

Pre-task: A bottom-up kind of music education

Pianist, composer, intellectual and teacher Yonela Mnana, born blind in eDutywa in the Eastern Cape, uses his multiple musical talents to present a uniquely South African approach to music education or what he calls “Vernacularism.” Yonela’s musical expression accesses the intuitive heart of indigenous South African music. These are the jewels of self-discovery and the foundation for learning South African music.

Next to Alberton, at Ezibeleni High School for Physically Disabled Children in Kathlehong, Yonela holds down a teaching job. He has a wonderful working relationship with his colleagues and Head of Department, Nomthandazo Solomon. Together they have created a sense of community rather than an ‘academic’ environment, encouraging students to learn more from one other. These teachers are also grooming future musicians through intense practice.

The heart-warming experience of Ezibeleni shows the correlation between being well schooled and having an appreciation for the arts. Ezibeleni has inverted the ‘top down’ and ‘othering’ styles often employed in teacher-student relations, and built a kind of community approach whereby they learn to survive, grow, praying and play together. As Yonela says, “Music brings a type of cohesion – like Ebony and Ivory, standing side by side!”

Through community, the students relate to each other as fellow humans, and less as coming from different levels of society. This sense of togetherness and inner learning, encourages the students to rise to their best levels, beyond the horrible conditions of some of their living circumstances, such as squatter camps.

Teaching is not only imparting the knowledge that you know, but it is also about reacting to the knowledge the students come with. There’s been a lot of informal teaching in South African music that hasn’t involved a lot of money.

Although South African Jazz has gained much inspiration from American jazz, Yonela’s primary concern is with his musical roots. Does being a South African mean you can only play South African music? Yonela is taking a lead in musical expression by looking inward and learning from those who have walked the path before, such as Bheki Mseleku. Yonela said, “Students who look outward become colonized in their thinking. They are taught ways of thinking about the content, and end up judging themselves as less competent against those foreign standards. So, we have to change these lenses and perceptions of ourselves through our teachings.”

Teaching is a cultural movement

The important thing that music schools do, is show the depth of our musical culture. They not only teach content, but they also create a culture. One of the great strengths of South Africans is that we imbibe content and we learn from one other. This has created a groundswell of great musical talent and productive people. We have seen it in the schools and teaching of the likes of Thandi Klaasen, Victor Ndlazilwana, Mimi Mthenjwa, Johnny Meko, and even Moses Molelekwa’s, Jerry Molelekwa. We have seen it in informal cultural movements that musicians have joined, such as vocalist Judith Sephuma, guitarist Jimmy Dlodlu, drummer Tumi Mogorosi and vocalist Gabi Motuba. All these musicians have studied music academically but they mastered their talent through those cultural movements. And of course the traditional cultures, such as isicathamiya or maskanda, are learnt purely through the cultural movement.

The way of Jazz is the democratic way

The bottom-up approach is just perfect for South African Jazz. As Yonela says, “Freedom is struggle. Improvisation or jazz wants to free us from the establishment, that which holds us from moving. So jazz is about struggle; it is freedom.” And that is why we improvise, not just to play the notes but be comfortable with who I am.

One of the most important things about Jazz is the fact that it is not a top-down thing. It’s really very democratic. Take for example a melody: everyone gets to play the melody and accompany it, and everybody gets a chance to play the solo and to say what they feel about the music.

We practice jazz democracy through exercises like trading spots or trading fours. The piano player gets to play the first four bars, then the drummer the next four bars. Sharing is the highest level of education. That is the kind of sharing that tends to happen on the bandstand, but at a more intense level, because now they are not only sharing as a band, but also sharing with the audience.

Now answer the following Pre Task Questions

1. Yonela emphasizes more lateral, more communicative, more non-discriminatory, and a more cohesive approach and practice in music education. The music teaching that you received at high school and at the tertiary institution, how did it differ from Yonela’s model? How will you approach this as a band leader and an educator?
2. Some say this ‘back to your roots’ teaching is outdated, as we live in the age of the internet with multi-platforms of music education, sharing, viewing and distribution. What is your take on this debate?
3. Yonela continues his argument on music education based on the languages, the cultures and traditions of SA. In the music that you make, the instrument that you use, the music icons that you adore, how have you received SA musicians, as compared to USA/UK musicians? In your opinion, why is radio playing more Western music than our home-brewed music?
4. For Yonela, music is a question of experience. We are forced to deal with what we have. So, what do you have available to you to help you in making music?