



Comments On Kenyan National Music Policy: General Ideas For Further Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Nations in Africa are struggling to maintain a respectable presence in the world economy, politics and culture. Kenya, in particular, has a strong visibility in its tourism and cultural elements that present the part of the African mien as well as any other continental nation, and music is a significant part of this. This paper was requested and written concerning a Kenyan governmental policy for music industry, music ministry and education in light of their contributions to the nation's tourist industry. The author spent a U.S. Fulbright grant interviewing in the above vocations, producing, performing and writing music in collaboration with professional musicians, and teaching students and industry professionals. The experience provided the basis for this evaluation of current Kenyan music and its context.

Key words: Music Industry, Politics, Culture, Tourist Industry, Professional Musicians, Government Policy.

Defining Kenyan “Music”

As a professional musician and university professor, the author has had the opportunity to study and work in the music industry and education culture in Kenya over the last several years. What began as a “simple” examination and study of East African gospel and commercial music turned into an overview of an amazingly complicated and intricate internal culture. Ranging from rap and hip-hop in Sheng and Kiswahili to a multi-national presentation of Brahms; from music ministry reminiscent of a Chicago-style black gospel church; from tribally-defined folk music to “Afro-fusion,” evidence has developed outlining the frustration of workers in the music, music education and entertainment fields. All of these musical styles and venues are viable facets of Kenyan musical culture. Regardless of the political, historical or social perspectives on tribalism, colonialism, immigration and labour, it is important that those concerned with Kenyan musical culture understand their contributions – generally for the positive – to what constitutes “Kenyan music.”

“Kenyan music” is difficult to assess and the national government is to be affirmed in its putting forth a national policy. By addressing such an issue, it will not only bolster and generate an interest in the field, but can provide an impetus revitalizing an industry directly related to the national economy.

It is this element of stylistic diversification that can provide Kenya with a presence in the world market of music, and can generate an internal and external income and viable industry that is not only compatible with its world-famous tourism, but can be a vital component. The issue is that while there are “crossover” points between all of these styles and cultural sources, each has an impact or benefit unique to its own culture and therefore system of learning.

For example, the ethnomusicological point (for convenience, here termed “Folk Music” for its consistency with similar cultural experiences around the world), affirms tribal, national and East African customs, mien, history and sustaining culture. But it has shown itself as a having viable



influences on commercial styles in hip-hop and rap, gospel, jazz, and even in classical music and film scoring.

Likewise, Western “classical” music has shown itself to be a positive influence in the social and commercial aspects of Nairobi life. An adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in 2013 blended the Renaissance-period story with Kenyan elements in music and culture, Folk, classical and popular, and implemented with technology as well (Gitonga et al., 2013).

Any cultural music is a blend of multiple styles, local, historical or popular. This is especially evident in a nation with multi-ethnic influences, such as the United States or Kenya (Author, Journal, 2013, p. 153). When the nation itself is in contact with indigenous cultures, colonialism, and immigration from many sources, its art and music will inevitably be influenced by these sources. That said, it is vital that such a nation maximize each of these cultures, individually and collectively. To effectively affirm each culture – be it Kikuyu, Luo, Indian, Pan-African, Caribbean, Western or Maasai – a nation must recognize the collective contribution to the nation as a whole and how the collective is a unique and distinct culture in itself.

Some of the problems with Kenyan music may be traced to this principle. One must recognize the multi-faceted nature of its artistic mien to fully affirm the individual cultures that make it up. Until the industry and the government reach this point of agreement, the national discussion on music and other arts may very well stall and progress be difficult to make. The constantly metamorphosing nature of immigration, the historical proximity of colonialism and national birth and rebirth will force Kenya to constantly redefine its cultural heritage as manifested in the arts. Without a national policy, it will be difficult for the industry and the government to stay abreast of world marketing, industry and its own changing cultural style.

Music Education as a Support

Music Education in Kenya needs to be developed to fully appreciate the talent and resources of all three musical sources, (Folk, Western, Commercial), so that Kenya can be edified and enriched in this particular field. By recognizing specific areas of strength and contribution, music education programs can be designed from existing models in-country to develop this resource.

Here, one music director said,

there was a need for a university degree in music ministry, People just sing, and they have really no idea of how to really maximize their skills in that area. There are so few people here who really know anything about music construction, production and even performing, that when we get [experts in music], we want to keep them around. (Author, Kenya Journal, I, 2013, p. 105).

The few people who have been trained in both Western and African music approaches have shown the benefit of such education. The most effective musicians, whether in commercial, church, or classical music, have been trained in Western institutions to some point as well as a personal experience or education in Kenyan folk music, and thus have a perspective on African music that ranges from condescension to full appreciation.

According to one career church musician,

Musicians [in Kenya] are struggling to find identity... Those trained in music have a better grasp on what is happening in their music as well as any business opportunities. (Author, Kenya Journal, 2013, p. 153).



As is the case with this paper's divisions of Kenyan music into three streams, so Music Education should pay attention to Indigenous Folk Music, Commercial Music and Western Classical.

Indigenous Folk Music

The primary benefits of folk music to the national mien are related to cultural history, tribal identity within the context of a national culture, influences on other areas of musical style and musical entertainment within the context of tribal tradition. The approaches to music education in this field have much to do with customs within each cultural approach to music education. Education in this area may enfold such principles as:

- Instrument design and construction
- Improvisation
- Rhythmic and tonal identification
- Harmonic and melodic elements
- Structural and compositional approaches
- Folk music in the commercial music area
- Folk music as an identity of immigrant influence
- Folk music as contributor to national dialog in the arts
- Music business and marketing folk music in the commercial music and tourism industries

Western Classical

Aside from any colonial or migrant culture using the Western Classical system influencing Kenya, the benefits of the western music system allow an external examination of music over the whole country and has the great potential for unifying the various cultures, systems and styles. The system itself has developed since the fourth century (Boethius) and even has its sources in Greek mathematics and philosophy. The system has the advantage of being based in an environment of physics, and thus is common to the global human experience. The principles themselves will not change according to the perspectives of culture. The notation system based on the keyboard gamut has been accepted universally to various degrees and has shown itself a viable basis for transcription systems in even micro-tonal and multi-rhythmic cultural settings.

Further, the systems of commercial and popular music rely on the Western music transcription and keyboard systems in the development of audio and production technology, and the written dissemination of music principles.

The Western Classical system shows itself to be adaptable in its transcriptions, approximations and comparative methods in folk music. A notable example is American jazz, where its notation is acknowledged as limited and does not convey elements in performance, rhythmic feel, nuance or even harmonic voicing (Schuller, 1952, 1984; Author, 1986, 2004, 2007). Nonetheless, the system is a guiding basis and a standard notation system for the performance of jazz pieces, allowing the performers and culture to allow the necessary elements described above to permeate and influence the written score.

Commercial Music

A third facet of music education must be in the area of entertainment, that is, the area that provides a viable industry to the country, directly or indirectly. As this is the direct tie to the world markets, it is imperative that music education addresses elements in common with that market, the technology necessary for it, and the means by which music is produced using that technology for that market.



In interviews with high-profile Kenyan producers in Nairobi, it was consistently stated that:

- Music education is rare here, and badly needed on several levels
- Kenyans are inherently musical and have a great innate talent, but severely lacking in widespread education
- Music production is limited. [One producer said] even studios (counting the “home” studios) in Nairobi have gone from a “thousand to few.” Any studio of any significance may be counted on one hand
- Kenyan music is “borrowed...”
- ...The music industry here is struggling between traditional (which is the domain of the anthropologists), “English” ... or Euro-pop, World, and well-worn popular music from the 60s and on (such as Bob Marley all the way to classic rock)” (Author, 2013, p. 141)

Other concerns regarding the music industry in Kenya included the following comment: “We are fine for Kenya, but if we want to compete on the world level, we have to take it to the next step.”

Areas for Focus in Music Education

Music education in the area of Commercial Music will need to focus on the following for the highest impact on the music industry, tourism and the national economy:

Western Music Core – To compete on the world market, it is imperative that concise, directed methodology in this area is conveyed to prospective music industry personnel. Aside from that mentioned above (that this system is the standard in world music industry and technology interfaces), it provides a method for composition, performance competency and above all, efficiency that would increase the competitiveness of Kenya’s music industry in the world market. Whereas among all interviewees (and this writer), the consensus was made that Kenya has amazing innate talent, but the implementation of that talent is extremely inefficient due to lack of formal music training. This is the training that begins at an early age.

Music Business – As copyright issues within the Kenyan system are being consistently updated and improved, understanding music production as a multiplicity of revenue streams is vital. The music industry needs an avenue of regulation and improvement in the production, marketing and dissemination of musical and entertainment product, nationally and internationally. Once again, it cannot be emphasized enough that Kenya’s vital tourism industry is too much a part of its representation on the world market for other avenues that enhance that tourism cannot be ignored. Safari excursions are only one avenue of potential income and marketing attraction for resorts, for example. An example of an area maximizing multiple tourism possibilities is that of “Amish” country in the state of Ohio, USA. The Amish have an attraction based upon their culture. Avenues of income for them are not just limited to hayrides, upscale hotels and resorts, and their famous culinary style, but in the last few years, many have begun showing culturally based musicals, concerts and comedies as a way of adding income and increasing attractiveness in their marketing. There is no reason Kenya cannot do this, in a nation of such inherent attractive tourism.

Technology – Hand in hand with formal music concepts is the implementation of those concepts and creativity within the context of technological skills. One (global) concern is the ease with which “good” music can be made with a minimum of effort, by using ready-made elements in music technology. It cannot be forgotten, however, that these elements have the following issues:



- “Somebody” had to program them, onewho is being paid to do so
- “Stock” music still has to have musical knowledge for implementation
- “Stock” music sounds ordinary and bland, leaving little room for implementation without musical knowledge

Music education in technology does not just teach skills in programming or “pushing buttons.” It is vital that such education addresses the need for *critical thinking and the creative application* of such skills, something mere programming cannot ordinarily do.

Survey of Musical Styles– Unless a musician is exposed to a wide range of styles, it is unclear whether he or she will have an impact on the world stage. This is especially important in a country such as Kenya, which has a multiplicity of cultures, internal and external. Such education not only trains in musical skills, but also adds elements of cultural knowledge and national awareness.

Music Education for the General Public

However, music education benefits areas not so strictly musical. Multiple articles have shown that participation in music education has the following benefits to even those students not inclined toward the arts. Increased ability in:

- High scores on standardized exams (Morrison & Demorest, 2000; Phillips, 2006)
- High scores in high school (Phillips, 2006)
- Critical thinking in multiple situations
- Innovation in hard science research and development
- Mathematics and quantitative calculation (Rauscher, 1997)
- Self-driven discipline
- Long-term effort
- Character
- Spatial ability (Morrison, 2000)
- Language reasoning
- Team building and organizational contribution (Phillips, 2006)
- Social skills (Allsup, 2003)
- Motor skills
- Creative application of hard skills
- Evaluative skills
- Mental and physical therapy
- Symbol systems and associative principles (Morrison, 2000)
- Pattern identification (Phillips, 2006)
- Paradigm shift and perception as related to problem-solving (Morrison, 2000; Allsup)
- Anthropological subjects from an internal perspective (Phillips, 2006)
- Applied craftsmanship (Phillips, 2006)
- Detail and project completion (Phillips, 2006)

Conclusion

The music education element concretely addresses the pragmatism of national industry. In particular, the tourism industry, so vital for bringing outside income into Kenya, cannot ignore elements of entertainment, be it film, radio, stage, dance or music. “Entertainment,” after all, is the reason for a tourism industry: it is why people frequent the resorts, parks and markets of Kenya. The world-known mysticism and ethos of “Africa” is embodied within Kenya. However, at this point, Kenya is not the



“go-to” for music and sound production; a Kenyan student commented negatively on the fact that even the animated feature film, “The Lion King” was purported to have taken place in East Africa, but the music was South African. This is a concern regarding the music situation in Kenya.

To reiterate a producer’s comment, Kenya has an amazing resource of musical talent, engendered by tribal and cultural tradition, and individual talent. Kenya also has a ready-made industry to nurture a music economy, which will enhance the national economy and culture.

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