

Hans Huysen
Ciacona & Tshikona

for orchestra, Tshikona Ensemble and kuduorns (2007)

commissioned by the MIAGI Festival

Two different principles were guiding the composition of this new work and, accordingly, govern its performance:

For one part it relies on a Western orchestra to comply to the peremptory demands of a concert situation, in which it is expected of the music itself to contain and carry all procedural events, while the audience may participate only passively. This becomes possible through the assemblage of highly sophisticated instruments, each of which can render a wide range of different pitches and individual colours and thereby sustainably shape music in a versatile, dramatic, narrative and emotionally flexible manner.

On the other hand, its essential structural idea, however, is derived from a unique African form of musical expression, which is firmly embedded in the context of a social occasion, where the issues of recurring gatherings, inclusive participation and the repeated affirmation of belonging are predominant.

As it is the intention of the MIAGI Festival to be a forum for both kinds of approaches it seemed appropriate to once again endeavour on an attempt to formulate this aspect of the heterogeneous South African context in musical terms.

The music based on the first principle sets off with a bass-ostinato in the style of a Passacaglia. Its recurring variations are grouped into larger sections, which at certain moments open 'windows' onto the *other* music. It is interesting to note that the Passacaglia or Chaconne – a most important form of early European instrumental music – have the constant recurrence of a single short pattern in common with traditional African music. However, European composers have always indulged on the aspect of variation, pursuing formal development by departing to various degrees from the original starting point. African musicians on the contrary would aptly express their culture's perception of time as a recurring cyclical entity by persisting on the repetition of the original material.

This latter approach is exemplified here by the structural ideas derived from a Tshikona dance performed by the *Thikundwi* group and transcribed during a short recent visit by the composer to Tshakhuma village in Venda. (Incidentally the group's gathering place is only a stone's throw away from the mission church, where John Blacking, the musical authority on Venda music, began his field studies in 1956.)

Tshikona is the Venda national dance and the most important form of communal music. Blacking mentions several idioms, which make this clear: For the Venda Tshikona is 'the time when people rush to the scene of the dance and leave their pots to boil over'. Tshikona 'makes old men throw away their sticks and dance'. Tshikona 'brings peace to the countryside'.

For a performance of Tshikona one needs a set of drums – *Ngoma*, *Murumba* and *Muthungwa* – and a randomly large number of dancers, who each play a differently tuned reed-pipe. The music is structured in such a way that each participant provides just a single note (one specific pitch repeated in a certain rhythmical pattern) to the overall pattern, very much comparable to a specifically coloured strand within a woven cloth. The resulting texture of such a one-player-one-note approach of ensemble playing is a sounding manifestation of a well-coordinated mutual undertaking and as such a conscious symbol of ideal social interaction. It depends on reliable yet humble individual contributions – very much in concordance with traditional African concept of society, where the emphasis on belonging to a balanced whole, always ranks higher than the pursuit of individual liberation.

To once again quote John Blacking: "Tshikona is valuable and beautiful to the people of Venda, not only because of the quantity of people and tones involved, but because of the quality of the relationships that are established between people, tones and movement, whenever it is performed. To play one's part of the pipe melody correctly whilst moving in harmony with others in a large crowd of performers and spectators, generates individuality in community, and so combines self with others in a way that is fundamental to the existence of Venda culture and society."

There is evidence (on one of Blacking's photographs) that in earlier times horns were used similarly to the reed-pipes in interlocking, hoquetus-style ensembles. This may serve as justification for their use in the composition, even though they are currently not used in this way any more in Venda.

Soon after the Tshikona ensemble has been introduced in another of the orchestral 'windows', its habitual energy engulfs the whole orchestra, drawing everyone into the unceasing swirl of a momentous musical carousel in which eventually even the Western instruments sacrifice their individualistic expression and instead succumb to the excitement of an ecstatic communal experience.

It remains to remark on the striking similarity of the ancient Italian version of *Chiacona* and *Tshikona*. Especially, since the first historic record of a chaconne mentions it as 'being a wild and sensual' Mexican dance that was only imported to Spain in the 16th century. Could this be considered etymological evidence of an ancient connection between American and African cultures? Though of course it remains mere speculation, it is an intriguing thought nevertheless. Exceeding its mere function as incidental music for the opening of the 2007 MIAGI Festival, a coincidental dimension is implied.