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***“UNYAZI”: ELECTRONIC MUSIC SYMPOSIUM + FESTIVAL 2005***  
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Thirty-five years after the establishment of the first electronic studio in South Africa, the South African section of the International Society for Contemporary Music, *NewMusicSA*,<sup>1</sup> organized *Unyazi*, the first international festival of electronic music and sonic arts in Africa, in collaboration with the School of Arts of the University of the Witwatersrand.<sup>2</sup> The Zulu word *unyazi*, the title of the festival, means “lightning” and seems to have been chosen as a symbol of the essential programme concept and direction of the event. No doubt these were strongly motivated by sociological issues based on the necessity for the affirmation of such production in the field of electronic music which at various musical levels and combinations of media can and should communicate creatively with the authentically African.

Within this is the view that this aim can best be reached through drawing artistic inspiration from specific contexts of African life, rather than by permanently eavesdropping on countries outside Africa. From this perspective, these countries cannot be expected to provide appropriate answers to current problems of musical culture of Africa, because African culture originates from and belongs to generally different economic, political and social spheres than are characteristic for, let us say, the northern hemisphere. Hence, the assumption is that within a specifically African world-view and its indigenous cultural heritage, electronic music and digital art, with their powerful technology, can contribute to the desired replacement of European cultural elitism that strongly affects the African professional musical soil, with its alternative ways of musical creation and communication. Generally speaking, these ways should rely on the autonomous social and musical Africa, on

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<sup>1</sup> President of the Section is Charles Mabaso, and its artistic director, Michael Blake.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the artists belonging to the South African musical culture (for example Brendon Bussy, Jürgen Bräuninger, Sazi Dlamini, Christo Doherty, Theo Herbst, Aryan Kaganof, Carlo Mombelli, Pops Mohammed, Zim Ngqawana, Toni Olivier, Dimitri Voudouris, Chris Wood, Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph), authors from overseas also participated in the festival: mostly from Latin American countries (e. g. Mariano A. Fernández, Daniel Judkovski, Alicia Terzian), then from the USA (e. g. Mark Applebaum, George Lewis), Spain (e. g. Francisco López), Germany (e. g. Georg Katzer), etc.

the variety of its hierarchies, cultural levels and customs. Still, all this should be reached on the basis of international standards, features and achievements in the field of electronic music concerning its technology, form and genres. Exactly by these aspects, combining the indigenous and the international, most of the composers' poetics are featured in African (electronic) music.

One of the most challenging features – artistically and socially – appears to be that of genre, being essentially connected with folklore musical practice. For example, we might say that the interest of African composers in multimedia genres naturally arises from the artistic syncretism prevailing in African traditional folklore experience. Therefore, the logic of multimedia permeated almost all aspects of the electronic music presented at this festival: live performances, tape-music, workshops, installations, video and film projections, panel discussions and a two-day symposium.

In this review we will focus on the symposium, whose participants also were some of the most distinguished authors at the festival. Their theoretical views were expressed through their compositions, and verbally, during the symposium from their auto-poetical perspectives. These views referred to crucial questions regarding the process of composing, particularly in the electronic medium. The technological and poetical problems implied by these questions, as well as ways of considering them overlapped with the above mentioned general views of African composers, but, naturally, were projected from the angle of musical environments that are not only African.

For example, while speaking on her work with the heavy metal group, *Reynols*, from Buenos Aires, the experienced American author, Pauline Oliveros, in her paper *Pauline Oliveros in the Arms of Reynols: a Collaboration* pointed to a variety of her personal poetical references, within which a significant place is dedicated to the amateurism of the popular provenance. Then, the leading Egyptian composer and pedagogue, Halim El-Dabh, presented his musical investigations accomplished in Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria and Congo, in his text "*Unyazi*" *Born Within: the Advanced Sonic Sensitivity of the African Village*. His research revealed that a considerable proximity exists between the sonic world of electronic and African folklore music. Therefore, El-Dabh himself has built his compositions, aesthetic and pedagogical concepts on the development of potentials of sound used in the practice of African rituals.

Lukas Ligeti, presenting his new project *Burkina Electric*, done in collaboration with artists from Burkina Faso – exasperated by comparisons with his famous father and the question of how it is that he does not compose in a way similar to that of his father – considered possible mutual enrichments of African music and (experimental) musical electronics. In his view, this reciprocal process is the best way to overcome frequent current fears that electronic technology might be a threat to African – and let us add – any other music. He is right in claiming that electronic music can only help to stimulate the rise of a composer's creativity.

For Canadian artist Maxime Rioux, predominantly interested in installations based on different forms of interaction among the human body, instrument and sound as artistic objects, creative communication with any local culture, including African, is in fact an issue of a personal selection of material. During his rather wandering verbal improvisation on the theme *Can Music Be at the Same Time Nomadic and Sedentary?*, Rioux stressed that the principle *omnia mea mecum porto* is his permanent creative filter, referring to possible and desired influences of any foreign culture, in a musical, philosophical and generally cultural sense.

Connections between cultural heritage and identity, focusing particularly on Latin American contemporary music, were examined by a young Mexican composer, Rodrigo Sigal, in his text *The Borders of Identity, a Personal Perspective*. He considered the subject from the aspect of his own creative work, based on electronic technology, which is primarily informed by European academic practice. During his presentation, Sigal raised the issue of the evaluation of electronic music, especially the question of how analytical methods can precisely reveal the compositional procedures applied in a concrete piece of electronic music. Considering that this process is objectively burdened by technological complexity, Sigal emphasized that compositional and technological procedures applied in a piece of electronic music should be transparent enough, at least in the elementary technological sense, to avoid possibly inappropriate explanations and evaluations.

To a certain extent, these views were also shared by the American author Matthew Ostrowski. In his presentation, *The Anxiety of the Client: the Network as Compositional Tool*, he dealt with the upsurge of interest of users of the internet (composers and media artists) for mapping and use of internet data bases. In an era such as ours, which Ostrowski perceives as being torn between individuality of identities and homogeneity of globality, the use of

samples can act as matrices of understanding. However, to his mind, the similarity with data is actually of no importance from the artistic point of view. Hence neither is the transparency of the technological process to which data (samples) are submitted of importance. Artistically important is how far a composer deviates from the samples he uses.

These standpoints directly preceded the *Discussion Panel concerning Models for Teaching Electronic Music / Sonic Arts in a Tertiary Educational Environment*. The discussion was sparked by Theo Herbst's theme, *Music Technology at Stellenbosch University*. Christo Doherty, who chaired the discussion, accomplished a sensitive navigation between two opposing views that emerged. One considered a systematic education in composition – and within it in electronic music – necessary when it concerns higher education. The other included two different attitudes, one glorifying talent and inspiration above all else (because, “anyway, knowledge can always be reached through appropriate courses” – sic); the other, we might say, concealing a pure embarrassment among academically trained composers, who, if supporting a systematic higher education, might be labelled as dismissive of talent. In a lively discussion amongst the composers, musicologists and digital artists, the contribution of Srđan Hofman received particular attention. From the perspective of the system of studies of composition in Serbia, with irrefutable arguments, he advocated for professionalism and an appropriate level for higher compositional education.

Therefore, at this point, the panel discussion in fact abandoned its initial intention of ‘apologizing’ for obtaining academic degrees.

Translated by the author