

# INTRODUCTION

From earliest times Westerners have been awed and fascinated by Africa's unique music. About 500 B.C., when Hanno the Carthaginian returned from West Africa, he wrote that upon landing on an island off the coast he and his companions had seen many fires being kindled by night and had heard "the noise of pipes and cymbals and a din of tom-toms and the shouts of a multitude." They were frightened and hastily left at the urging of their interpreters. Some two thousand years later, in the early 1620's, Richard Jobson, sent among the Mandingoes of West Africa by the Merchant Adventurers of London, reported how alien the sound of African music had been to him. In the Mandingo King's house, he said, "his drummes, the onely instruments of warre which we see amongst them," hung by his chair. "Neither," he continued, "are these drummes without dayly employment, for this is their continuall custome every night after it seemes they have filled their bellies, they reparaire to this Court of Guard, making fires both in the middle of the house, and in the open yard, about which they do continue drumming, hooping, singing, and making a hethenish noyse, most commonly until the day beginnes to breake, when as we conceive dead-sleepes take them." Some believed that the noise was made "to feare and keep away the Lyons, and ravening beasts," and pointed out that virtually no village was "without such poore drums they use," and if one was without drums then "they continue the custome, through hooping, singing, and using their voyces, but when it happens musicke is amongst them, then is the horrible din."

We have learned much about Africa since Jobson's day—much, that is, of Africa's geography, economics, and politics. Culturally, however, the divide, while narrowed, is still largely unbridged. The songs in this book are therefore doubly welcome, for apart from their intrinsic interest and beauty they introduce us to aspects of African culture in Southern Africa still widely unknown to us.

Most of the songs presented here are the songs of the Zulu and Xhosa peoples. Both the Xhosa and Zulu languages, like those of all the Bantu peoples, are musically accented, abounding in rich vowel sounds which lend themselves to song. Both languages also have a wide range of consonants, including the famous "click sounds,"

which we shall explain later. In this book the songs have been provided with musical accompaniment of triadic chords based on seventeenth-century European harmony, which enables us to appreciate and assimilate sounds that would otherwise appear too unfamiliar. Melodically, most of the songs in this book are distinguished by a wide use of syncopated rhythms. Syncopated rhythm, though a common feature in African music, is not used as extensively as in American jazz music. In fact, the peculiarities in the use of syncopated rhythm are a major difference between the two types of music.

The songs are direct transcriptions of performances of African folk songs; although they represent the interpretation of one particular African artist, each is nonetheless authentic. Other transcriptions would, of course, result in different versions. But folk music is music created by a people, and not by an individual composer, and thus it lends itself to different moods, different emphases, different circumstances—and is, finally, as variable as life itself.

Miriam Makeba adds yet another element to her interpretation. The songs she sings are songs that have usually remained unwritten. They have been transmitted by a long line of African singers, each one of whom invests them with his or her own personality. Miss Makeba brings her own unique interpretation to her material—an interpretation that differs from that of most of her predecessors, not only because she has assimilated the particular experience of city life in South Africa [which in itself is a new mutation of the folk experience], but because, far more than most African singers, she has been exposed to musical influences that are largely non-African. Since her "discovery" by a movie producer who directed the social protest film *Come Back Africa*, her life has differed from that of most black South African artists. She has gained a degree of freedom they can only hope for. She has lived in the United States where she has been acclaimed by vast audiences of blacks and whites. And she has sung to African audiences, and in her travels across the continent has learned firsthand many of the variations of Africa's music found in lands other than her own South Africa. All this has broadened her understanding as an artist and enriched her singing. As those who

have heard her know, her style is marked by a strong, dynamic, and huskily compelling quality which is quite distinct and unforgettable.

Before looking at the songs themselves, we may do well to consider the historical background of African music as well as some of the types of musical instruments and song styles of Africa.

### The Historical Background

In the distant past what we now call the black African peoples inhabited not only Africa but also other regions. They were spread in a great arc, or semi-circle, which swung from East and Northeast Africa up to an apex in Southern India and Ceylon, before swinging south again across the Indonesian archipelago and into Australasia. The migrations of peoples throughout history largely erased the top of the arc and fragmented the rest. But traces of the original black-skinned race are still to be found in Southern India and in parts of the Pacific, as well as in Australia and the islands of Oceania, even though it is in Africa that the main body of the race has made its homeland.

There is thus a reason for the many similarities between black Africa and Indonesia. That species of coastal palm tree which is regarded as so peculiarly African is the same as that found in Indonesia, where scientists believe it originated. As with peoples and plants, so with music. The late ethnomusicologist Curt Sachs commented that, in Uganda, one of the Ganda peoples "divide the octave into five, in principle equal, steps of around 240 cents, which corresponds to the *salendro* gender of Java's and Bali's *gamelan* orchestras." The Bapende and Chopi peoples of Southern Africa, he also observed, give their xylophones an "arrangement with even steps of about 171 cents in an octave, which amounts exactly to the current genders of Siam and Burma" —a striking coincidence, if coincidence it is.

Yet another hint of a relationship between Indonesia and Africa is provided by the drum. Today, of all instruments, it is regarded as the most characteristically African of all musical instruments. In his essay on the origin of African civilizations, the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius wrote as early as 1898 that, "By far the larger part of African drums consist of a log



