

BOOK REVIEW

Paul F. Berliner. *The Art of Mbira: Musical Inheritance and Legacy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. x+609 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780226628684.

Paul F. Berliner and Cosmas Magaya. *Mbira's Restless Dance: An Archive of Improvisation, vol. 1 & 2*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. vi+900 pp. \$80.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780226626277.

A half-century ago, in 1971, Paul Berliner embarked on his first research trip to Zimbabwe. Working closely with a young musical prodigy, Cosmas Magaya, along with several of his family members and teachers, Berliner's initial study of mbira music resulted in the most widely read book on this subject, *The Soul of Mbira* (1978), and several audio recordings released in the 1970s. These studies helped introduce the world to this music, which has since become a global phenomenon. Years later, after Berliner's intense investigation of jazz which produced his award-winning tome *Thinking in Jazz* (1994), the ethnomusicologist returned his attention to the mbira in the 1990s, "delving further into its intricacies" (viii). Continuing analytical themes from his jazz studies, the current three-volume set focuses more acutely on "learning, transmission, and improvisation" (viii) associated with the mbira instrument itself.

Although there has been a wealth of mbira scholarship published over the last several decades, none has attended so intensely to a single artist's career path and practices. As Berliner keenly focuses on the life and art of his longtime teacher, giving readers a "longitudinal perspective on musical development and creativity" (ix), he also exemplifies the benefits of slow ethnography. Drawing on decades of collaborative research, Berliner is able to offer unprecedented nuance to the academic discourse on the mbira. Magaya's point that "the music's meaning lay in its details, not its generalities" (18) is made abundantly clear with the rich analyses that lie within these pages. Moreover, while at one level, the authors reveal their "concern for documenting the music" (ix) in light of the loss of many great mbira performers, they remark that "our goal is to stimulate further scholarship about distinctive 'schools' and personal styles of mbira performance" (x); like mbira patterns, this collection is presented not as an end in itself, but rather as

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a springboard for further innovation and knowledge production. That is, despite the works totaling over 1,500 pages, the authors do not claim that this study is absolute, instead, continuously demonstrating how Magaya's artistic expressions are situated within a larger milieu of other performers, teachers, and ancestors who all comprise the ever-evolving mbira tradition. As such, this assemblage avoids criticisms of similar scholarship that has positioned singular African "master drummers" and their performances as definitive.

The Art of Mbira is divided into four parts, each with multiple chapters. The first chapter is primarily concerned with research methodology, as Berliner notes how his sustained commitment to, and direct experience of, mbira music has yielded continuous insights. The subsequent chapter emphasizes mbira's "deep roots" (19) in Shona religious practice while outlining its basic compositional aspects. Chapter Three centers on tablature, foreshadowing the technical depth that dominates the volumes; those familiar with Berliner's earlier work will recognize, and likely welcome, the refinement of this notational system with its increased clarity and analytical markings. After Chapter Four outlines the various sonic registers of the mbira, the next chapter highlights the delicate "dance" of choreographed keystrokes that produce its kaleidoscopic sound; that is, Berliner highlights the confluence of kinesthetic, corporeal, aural, and organological factors that shape the development of this music. This convergence remains central to Berliner's subsequent exploration of harmonic motion; although Magaya does not conceive of harmony in a European sense, Berliner notes the cyclical "shadows of the imagination" that ring in the mbira player's mind to produce overlapping melodic-polyrhythmic sonorities. Having covered most of the "basics," the discussion then turns to the techniques used to create variations; pitch substitutions, chording, accents, and other devices are shown to produce mesmerizing sonic ambiguities and illusions that can, according to Magaya, "transport listeners into a different world altogether" (67). This section then ends by exploring the prominent interlocking aesthetic of mbira music, which, says Cosmas, "is where the beauty of this music lies" (81). Here, Berliner highlights the music's dialogic aspects as he examines how artists interact with one another, deploying a storehouse of practiced patterns to craft responsive performances.

Part A's dense analytical prose gives way to a more accessible narrative style in Part B, as Berliner connects Cosmas's life history to the acquisition of knowledge, and, ultimately, creativity. Berliner succeeds in showing how Magaya's "selective absorption" of mbira ideas is intimately linked with personal memory as the artist builds a repertoire of musical possibilities that embody a matrix of associations with his teachers, ancestors, and everyday experiences. Subsequently, Berliner's careful analysis reveals the creative process of this virtuoso; after Magaya masters the patterns of his mentors, he experiments with them, developing a signature style while transforming the mbira tradition itself. Demonstrating a lifetime of growth in musicianship, Cosmas has been able to innovate new musical arrangements, play with tension and release, and attenuate textural density, rhythmic diversity,

melodic ornamentation, and form to meet the needs of various performative moments.

Part C turns to the application of knowledge in performance, examining how Cosmas deploys his vast repertoire of songs, patterns, melodies, and techniques within various cultural contexts to produce meaningful and evocative experiences for the participants. Berliner presents several “narrative tours” of particular compositions and their performances, offering detailed transcriptions and analyses that guide the reader through the twists and turns of mbira artistry. Via these narratives, we get a deeper understanding of the ways in which Magaya reimagines music in the moment, communicating almost “telepathically” at times with other musicians, dancers, singers, and spirits. The book then reaches its apex in Chapter 22, as we are, at long last, brought into the middle of the sacred *bira* ceremony; here, Berliner highlights how Magaya skillfully builds momentum to inspire ancestral spirits to share their healing powers and wisdom. Lastly, Part D comprises nearly 300 pages of transcriptions, most of which are linked to specific audio and/or visual demonstrations (performed by Magaya) located on a neatly organized, open-access accompanying website.

Mbira's Restless Dance primarily contains detailed transcriptions and analyses of 39 mbira compositions, serving as “a distillation of master classes with a world-class mbira player over four and a half decades” (2). The repertoire in these texts is organized alphabetically, although Magaya includes a suggested progression through it based on both the music’s popularity and its technical level of difficulty. Together, these volumes live up to their promise of illuminating “the thought and labor that underlies mbira players’ skills and performance strategies” (2). Like their companion volume, these manuals reveal the mind of a master musician, sketching a cognitive map, or anatomy, of musical invention. Individual pieces are presented not as definitive scores, but as a kind of theme and variations, with segments of basic and accompanying parts that can be combined in various ways contingent on a given situation. As such, these transcriptions are intended as “generative models” that elucidate an artist’s path within a particular tradition; they can simultaneously serve to inspire further innovation. Lastly, Chapter 40 offers a comparative analysis of Magaya’s artistry, again situating him within a larger body of teachers, artists, and ancestors. This section further eradicates notions of absolute performance practice or definitive iterations of repertoire.

In each volume, as Berliner remarks, the focus is squarely on the “instrumental components of the mbira tradition” (9). Thus, as comprehensive as this work is, the authors freely admit to its incompleteness, which they hope will inspire further scholarly attention to this art. Technical analyses of other performance elements, such as singing, dancing, spirit possession, poetry, and *hoshō* (rattle) playing, are secondary within these texts. For instance, although the authors offer periodic exploration of vocal performance, including several video clips and tonal analyses, one has to look elsewhere to find an investigation of mbira singing on par with the detailed instrumental

transcriptions and analyses included here. Berliner's earlier work (1978), however, beautifully covers some of this terrain, particularly the poetics of the songs. Despite their microscopic focus, or perhaps because of it, the current volumes still evince how mbira artists interact with the aforementioned performative elements, coordinating their expressions in relation to their musical, social, and metaphysical environments.

Overall, mirroring the interlocking nature of mbira itself, the authors' words and music dance in partnership across the pages, delivering an exemplary rendition of collaborative research based on mutual respect, intention, and friendship. Recalling Berliner's landmark work on jazz, the authors offer insight into "thinking in mbira," that is, not merely how to think about the mbira, but how to think through it and with it by illuminating the ways in which its artistry connects to memory, emotion, kinesthetics, aesthetics, and spiritual epistemologies. Daunting in its detail, this work also eradicates the outmoded, but ever-present, notions of African music as simplistic, conversely displaying the careful craftsmanship, depth, and virtuosity of a dedicated musician comparable to the likes of Coltrane or Beethoven. Further, for all its technical detail, Berliner still succeeds in demonstrating that improvisation is not merely about the mastery of musical technique, but also involves a lifelong process of embodying and responding to the social and spiritual worlds.

Finally, in an all-too prophetic statement, Cosmas commented on the completion of this work: "I know that if I die tomorrow, I can go to my grave satisfied" (x). Magaya, only in his 50s, unfortunately became an ancestor in 2020, another tragic victim of the pandemic. Consequently, the present study simultaneously attests to the depth and uniqueness of his artistry as well as to the profundity of his loss. Yet, his spirit and genius will certainly live on within these volumes as they stand as loving tributes to his memory.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Makombe, Rodwell. 2017. "Literature as a Medium for Social and Political Activism: The Case of Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness*." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 115–38. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.51.
- Perman, Tony. 2017. "Muchongoyo and Mugabeism in Zimbabwe." *African Studies Review* 60 (1): 145–70. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.4.
- Sanga, Imani. 2010. "Postcolonial Cosmopolitan Music in Dar Es Salaam: Dr. Remmy Ongala and the Traveling Sounds." *African Studies Review* 53 (3): 61–76. doi:10.1017/S0002020600005679.