

Sonic Africa's many stylistic skins

Review – *Imagining Africa*

By Gwen Ansell

Business Day/Cue Guest Writer

“I hope,” wrote composer Bongani Ndodana of his suite *Ceremonies and Tongues*, “that [this piece] will rid people of the patronising notion that because we are ‘black’ composers we should be writing music with marimbas, wild jagged rhythms, girls ululating in grass skirts and general din.”

Like everything else that happened at the New Music Indaba concert *Imagining Africa*, this programme note tells us far more about the mind of the composer than about anything to do with Africa.

Some of the music – like Peter Klatzow’s 1996 *Inyanga*, and Michael Blake’s *38a Hill Street Blues* – did feature marimbas. The first, in percussionist Max de Vries’ fluttering sleeves, also woke in our memories the

kineticism of dance-related music.

Some – like Kevin Volans’s *Walking Song* – adapted its cyclic and interlocked form from Congo pygmy music, where each player finds her space in relation to the sound or silence of the others.

Some composers and players invoked Africa in America. Ndodana both dissected and connected the diverse sources of American culture via some exceedingly pretty tunes underpinned by a solid piano rhythm.

Players Jill Richards, Annake de Villiers and Kutlwano Masote endowed Martin Scherzinger’s echo of mbira music, *A Prayer Wheel to Suck Water from Nowhere*, with a distinctly jazzy swing.

All the players – members of Ensemble NOW (which has its own concert today at 11:00 in the Rhodes Chapel) – were veritable chameleons, taking on different stylistic skins as they recreated the sonic Africas of very

different composers.

The music was framed by the larger cyclic pattern of the concert itself, which started with a piece for one player, grew to six and tapered back down to one again. And woven between each piece like straw through wattle was Dimitri Voudouris’ electronic composition *Impilo*, structured from the sounds of human life and nature in Africa, including some buzzing insects grown to horror-movie dimensions.

These interludes, with their identifiable social and natural sounds, added a grounded quality to the event, suggesting to our imaginations that we might be in a space other than a concert hall.

Voudouris had two other pieces in the concert: *Sizobonana*, a series of rapid sonic transformations, which set what he sees as the disappearing polyrhythms of tradition against the rattle and clatter of modern life, and the

closing (NPAFI) *New Possibilities for African Instruments*, which electronically dismantles and reconstructs the sound-worlds idiomatic to the thumb piano and bowed harp. Like *Antigone* theatre director Sean Mathias – and like Afro-pop composer Manu Dibangu who coined the phrase – for Voudouris, there is an electric Africa.

Up the hill at the Glennie Centre, the young theatre company of Vuya Vuya Mutsonga were also imagining Africa: an idyllic village past of fish-filled rivers and fat cattle. In their imaginations, the grass skirts and ululations of Shangaan music symbolised not a “patronising notion”, but pride in the heroic tales of their grandparents. And yet, when it came to the courtship scene, their music switched to R Kelly-style R&B.

Africa never stands still.