

## **Between African Ritual and European Romanticism: The Music of Bongani Ndodana-Breen**

**Martin Scherzinger, Princeton University**

Born in 1975 in Queenstown, South Africa, Bongani Ndodana-Breen acquired his first musical education at St. Andrews College in Grahamstown, where he composed for the chapel choir as well as resident ensembles, including a prize-winning College Overture for wind orchestra. In the early 1990s, he was awarded an undergraduate bursary from the Southern African Music Rights Organization to study music at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, and in 1996 he was awarded a Senior Music Bursary from the Foundation for the Creative Arts to specialize in composition with Roelof Temmingh at the music conservatory in Stellenbosch. One year later he received a commission for an organ work for Gerrit Jordaan, wrote a chamber opera *Temba and Seliba* for the Standard Bank Festival of the Arts, and worked as a conductor with members of the Capab Opera. In 1998 he won the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Music in South Africa, which led to a commission for *Uhambo – The Pilgrimage*, an opera-oratorio based on the narrative poem *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross* by the South African poet and playwright Guy Butler.

Ndodana-Breen emigrated to Canada the following year, where he became the music director of the then newly founded *Ensemble Noir* (reconstituted in 2005 as *Musicanoir*), a Toronto-based contemporary musical ensemble dedicated to cultural and artistic diversity, with a special emphasis on music from Africa and its diaspora. Ndodana-Breen's international profile quickly escalated, with premiere performances by the Belgian National Orchestra, Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, Symphony Nova Scotia, Natal Philharmonic, New York City's Vox Vocal Ensemble, Cape Town City Ballet, Ensemble Noir, Ensemble Cosi Facciamo based in Munich, Chicago's Cube Ensemble, the Ossia Ensemble of the Eastman School of Music, the choir of Wadham College Oxford University, amongst many others. Ndodana-Breen's musical activities with Musicanoir/Ensemble Noir have included numerous concerts at home and abroad, including an ambitious tour in 2003 of African nations (including Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa) bringing contemporary African concert music to local audiences. His place on the international stage was consolidated when, in 2006, Ndodana-Breen became one of the youngest composers ever to be featured on the well-known "Composer's Portraits" series at the Miller Theatre -- New York's most prestigious current contemporary music venue.

Ndodana-Breen's recent projects include music for a video-cantata *Orange Clouds*, performed live by singers, strings and winds, with a libretto by John Greyson and a video by the internationally-acclaimed video artist Geoffrey Pugen. An investigation into the vexing notion of the *pioneer* (with its attendant theory of historical origins and precedence), *Orange Clouds* takes its conceptual cue from the annual flight of the monarch butterflies from the Rockies in North America to a remote neovolcanic plateau about 150 miles outside Mexico City, a destination completely unknown to them. Far from dismantling the myth of origins, the video-cantata pays tribute to various historical

trail-blazers who daringly carved analogously perilous new paths into new terrain: Simon Nkoli, an activist who founded the first black gay organization in Africa and became an outspoken advocate for people with AIDS before his death in 1998; Portia White, a commanding contralto who famously sang for Queen Elizabeth II in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and in 1944 became the first Canadian black opera singer to sing at Carnegie Hall; and, more reflexively, Fred Urquhart, the Canadian zoologist who discovered and mapped the migration patterns of the monarch butterflies. The score is resolutely eclectic, casting a wide net of intertextual references that include minimalist patterning, the conventions of Baroque music, melodies from Hollywood show tunes and African music. Ndodana-Breen's current engagements include writing the music for Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, the famous story of Saartjie Baartman (a Khoi-San woman publicly displayed as the "Hottentot Venus" in Europe in the early twentieth century), scheduled for a performance at the Aaron Davis Hall in New York, as well as completing commissions from organizations as diverse as the Vancouver Recital Society, Madam Walker Theatre in Indianapolis, the Kazbah Project New York City, the Southern African Music Rights Organization, the International Violin Competition of the University of South Africa, The Emancipation Festival in Trinidad & Tobago, the Playhouse Company in Durban, and the Cape Town City Ballet.

In his music, particularly in its rhythmic patterning, Bongani Ndodana-Breen evokes a brand of African musicking intended to sound clear, buoyant, and intuitive. To those familiar with South and West African musical traditions it carries clear traces of string music as well as the sound of lamellaphones and voices. The titles and the extra-musical content of Ndodana-Breen's works too grant pride of place to African musical traditions, history and folklore. Of his recent works, *Sons of the Great Tree*, for example, invokes the totem name *Mthikhulu* ("Great Tree") of Ndodana's ancestral lineage, *Rainmaking* conjures the memory of Queen Nodjadai V, the "rain queen" of the Lovedu people, who died in 2001, and the *Hintsa Dances* refer to Hintsa ka Khawuta, chief of the Gcaleka people (a group of the Xhosa nation) who was imprisoned in Robben Island by the British in the Cape Frontier Wars (1835). On his *Uhambo*, the composer explains that the "core African accent" includes references to a diverse array of musical traditions: the *kora*, *uhadi* and *djembe* (in Gallet, 1998). Ndodana-Breen describes his engagement with African music in terms of a gradual distancing from western compositional standards: "As part of my quest for an identity as an African, I have been drawn more and more towards an 'African aesthetic' within my art form, which is still riddled with European conventions. In trying to make sense of a cultural paradox, a new musical language emerges" (in Pyper, 1997). In some cases Ndodana-Breen even stakes African political claims on various musical gestures in his scores. On his quotations of Bach and Beethoven in his *Umuntu: Threnody and Dances* (2001), for soprano and cello, for example, the composer says, "I basically tear apart a fragment of Bach's Brandenburg # 3, symbolizing the looting and pillage of Africans by Colonial powers from Europe" (in Sasnett, 151, 2006).

It is for good reason, then, that reviewers and critics of Ndodana-Breen's music have tended to connect his geographical origins with his musical aspirations. Writing for the *New York Times*, for example, Bernard Holland claims, "Mr. Ndodana's delicately made

music ... has a lot to teach the Western wizards of metric modulation and layered rhythms about grace and balance. He reminds us that most of our notions about musical motion in the last century came in their roundabout way from Africa or Southeast Asia in the first place, and that Africans tend to do it better than we do" (Holland, 2006). Seeing that Ndodana-Breen was trained almost exclusively in the western musical tradition, and left South Africa before the age of twenty-five, it seems reasonable to suggest that the foundation on which he bases his African echoes are constructed, bearing the marks of a utopian vigor that in turn resonated with a newly democratic political landscape in South Africa after 1994.

For example, Ndodana-Breen's treatment of African source material in *Rituals for Forgotten Faces* No. 4 for string quartet is loose and open-ended, recalling as much the thematic transformations of European romanticism and the open sonic landscapes of early European modernism (Sibelius, Debussy, Stravinsky, etc.) as it does genuine African compositional processes. *Rituals* No. 4.a draws on the one-stringed *ugubhu* bow music of the late Princess Constance Magogo, daughter of the Zulu king Dinizulu ka Cetshwayo (1868-1913), but far from elaborating traditional *ugubhu* oscillations between two complementary pitch sets, the music quickly unfolds a series of motivic ideas, which shuttle illusionistically between the simplicity of a single line and the complexity of a web-like texture. The use of a chromatic pitch collection spun out in ever-transforming thematic streams surpasses the interlocking pitch fields found on the *ugubhu*; and yet the never-quite predictable polymetric melodic transformations that create the continuum between texture and line are themselves reminiscent of African modes of variation (on, for example, the *mbira*, *matepe*, *timbila*, etc.) found further north of KwaZulu Natal. This "handmade" quality of pattern transformation contrasts vividly with the machine-like precision of African-inspired minimalists in Europe and America.

Ndodana-Breen's music is generally grounded in a motivic procedure delicately developed in the context of multiple simultaneously unfolding meters. Towards the end of *Sons of the Great Tree* (for small ensemble), for example, strings elaborate a walking rhythm in binary time against the ternary beating of the rattles (conjuring the interlocking patterns of the Shona *mbira* and *hosho*). Likewise, in *Rituals* No. 4.b, the four instruments of the string quartet enter in four different temporal groupings. While the parts are notated in 4/4, the first violin consistently elaborates a three-note motive in an implied 6/8 (with three quarters in the time of two) beginning on the second beat of the measure, the viola elaborates an undulating passage in an implied 12/8 (with three eighths in the time of two), the cello elaborates a melodic rise and fall on every third pulse of the 4/4, implying a ternary (dotted-note) time that cuts across the written bar lines. The only instrument in sync with the notation is the second violin, but even here the undulating melodic line is consistently placed on the offbeat. It is as if the notated time signature is an abstract convenience thoroughly infused with rhythmic ambiguity; these are stratified ternary and binary groupings that freely jostle for tempo formation.

Ndodana-Breen's harmonic language tends to cohere around limited pitch collections that are often gently interrupted for contrast. In *Rituals* No. 4.b, for example, while the first violin and cello outline continuously morphing thematic material in a pentatonic field, the

second violin and viola sketch rolling diatonic paths in the middle register. Far from conflicting with the pentatonic collection, the diatonic collection sounds like it is *coloring* the pentatonic by smudging it. Ndodana-Breen's motivic/thematic workings are perhaps the most intuitive, and therefore least predictable, aspect of his compositional practice. The first violin's motives in the opening measures of *Rituals* No. 4.b, for example, seem to shuttle between incremental change and exact repetition, on the one hand, and a large-scale descent (from m.1 to m. 14) following the jagged melodic intervals implied by the demands of the pentatonic set. And yet, on completing the octave span the music casually continues tapping out motives un-implied by the descending flow. Another prominent motivic device in this music is the interposition of additional notes, thereby displacing the temporal placement of the music's motives. For example, in the opening measures, the cello's meandering dotted note figures are freely expanded and contracted, and in the second section (beginning on m. 22) the second violin's ostinato figure is constantly metamorphosed via interpolation.

Ndodana-Breen's light, open textures offer spacious musical landscapes in which the processes of pattern-formation are themselves central to the musical argument. These are largely transformations that pose as repetitions, yet without forgoing the pleasures of pure repetition from time to time. His compositional palette, interlaced with diverse references to Africa and Europe, is wide-ranging and eclectic. The composer's motivic language, equally at home in a Sibelius symphony as a traditional *mbira* improvisation, along with his harmonic language, referring at once to the world of both chromatic Romanticism and the African *timbila* or the *ugubhu*, and his rhythmic interlacing techniques, which recall African polyrhythmic processes as readily as those of European modernism, produce an imaginatively blended invention of African music. Ndodana-Breen's is less a new African music than an African new music.

## REFERENCES:

Gallet, Francois. "Eclectic New Opera Mixes Bach with Djembe Drums," *Sunday Independent*, July 1998 ([http://www.geocities.com/bonganin\\_99/localcomposers.html](http://www.geocities.com/bonganin_99/localcomposers.html))

Holland, Bernard, "For One Composer the Power of African Music is Endless," *New York Times*, January 23, 2006.

Pyper, Brett. "Bright Young Things," *Mail & Guardian*, November 1977 ([http://www.geocities.com/bonganin\\_99/localcomposers.html](http://www.geocities.com/bonganin_99/localcomposers.html))

Sasnett, Kathleen Beth, "Twenty-Five Works for the Dramatic Soprano Voice and Orchestra: A Study Guide," Doctor of Musical Arts in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University, 2006

Published in *Companion to South African Composers*, Wits University Press, 2007.