

Post-task: Piano is the instrument of the people!

Yonela sees solo piano playing as the highest form of communicating with yourself or what he calls “a testing point of destiny.”

Solo Piano offers a 360 degree worldview or is it 360 different degrees in the university of life, as the solo pianist moves from the nurturing environment of playing for ourselves into the harsh exposure of the public environment.

South Africa has an incredible tradition of solo pianists dating right back to the marabi pianists of the 1930s. They never played with a lot of instruments; yet they could entertain a whole crowd all by themselves. Just placing the piano in an ordinary house, despite all the wretchedness surrounding it, turned the house into a shebeen. Audiences would go there like on a pilgrimage, using the experience of dancing all night to the solo pianist to get themselves back towards themselves.

In South Africa, solo piano is a real people’s instrument, played in the houses and the communities.

Like with the choir, when you play by yourself, you have a lot of sounds on your hand. You have time to consider, and the chance to harmonize, to use your range. Or, you have the chance to be as silent or as loud as you wish, without having to work towards specifics, like ‘We’re going to retard the music now’ or ‘we’re stopping briefly here’, or ‘solo now’.

The solo pianist has a kind of a carte blanche. As s/he sits by the piano it is like an open blank canvas presenting a big challenge. And the solo pianist plays, at first, for him/herself. “It is the best way of finding our own identities,” says Yonela.

Solo piano is a journey of self-discovery and of identity. It is a high form of performance. Yonela loves to experiment in his playing. He is not a ‘piano perfectionist’ or purist by any means. He is flexible and versatile and draws on his South African vernacular like a great encyclopaedia of music to adapt to any situation he finds himself in.

The piano is not like a wind instrument you can carry around. You have to go to the piano, in the same way you would go to the temple, or to the bedroom. Yonela explained, “While playing different pianos in different spaces, you remain the same person, so there is a specific psychology which you have to assume when you sit at the piano. Pianists have to go where the piano is. There is a wrestling, a battling, a desire to own it and make it ours.”

Towards a South African Music Vernacular

Sometimes when you watch the pianist move their body whilst playing, this lends credibility to what the pianist is playing and the pianist continues to express his unfolding relationship with his instrument. It is like Bra Andile Yenana’s tapping his foot as he plays or Keith Jarrett moving his body. It creates another kind of freedom – not only the freedom to harmonize but the freedom to dance, stomp and bend your body. It’s beyond playing.

The way music education is designed, does not harmonise with how we freely explore our own music. The South African concept of music is not necessarily based on notes but on sound and the idea of talking to make sound. South Africans tend to use the body to dance. South Africans talk about specific rituals. By

invoking these South African principles and teaching these principles along with the notes makes it easier to understand music and develop your own personal approach.

Take the example of 'swing' music in Jazz. Indigenous African styles swing, such as the amaXhosa when they perform ukuxhensa, and the amaZulu when they perform amahubo.

Or, take the voice for example, the oldest instrument of all time. Choral music is deeply embedded in African ceremonies. Great South African pianists have expressed this dualism between the piano and choir. Abdullah Ibrahim took the harmony from the African Methodist Episcopal Church and played it as it is, taking the voicings from the choir. Todd Matshikiza was always being commissioned to write choral music, even a piece for Queen Victoria when she visited the then Rhodesia. Gideon Nxumalo and Chris McGregor also wrote for other instrumentations.

But what is central to the South African musical vernacular is our spiritual approach. Spirituality is respect. We learn to respect the land that we walk on. We learn to respect one another, greet one another and learn one another's customs. Spirituality in Africa is a very practical thing, it is a choice to acknowledge what is around you and appreciate what you have.

Post-task Questions

1. Yonela exposes us to the varied layered experiences and meaning of playing as a solo musician. What is your instrument? What is the meaning of playing your instrument solo? What memorable moments have you experienced taking a solo during your band's performance? Share with us an audio rendition.
2. Where and when have you experienced playing solo or with your band, that the music was transcending the mere screen sheets that you were following? Have you had a spiritual moment in your performance, and what was it like?
3. Jazz is seen as a genre that grows from improvisation and from sharing amongst musicians, sharing with audiences and sharing with its history and legacy. Do you agree or not? What kind of sharing are you engaged with and what kind of sharing will take you to the next level?
4. In your village, township, your informal settlement, your suburb and or your block of flats, what is the youth and cultural movement that attracts you? Are you a part of it? How does participation nurture and expose your music talent? What are the informal teachings you are learning from this exchange with other community artists?