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Chaka: An Opera in Two Chants (review)

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Chaka. An Opera in Two Chants. Composed by Akin Euba from an epic poem by Léopold Sédar Senghor. City of Birmingham Touring Opera. Conducted by Simon Halsey. Point Richmond, CA: Music Research Institute, 1998. One compact disc.

Opera is music. It is also drama. Although we might be tempted to follow Wagner in joining the two words to make a third, “music-drama” really only registers an artistic intention. High quality drama does not guarantee successful opera. Memorable music does. (Devotees are more likely to leave the opera house with music ringing in their ears than with concerns about the plausibility of the plot.) What resound in the memory are the voices of singers. Opera, then, is not just music; nor is it just performed song. Opera is voice (see Abbate).

If opera is ultimately voice, then opera is fully compatible with African modes of expression (see Soyinka). No other instrument—certainly not the sensationalized drum—occupies as central and critical a place in African traditions of music-making. The range of vocal ideals is vast, ranging from syllabic, speech-like declamation to the melismatic and wordless singing originating from, or inflected by, North African and Middle Eastern styles. Voice is the gateway to meaning in music.

Oddly, however, opera is not readily associated with Africa in the popular imagination. Perhaps global economies of representation and reportage are to blame; but perhaps there is a concrete absence that needs to be acknowledged. If we ignore folk operas and the productions of concert parties, we wipe out most of the data that would support the view that opera is widespread in Africa. We might mention Saka Acquaye’s *The Lost Fishermen*, Walter Blege’s *Kristo*, Adam Fiberesima’s *Opu Jaja*, Soleymane Koly’s *Waramba*, Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Koso*, Solomon Mbabi-Katana’s *The Marriage of Nyakato*, and perhaps a dozen more titles, but we won’t be able to provide a lot of evidence to prove that opera occupies a key position in the work of African art music composers.

Publication of a CD recording of Akin Euba’s *Chaka* thus marks a special moment in African art music composition. First heard at the University of Ife in 1970, *Chaka* has been performed sporadically, but never as a fully staged opera. This 1998 recording, the first of its kind, features a revised version of the work. While no recording can ever substitute for a live performance, the present document affords us the opportunity to hear and imagine the musical drama. It exemplifies Euba’s way with voice, his conception of various characters, and his vision of this most artificial of genres.

Most importantly, perhaps, *Chaka* on CD makes it easier for students, younger composers, and the music-loving public to gauge what is possible in the realm of modern African operatic composition.

For his libretto, the composer chose an English translation of a prose poem by Léopold Senghor of the famous legend of King Chaka, the nineteenth-century Zulu warrior. To this Euba added another poem by Senghor, "Man and the Beast." We encounter Chaka in a reflective and sober phase of life, not in his more characteristic war-like pose (although that pose lurks in the background, and is manifest in the considerable strength that Chaka displays as he responds to the allegorical White Voice that tries him). Subtitled "An Opera in Two Chants" (the division into Chants, which is intended to register difference from "Acts," is Senghor's), Chant 1 features a dying Chaka being interrogated by a White Voice, while Chant 2 brings in Noliwe, Chaka's wife, for a sustained reflection on love.

Euba's musical language draws on diverse sources. The Prelude to Chant 1 presents in typically synoptic fashion most of the major musics to be heard in the opera. Modernist-sounding patches of music alternate with trumpet fanfares, Akan-Adowa music, and snippets of the *Dies Irae*. Then there is Ewe *Agbekor* music and the melodies of *atenteben* (bamboo flute). Elsewhere in *Chaka*, atonal paragraphs of music in the manner of Schoenberg alternate with a self-conscious style of (English) text setting reminiscent of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. And in Chant 2, which is also the weightier of the two chants, Yoruba *oriki* praise poetry, hunters' chants, and folk-like melody enliven the musical palette. (There are doubtless other allusions that I missed). The opera thus compels attention as a repository of styles, none of them collapsible into each other. These styles are predominantly West African rather than southern African, making this an Akan or Ewe or Yoruba Chaka, not a Zulu Chaka!

Euba's writing for the voice is articulate throughout. It is never tuneful in the Verdian or Puccinian sense (Noliwe's aria in Chant 2 may be an exception), but its almost-melodic style is consistent enough to make a strong impression. Some lines or words are spoken, some sung at unspecified pitch, while still others are trapped in the interstices between the spoken and the sung word. The intensified expression in Chant 2 is due in no small measure to the choral interjections that restore the African folk to Chaka's world. Many will remember Noliwe's high-register song in Chant 2, where hearing words is beside the point, where language is killed, so to speak, allowing music to predominate. From there to the hunters' brigade in Part IV is a logical move, and the danceable "Why do you not dance?" chorus in a folk idiom brings *Chaka* to a joyous and thoroughly African conclusion. We may even have forgotten (and forgiven!) the protomelodic utterances of Chaka that dominated Chant 1. The modernist patches seem "other," while folk song triumphs.

Words can never fully convey the sense of music, certainly not the remarkable sense of Akin Euba's *Chaka*, which should be heard or—whenever the opportunity arises—seen and heard in order to be fully appreciated. But in reflecting on Euba's new project, two things come to mind. First is the problem of continuity, a problem faced by practically

every operatic composer. In setting Senghor's epic to music, Euba is guided by—and responds reciprocally with music appropriate for—breath groups at the level of articulation, and by an overall sense of words and phrases. The listener is thus made to reckon with discontinuity as an organizational principle—a little bit of this, a little bit of that, as in the various traditional musics that Euba draws upon. Structural discontinuity is mediated by thematic cross-referencing to promote coherence. But it remains an aesthetic question whether the discontinuity of parts of *Chaka* is a purposeful discontinuity, or whether it acquires its form from the forced cohabitation of isolated, internally coherent groups.

Second, Euba's African materials retain a high degree of authenticity because of the almost quotational way in which they are used. That these materials anchor the expression, and indeed provide some of the memorable song that audiences yearn for, confirms—if such were needed—the richness and distinctiveness of African materials and the composer's uncanny sense of their theatrical potential. The fact, however, that the Yoruba, Akan, and Ewe materials are not plumbed for structural secrets, the fact that they do not, for example, leave distinct traces on the *form* of the opera—this fact suggests that the operatic framework in *Chaka* is not yet fully Africanized. Africanizing opera, however, is a paradoxical prescription, for as mentioned earlier, opera as voice is nominally African. With characteristic energy and an obstinate artistic temperament, Akin Euba blazes yet another trail in on going efforts to win legitimization for those products of African musical creativity that seem always already imbricated in metropolitan expression.

—Kofi Agawu

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