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CALL AND RESPONSE: MUSICAL JOURNEYS IN MISSION
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“Language learning is communication is ministry!” And so the Master’s level class in language and culture learning¹ began at Fuller Seminary with Tom and Betty Sue Brewster; it was the summer of 1981. As I followed the Brewsters’ lectures and went out into the local community attempting to learn Mandarin, I was struck with the strong parallels between music and language learning. I had recently returned to the United States to study at Fuller Theological Seminary after three years of what was then considered short-term ministry in Nairobi, Kenya (1978–1980) at the then fledgling Daystar Communications. Little did I know at that time, how my own ministry would follow the concepts contained in the pithy saying of the course.

I knew another saying, “Music is a universal language!” But, during my time in Africa, I had discovered that this was not necessarily true. In spite of western hymns sung across the globe, I had learned that there were many misunderstandings about their content; misunderstandings that significantly impacted worship, witness, and spiritual formation. Music is a powerful medium of communication. Just as one needs to learn a people’s spoken, vernacular *heart* language to be an effective communicator of the Gospel, so learning a people’s indigenous *heart* music fosters effective Christian communication. But wait, I’m getting ahead of myself. How did my musical pilgrimage in mission develop? How and in what ways did the Lord call and ask me to respond? Let me share some significant turning points along the way.

Call to Mission: Discovering My Musical ‘Fit’

I first left for Nairobi, Kenya in 1978, a woman and a musician asking the Lord if He could use me. I went saying, “I’m not a preacher, nor will my church allow me to be a church planter. So, Lord, just how does music as mission fit into the task of making Christ known among the nations? And, Lord, most missions are requiring marriage, something I desire, but have not found. Where can I serve?” Gratefully, with a Bachelors degree in piano performance, expertise on the French horn, experience in organ performance, and a newly minted Masters in

¹ MB530 Language/Culture Learning and Mission.

Music Education (Choral–General) from the University of Oregon, I finally found an organization that realized music is more than mere entertainment, rather that it communicates. That institution was Daystar Communication in Nairobi, Kenya.

And so I left for Daystar Communication on my first musical adventure in mission. Once I arrived it did not take me long to learn how central the musical arts are to African cultures. Within the first six weeks in Nairobi, I was asked to design, write, and voice four one–hour programs entitled “Music with a Message” on the National Voice of Kenya radio station. Little did I know at that time how appropriate and prophetic the title of those programs was. “Music with a message” helped me realize that in Africa, music preaches. Thus, my short–term mission of 2 years became a ministry of 22 years based in Nairobi, one that included doing fieldwork and teaching seminars in thirteen African nations in addition to the academic classroom at what became Daystar University.

I had asked God to show me where and how I fit into mission with my musical expertise; He answered. Indeed, the opportunities kept presenting themselves, sometimes seemingly out–of–the–blue. For example, a choir from the local, huge slum of Kibera walked more than four miles to have me coach them at Daystar’s Ngong Road campus. I had found my musical ‘fit’ where the Lord wanted me to serve; it became a journey where I wholeheartedly served Him with joy!

Call to Nairobi, Kenya: Communicating Christ through Music

At the foundation of ministering through music lies with what became for me the theoretical core of my ministry, intercultural communication. One of the first things I did at Daystar was to attend the International Institute of Christian Communication. Interestingly, I stayed in the Daystar dorm, and found an apartment there that was adapted for a couple needing wheel chair access. This couple just happened to be Tom and Betty Sue Brewster, two people I would not meet for another three years until I enrolled in the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

During the communication course, as I was learning each of Don Smith’s propositions, I found there was always a musical link. Yet, two of the propositions were especially critical ones for cross–cultural music ministry. The first is “Proposition 3: Meaning is internal and individual”, (Smith 1992, 50–64) arguing that meaning lies in the receptor who interprets

messages according to their own communication filters and what they have experienced in life. This proposition helped me, musically, to understand the reason people often like different musics and respond to them either negatively or positively; music is not understood universally.

I had been exploring church worship services around Nairobi, and was amazed to see different responses to Western hymns that had been introduced onto the continent in contrast to local, indigenous expressions². It was striking and set me on a journey to research and study African musics in the discipline of ethnomusicology.

The second proposition, really two combined together, are Propositions 11–12 (Smith 1992, 144–165) about human communication occurring through the use of twelve signal systems (Proposition 11). Proposition 12, a proposition that Betty Sue often taught in her courses at Fuller Seminary, points to the impact of culture on the use of the signal systems and states that the signal systems “are used differently in different cultures” (Smith 1992, 144).

Significantly, the combining of the propositions points to the critical insight that music is *not* a universal language. Rather, “Music is universal: its meaning is not” (Titon 2009, 2002, 1–14). The implications for effective worship and witness cross-culturally are enormous, especially in relation to mission. This became another pivotal moment for me as I realized the gap of and the need for culturally appropriate music in mission on multiple levels. As a result I began exploring the development of worship music in culturally appropriate forms and the ways in which it is employed.

In 1978 at Nairobi Baptist Church, for example, I worked with the young people to put together a culturally appropriate musical, “The Hippo–crit.” This type of ministry involvement became another significant turning point and response to God’s call. Throughout the years in Nairobi, I designed, led, and produced numerous culturally appropriate worship services such as Christmas and Easter programs that sought to bring Christ into the people’s life in relevant and meaningful ways at Nairobi Baptist Church where I directed the choir and led worship. This was always done in collaboration with members in the choir.

² For a history of the music brought to Africa by early western missionaries see my chapter 2, “Music Culture: Euro–American Christianity” in *Music in the Life of the African Church* (King 2008, 17–26).

Call to the Peoples of Africa: Exegeting Music Cultures for Christ

Two key professors who taught in that first course at Daystar in Intercultural Communication were Charles and Marguerite Kraft, anthropologists and missiologists from Fuller Theological Seminary and Biola. Chuck, as we all come to call him, challenged me to study at Fuller Seminary saying that I could combine ethnomusicology courses at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) with my courses at Fuller Seminary. Thus began my journey into ethnomusicology and its applied dimensions in tandem with missiology. Significantly, I met J. H. Kwabena Nketia, the leading African ethnomusicologist at the time at UCLA (not in Africa). He helped me to identify key components in studying African music cultures as we interacted weekly, one-to-one concerning music communication in Africa.³

At the same time while studying at Fuller, I joined WorldVenture⁴ with ministry in French-speaking Africa where later my PhD fieldwork ultimately took place among the Senufo peoples of Côte d'Ivoire. The Cebaara believers of the Korhogo northern region are the ones who modeled and shared with me how they 'preach through music.' As part of my fieldwork, we worked on helping and encouraging oral believers to set Scriptures to song in culturally appropriate ways, what became the foundation of my book, *A Time to Sing: A Manual for the African Church* (King 1999).

Setting scripture to song through group composing was further developed and enhanced through working with closely related Senufo believers among the Nyarafolo in the neighboring town of Ferkessedougou. Together, we developed oral translations of selected passages in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Genesis, in particular the Abrahamic passages. Setting the Abraham story to song became a highpoint.

While the Nyarafolo believers were learning the biblical rendition of Abraham taking Isaac to the mountain as a sacrifice, on the other side of the town wall, white goats were being assembled for the Muslim celebration of *tabaski*, the grand feast that lacked the clear insights contained in the Biblical story; they believe, for example, that Ishmael was to be sacrificed, not Isaac. The Senufo culture is so close to Old Testament cultures, that the finer nuancing of the

³ See Nketia's article on communication and music in Africa, he wrote in response to many of the questions I raised in our discussions: Nketia, Kawbena J. H. 1982. "Interaction Through Music: the Dynamics of Music-Making in African Societies." *International Social Science Journal* no. XXXIV (No. 4).

⁴ WorldVenture at that time was called the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society, followed by CBInternational.

biblical passages were understood with amazement as the work of God. Indeed, the songs that came out of that workshop have made a profound impact in helping the Nyarafolo church to move from being a preaching point to an established church and to bring new believers to Jesus Christ.

Through this experience and work, setting scripture to song in appropriate oral forms became a hallmark of my time in Africa where I helped facilitate peoples composing scripture-based songs across the continent in more than 90 languages. Each time as I returned from the field to teach music classes at Daystar University (formerly Daystar Communication), I encountered students who had not had the opportunity to compose indigenous songs where misunderstandings continued about the content of the hymns.

One student, for example, in singing the “In the Sweet Bye-and-Bye,” referred to it as that “Bye, Bye” song and how it is considered and used as a funeral song. Once we had discussed the text further and he realized that it was not necessarily a funeral song, he made an amazing comment: “Ah *mwalimu* (teacher), we often don’t understand the meaning of the text. That is why we dance and clap to show that we are at least Christian.” Although identifying with the Christian faith, the intention of hymns shaping a people’s theological understanding was lost. Thus, singing with understanding in ways that impact a people’s relationship with God and their spiritual formation is foundational to my working philosophy of music in mission.

Call to Broader Horizons: Fuller Theological Seminary and Beyond

After establishing a Department of Christian Music Communication in the Institute of Christian Ministries and Training at Daystar University, and also mentoring three choir directors at Nairobi Baptist Church I sensed a need to ‘get out of the way.’ Thus, in 1999 when Dudley Woodberry, the Dean of the School of World Mission, approached me about joining the School of Intercultural Studies faculty and whether it might be time to leave Africa, I reluctantly and with tears in my eyes agreed it was time to leave Africa and join the faculty. Finding funding for a new faculty position is always a major concern and I was coming with a new discipline, ethnomusicology. Betty Sue Brewster and Dan Shaw knew of the need to work with translations for some of Bill Brehm’s songs and mentioned to me that there was current discussion of establishing the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts.

As I led international students in sharing the translated songs, it was another pivotal moment when Fuller Theological Seminary acknowledged the need to work with people's cultural musics as one of the 'manifold ministries' of God. Thus, with the establishing of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts, came an invitation to join the faculty in the School of Intercultural Studies to teach ethnomusicology and intercultural communication. God was once again calling me into new regions by introducing ethnomusicology and global Christian worship into a seminary curriculum; it was my joy to respond by joining the faculty, and developing the Global Christian Worship program.⁵

In the area of research and writing, the most recent project, "Songs of Peace and Reconciliation among Muslims and Christians" has extended our perspectives, academic research, and writing into new arenas of applied ethnomusicology. Funded by a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation through the auspices of the Brehm Center, the project explores the contribution of music and the arts in fostering sustainable peacebuilding through an interreligious lens. Working with scholars in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, the Global Christian Worship program now also does work in applied ethnomusicology in interfaith dialogue as peacebuilding through music.⁶ Moving beyond Africa into Lebanon and Indonesia doing ethnomusicological fieldwork has challenged me in new ways; it has caused me to continue to trust in God always seeking to glorify Him.

Although music is not one universal language, musics are certainly found around the globe in a plurality of diversity, each one remains a major means for singing our adoration to God wherever He calls us to serve Him, especially as we engage with God through our heart musics. As I reflect on how God has called and led me throughout my years of mission service and I have responded, I am reminded of a song that Tom and Betty Sue Brewster sang in that first language and culture learning class. It is one that helped to shape my philosophy of ministry. I am grateful to Betty Sue for all that she has modeled in our lives, in addition to the many lessons that were taught. Together with her, I continue to sing that song from class:

My total reason for being here is to glorify God by my life,
To grow to be more like Him, and To see Him produce remaining fruit⁷.

⁵ Information available at www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/globalworship/music.

⁶ See www.songsforpeaceproject.org.

⁷ "My Total Reason:" c. 1977, Larry W. Poland.

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King has published *Pathways in Christian Music Communication* (2009), *Music in the Life of the African Church* (2008), and *A Time to Sing: A Manual for the African Church* (1999). Her current research focuses on “*Songs of Peace and Reconciliation Among Muslims and Christians*”.