such as *Mamodiegi* and *Terrr Phaaa!*—a case of radio airplay motives not being congruent with audience expectations? In sum, music graduates entering the South African music industry find themselves having to fight for their artistic voice, let alone independence.

Lastly, South Africa, like most stable countries in the developing world, is experiencing massive urbanization.³³ The result of this phenomenon is the establishment of urban culture, which in essence, is a conglomeration of many cultures.³⁴ Studies show that every culture, including the resultant one born of cultural intercourse, develops its own transmission modes, the most common of which are its lingua franca and music.³⁵ Urban music is, therefore, music germinating out of urban socio-economic dynamics. In other words, urban music could be regarded as a soundtrack to urban culture. It takes a keen eye and a sharp ear to discern such musical dictates—attributes that often do not necessarily form part of the arsenal of schooled musicians.

Arguments for University Based Music Education

The advantages of acquiring music knowledge and skills through a university or some “formal institution” abound. Firstly, the fact that any qualification structure is typically designed to expose the student to an array of skills and a spectrum of experiences qualifying as high-level professionalism is invaluable. The making of such an educated musician presupposes the ability to go through music history classes, for instance, call for different musicological reflections, immersion and application in, say, instrumental study, acoustics, music theory, form and composition or aural training—areas of knowledge branching into sub-disciplines of musicology. This is the sort of training that university-based education guarantees. Additionally, ethnomusicology brings other dimensions closely associated with disciplines such as anthropology and sociology; hence the anthropology or the sociology of music nomenclatures.

Conducting a library or desktop research activity for a history assignment, off to a computer laboratory for acoustics, taking instrument tuition, practising in solitude, and then taking part in ensemble performances or conducting fieldwork is what a typical music student at both undergraduate and postgraduate is likely to experience.³⁶ In these kinds of environments, accountability, self-responsibility, and time management, amongst other skills, are critical.³⁷ The ability to cope with such a pressured situation on a daily basis means the student is en route to mastering the invaluable expertise that shapes their professional acumen.

Secondly, like most systematised professional phenomena or science, programs leading to the same kind of (music) qualification seem to be somewhat similar the world over. A Bachelor of Music (jazz program) at the University of Cape Town, for instance, is almost identical to that offered by the University of North Texas. In addition, experiences from other institutions such as the Berklee College of Music can be expected because of the influence of the principal designers in the design stages. In this case, the influence Professors Mike Campbell, an alumnus of the University of North Texas, and Professor Andrew Lilly of the Berklee College of Music are apparent. Most importantly, such an approach to curriculum design, apart from it being a constellation of universally recognised music

education practices, ensures or effectively achieves the so-called international standards. As such, ploughing through a study program at any of the sites guarantees acquisition of a more or less the same kind of knowledge and skills sets. All students of jazz, for instance, would have in their student periods, learned how to perform and improvise through the changes of Joseph Kosmas' *Autumn Leaves* or some such "standard" repertoire. This speaks to what Neil refers to as "the standardizing effects of institutionalization" in many jazz university programs throughout North America.³⁸ This phenomenon, of course, extends to other parts of the world where jazz and indeed all other forms of music are studied. All students of western classical music, especially students of composition, would have somewhere in their formative years, encountered the Johann Sabastian Bach's chorale compositional techniques. The argument here is that music education is standardized, and as such guarantees universal knowledge and skills sets across the globe.³⁹

Thirdly, music education policies and curriculum rely heavily on research, most of which resides within universities. Making sense of this exclusive information requires educated facilitators. South Africa has been frustrated by a shortage of suitably qualified teachers. Those skilled enough used to be white and thus serving a limited number of well-resourced schools and mainly teaching from a particular cultural view, find themselves compelled to accommodate many other learners from other population groups with different worldviews, social challenges, and cultural backgrounds is stressful.

It is common sense that government officials or curriculum planners can neither conduct classes nor discharge the much-needed education and training to the masses of South African learners. Universities must respond to such a demand by producing more suitably qualified educators to fulfil the task. To make sense and actualize such curricula, inculcating the culture of lifelong learning in pursuant of music excellence means developing and upscaling music literacies to levels comparable to those of other nations. Acquiring a university music degree presupposes a move towards the attainment of such an ideal.

The ability to read and write music is not only useful for music traditionally associated with western cultures. Many scholars including the likes of Kofi Agawu, Emily Agag, Jean Kidula, and Meki Nzewi, born and raised in African environments, are only able to "represent" African music, as it were, because of their university-begotten literary skills.⁴⁰ This form of education, notwithstanding the African ritual and socialisation processes they may have undergone, enables African scholars to contextualise or discern earlier theories, arguments, and ideations about African music.

What has been highlighted here is just the tip of the iceberg. For these and other reasons, the benefits of university-based education are plentiful and can hardly be taken lightly.

Arguments Against University-Based Music Education

Having briefly discussed the value of university-based education, it is appropriate also to acknowledge various compelling arguments against such an approach. Arguably, it is natural to expect a somewhat negative sentiment against academic music education to come from those who achieved success and proficiency through alternative means. Despite the fact that some hold music qualifications from universities, it is interesting to note that they share the same sentiments with those without.

The first of such criticisms could be summed up as the conveyor belt syndrome associated with university-based training whereby acquired music skills manifest, to some degree, in a particular determinable manner from one musician to the next. Even though the “individual voice” eventually emerges at the end for some, the sound or style of such musicians often bears characteristics that are sometimes too similar to ignore as though they were factory manufactured.

On the other hand, it may be argued that the self-taught exhibits a greater level of uniqueness in terms of voice and technique (or lack of it). For this reason, merit exists in Paledi Malatji’s assertion that if he were to start looking at music in terms of “flat 9s and sharp 5s” as is common parlance in the jazz theory language, he would lose the rough edge that makes his a typically *khelobedu*-sensed music.⁴¹ For him university education would make him sound like any other so-called schooled musician, and this is not what he wants. In fact, all musicians with heightened awareness of the national, regional, or ethnic musical subtleties strive to encapsulate nuances in order to establish a unique “music voice.” As for Sello Galane, self-study, especially the bandstand training he received, did not only liberate him but also opened opportunities but also paved a way for him as a composer and performer to develop his relatively successful “*free kiba*” concept.⁴²

Pastor Khathutshelo Muthaphuli, an all-around musician and the talented bassist Danny Mamphogoro are two self-taught musicians who grew up in the church environment and have absorbed what they call the “gospel sound.”⁴³ Talented as the two are, they both flatly declined opportunities to study music at a university. Mamphogoro asks: “If I can transcribe a song, make a sense of how it was put together, and then successfully perform it at a level I currently do, I might as well study something else.”⁴⁴ Indeed, he had since graduated with a degree in international relations. But what is interesting is that he had also stopped playing in church groups citing the fact that he has outgrown the ordinary standard of most church musicians. Perhaps as a somewhat paradox to his earlier point, he prefers to mix with university-educated musicians, who according to him often have something fresh for him to learn. Citing his friend Morokolo Mokgetle, a piano lecturer at a local university, Mamphogoro reiterates the fact that they both are tired of reproducing chords and progressions common in today’s church music. If they were to continue playing in such an environment, church or otherwise, they would want the liberty to break away from the norm and the license to venture into experimental music-making terrains. The two musicians, one formally trained, and the other self-taught, but talented and highly intellectual about music, seem in accord. They yearn for uniqueness and space for self-expression. This bears testimony to the fact that acquisition of music skills is not the sole preserve of university training.

From these and other inferences, it is within reason to conclude that university-educated musicians, like those trained in church environments, are to an extent parodic and stereotypical; for they each essentially approach music from a predetermined common point of view. The insinuation is that such musicians are relatively less spontaneous, and are likely to “wince at the sour notes, botched chord changes and off-key vocals.”⁴⁵ Furthermore having an instrumental tutor, instructor, or conductor as is common in mediated learning or music-making environments invariably instils this sense of (self)-censorship; often to the detriment of musical experimentation.

Whereas the “wrongness” associated with the self-taught might be motivation enough for innovation or exploration of unconventional music territories, the schooled musician is

trained to aim often for a purified, theoretically rationalised, or an almost calculated approach to music performance. In the final analysis, most schooled musicians tend to sound more or less the same. As a group, one can often tell them apart from the self-taught musicians just by the way they sound and how they approach music. There are, of course, exceptions to this observation.

The second type of criticism comes from researchers such as Christopher Small, who warn of the intrinsic and systematic demusicalization effects of university-based music training.⁴⁶ In these situations, many aspirant musicians, especially those with little or no prior experience in instrument playing or performance, freeze when put under high-pressure situations such as performing in front of a live audience or during tests and practical examinations. When told by instructors that their way of handling the instrument, embouchure, posture, or their way of articulating certain musical styles is incorrect or inappropriate, most crumble and never recover.⁴⁷ This kind of nervousness leads seasoned self-taught musicians to doubt the efficacy of the classroom training approach.

Closely related to the above point is the fact that the pressured environment, whether imagined or real in the HWOUs, is viewed by most African students as one of the non-musical factors impeding artistic development and growth. After all, such institutions are, according to Grada Kilomba, hostile and unkind to students coming from non-western cultural backgrounds.⁴⁸ For this and other reasons, it makes sense when most university-trained African musicians, regardless of their *alma mater* universities, continue to credit their socialisation processes by linking their most creative spells to periods spent at NGOs.⁴⁹ Despite the privilege of studying at universities, most African musicians choose rather to be associated with the legacy of the NGOs whose hallmark had always been laced with African solidarity in the face of the general hardships typical in the apartheid era, and the attendant quest for free political and social expression. The connectedness of musical creativity, spirituality, and the struggle for civil liberties is well documented.⁵⁰

Despite the apparent quintessence of western classical, later jazz, and much more recently rock pedagogies in universities across the globe, it would seem that given the reasons just mentioned, amongst others, the effect of canonical pedagogies on the raw talent of some students ranges from minimal to detrimental.⁵¹ This gives credence to “demusicalization” theories, which in the context of the socio-political realities of South Africa, rings true; especially for most African music graduates.

Challenges of Privileging Notation Over Aural-Oral Traditions

The tendency of universities to always relate or equate sound to notational patterns is a defining feature of formal university-based music education. Whilst such an approach may have served the western classical music pedagogy well, it could be problematic for students who come from the aural-oral tradition where music, or at least some aspect thereof, defies conventional notation.⁵² Some musical impulses, especially the aural-oral reflexes, are not amenable to literacy; and musical competency is primarily performative as opposed to literary. The rise of computer-aided programs is an expression of a need for music education to consider the aural-oral training on equal terms with the erstwhile writing and reading approach.

Currently aural training is only a subsidiary subject in formal music study. But its tendency to gravitate towards notation may be disadvantageous to many African students.⁵³ In its current state, aural training taught in formal spaces still emphasises the need for

notation or the score. This emphasis on the visualisation of sound as notes on paper usurps the more practical need to develop functional aural-oral facilities. Whereas students are encouraged to “hear” through the inner ear, the insistence on relating sound to notational patterns through the imaginary eye, that is, visualization could sometimes be defeatist if the balance is not right. For a novice coming from a predominantly oral tradition, this is likely to be misconstrued as meaning that the ability to read supersedes the importance of the aural-oral competency, thus missing the point of a balanced musical development. The worse case scenario for musicianship is the tacit propaganda that insinuates that music hardly exists outside of notation; and that the score is quintessential to the music it seeks to represent.⁵⁴

The academic urge to subject music to staff notation presents a challenge in that it forces it away from its performative nature. This disconnect, subtle as it may seem, accounts for the disparate attitudes towards notation-based aural training classes between students from the literary background on the one hand, and those from the aural-oral tradition on the other. For most African students eager to perform music as they aurally and intellectually perceive it, this type of aural training may seem a hindrance or burdensome if the music is first to be encountered as notated scores before it can make aural-oral sense.

Worse still, the general practice of allocating only ten minutes to the aspect of aural training in a typical forty-five-minute instrumental lesson and the insistence on sight-reading on top of that, clearly sends a wrong message; especially when even some instrument tutors doubt the importance of aural training, which is immediately not transferable to obvious practical benefit.⁵⁵ Despite being compulsory in formal music training, notation-based aural training classes are considered a distraction by those who find little value in sight-reading. In South Africa, for instance, too few African musicians end up in orchestras, big bands, studio session work, or any such situations where sight-reading skills are essential. The majority, if they eventually graduate, end up leading their own bands or playing in groups where they integrate with musicians the majority of whom function purely on the aural-oral traditional musical perception basis.

Given its endurance and wider application, it could be argued that the aural-oral approach that has long been established could still be a reliable pedagogical point of departure for it still is the most efficient way of transferring musical skills in many communities. Such an approach would not immediately need notation to thrive. The Brotherhood of Breath under the leadership of Chris McGregor, for instance, like many occasional South African big bands led by schooled musicians such as Victor Ntoni, is a classic example of an ensemble comprising a high calibre of musicians who do not necessarily read from the score but rely on their aural-oral skills. In fact, according to Joe Malinga, reliance on the score including the acquisition of music skills through the so-called formal school, has, in some quarters, been looked down upon and despised.⁵⁶

A more recent example of heavy investment in a skill that is least needed relates to Selaelo Selota, one of the few university-educated musicians in South Africa.⁵⁷ Much as Selota has become comfortable within the music literary tradition cultivated by university education, he maintains that most often his work is reliant on the aural-oral facility he has practiced and perfected over time. How he introduces the new (music) material to his band, communicates musical ideas during rehearsals, including the presentation of actual stage performances, is mainly via the aural-oral transmission mode.

Additionally, Magalane Phoshoko, a Black Conscious Movement-steeped pianist and music teacher based in Gauteng Province, relates instances where he gets inspired in the still

of the night. By virtue of his formal musical training, he would sometimes notate the musical ideas on a manuscript paper even though he still prefers to record such ideas on a recording device. More often than not, he argues, he is frustrated the following morning by the notation system, which often fails to recapture the mood that accompanied the inspiration the night before. As he puts it, “the music would have left me” regardless of the retention of a somewhat accurate notation. A much more retentive strategy for him is first to play the musical idea on the piano, thereby engaging the motor memory, hearing, and then committing such a moment to some recording device. This way, he contends, the idea would have been played, sounded and therefore “heard” by both the inner and the external ears.⁵⁸ Notation and, mainly, the motor memory resulting from having played the musical ideas on the instrument, could function as triggers to the already sonically indexed ideas in his sound memory. And these kinds of examples or experiences are common in the jazz and popular music traditions.

One may think that because of its close association with western classical music, South African choral music is entrenched in the literary tradition. Contrary to this belief, the tradition has grown into its own kind of a musical genre that almost exclusively employs the *solfege* system. This system resonates with the oral tradition in that, unlike staff notation, it largely thrives on the manifestation of a sonic picture in the mind as opposed to the visualisation of musical patterns on paper. In other words, choristers do not envision notes on paper but rather “hear” the sound in their heads. Lesley Nkuna, one of the revered composers of choral music, like most African musicians, would speak of a composition coming in the form of a dream. In the dream, a tune is often heard somewhere in the conscious mind, which is later transcribed into a poem, capturing the mood as much as possible and then later transcribes onto paper using the *solfege* system.⁵⁹ A composition is, for most African choral composers, never a manipulation of musical elements at a cognitive level, but one that grows from affective domains such as dreams and inspiration. Arguably, no one can teach anybody how to access such a resource; it is intensely personal. Notably, in this explanation, the representation of musical sound as patterns on paper comes last, and most choristers cannot notate music themselves, but they still can sing from *solfege* well enough to be functional in a choral format.

Hanyane Khosa, a music lecturer and choral conductor, is all too familiar with the frustrations of choral composers such as Ndwamato George Mugovhani as well as his own uncle the late Dr. S.J. Khosa.⁶⁰ He observes that both composers continually decried the fact that their compositions never come close to the initial conception despite enormous effort to accurately notate the musical experience. Personal impulses and nuances can hardly be transcribed to notation on paper, and choral music is always at the mercy of, or coloured by, amongst other things, the abilities of choristers, including the conductors’ musicality. In these and similar circumstances, it is understandable that the feeling or the musical essence of the notes is often elusive to many a chorister. This sense of inadequacy attests to the deficiency of music notation when it comes to representing musical ideas and inspirations.

Conclusion

This article set out to appraise university-based music training and to probe its amenability with the South African musical praxis. It pursued its purpose through interviews with musicians, the university-educated and the self-taught, including the consultation of written scholarly sources. The merits of the aural-oral nature of the music making on the one hand

and university-based notation systems on the other have been discussed. But the bias in favor of the notation or written form of literacy by universities only privileges a few and flies in the face of established performative musical practices of many. The ease of access brought about by technological advancement is a tide against which none can swim. The advent of outlets such as YouTube and Skype are challenging the wisdom of steadfastly insisting on notation-based music pedagogy. Perhaps a new music pedagogy, which is ready to harness all approaches, could still find relevance in the aural-oral, technology driven, and notation traditions. The coming of age of study orientations interested in genres such as blues, rock, and jazz, along with the awakening to the age-old successes of the so-called non-European music traditions, opens access to the study of music. Notably, in almost all these traditions, music essentially remains an aural-oral phenomenon. As with language intention in any given culture, musical ideas are transmitted efficiently using the oral tradition, and ideally with the intention of carrying messages in the literal sense or otherwise. Conclusively, the aural-oral tradition phenomenon, apart from being commonplace, is by far the most preferred mode of the music-making enterprise.

Notes

- 1 Mapaya 2014.
- 2 Cook 2005.
- 3 Primos 2001, p. 7.
- 4 Oehrle 1991; Carver 2002; Fredericks 2008.
- 5 Akrofi and Flofu 2007, p. 144.
- 6 Masolo 2013.
- 7 For autoethnography, see Ellis and Bochner 2000; Anderson 2006; and Chang 2008.
- 8 Data was collected through direct and unstructured interviews stemming from the central research question. All respondents wished to be quoted by name since they keenly own up to their opinions.
- 9 A mixture of political anger on the one hand, and a sense of conquest over the adversarial state of higher education are still detectable in their animated narratives.
- 10 EACEA 2009.
- 11 Credit must be given to the University of South Africa for claiming a stake in this space of adjudicating graded music examinations.
- 12 Prouty 2005.
- 13 For “Bandstand learning” see Barron 2007, and for “self-taught musicians see Dobbins 1988. Thamagana Mojapelo (2008) distinguishes between South African musicians who hone their skills through session work and those who, to the same ends, enrol for music education and training at tertiary level to acquire music knowledge and skills.
- 14 Mapaya 2011.
- 15 Nketia 1986.
- 16 Thorsen 2002.
- 17 Kubik 2005, p. 165.
- 18 Gatien 2009, p. 95.
- 19 Mapaya 2002 and 2010; and Selota interview 2009.

- 20 Jardemark interview 1997.
- 21 Gayle 1975; Malinga interview 2015.
- 22 Nick Prior (2010) speaks of the rise of the new amateurs.
- 23 Piszczalski 1977.
- 24 Reinecke 2007; McCarthy 2000; Peretz 2006.
- 25 Jorgensen 2002; Cohen and Laor 1997; Yamamoto, Terao, and Takeshita 2012.
- 26 Priest 1989, p. 174.
- 27 Priest 1989, p. 176.
- 28 Master Sechele, a retired record company executive opines that multinational record companies are in fact economic tentacles aiming to penetrate and create markets for countries of origin. In South Africa, these companies are structured in such a way that they have international as well as the local divisions or departments. Often the local divisions or departments are not adequately resourced to promote national talent, nor are they equipped to play a meaningful and developmental role and to grow that which needs nurturing.
- 29 Pyper 2011.
- 30 Mapaya, Malinga, and Thobejane 2014.
- 31 Smooth jazz, “a controversial term, denoting a form of music that many jazz lovers do not consider a form of jazz,” but “a musical genre characterized by bland instrumental watered-down jazz.”
- 32 Selota interview 2009.
- 33 Vlahov and Galea 2002.
- 34 Coplan, 1982 and 1985; and Ballantine 1993.
- 35 Herndon and McLeod 1990.
- 36 Byrd 2009.
- 37 Klickstein 2009.
- 38 Neil 2014, p. 4.
- 39 Humphreys 1988.
- 40 Agawu 1992 and 2003.
- 41 Malatji interview 2009.
- 42 Galane interview 2009. Bandstand music training is essentially dichotomous to classroom education even though one can expect a tinge of the other in each. The bandstand-training concept refers to a tried and tested jazz pedagogy where a novice “informally” learns directly from a mentor through trial and error. Greg Carroll (cites Chinen 2007) remarks; “I can recall back in the early ‘60s when it was sort of taboo for jazz to be presented in the classroom.”
- 43 Muthaphuli interview 2015; Mamphogoro interview 2015.
- 44 Mamphogoro interview 2015.
- 45 Escott and Hawkins 2011.
- 46 Small 1999.
- 47 Wöllner et al. 2003.
- 48 Kilomba 2008.
- 49 Koloane 1999; Thorsén 2002.
- 50 Garofalo 1992; Ward 2006; Schumann 2008.

- 51 For western music pedagogy see Jorgensen 2014; for jazz see Whyton 2006; and for rock see Reimer 1996.
- 52 Ekwueme 1974a and Ekwueme 1974b; Eerola and Himberg 2006; Grupe 2005; DeLaBruere 2007.
- 53 Reitan 2009.
- 54 Cook 2005.
- 55 Reitan 2009.
- 56 Malinga interview 2014.
- 57 Selota interview 2014.
- 58 Phoshoko interview 2014.
- 59 Nkuna interview 2015.
- 60 Khosa interview 2015.

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