

BOOK REVIEW

Grant Olwage (ed.), *Composing apartheid: music for and against apartheid.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-1-86814-456-3. viii plus 311 pages.

In 2004, the annual New Music Indaba (a contemporary music festival) was held in Grahamstown. As a prelude to the festival, a conference was held, dealing with the musics (plural) of apartheid – and specifically, how apartheid was constituted through music. Thirteen of the papers that were delivered were subsequently published in *Composing apartheid*, under the editorship of Grant Olwage, a senior lecturer in the Wits School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

This first book-length exploration of a fascinating topic is supplied with an introduction by Olwage, followed by chapters on a variety of themes that all shed light on music for and against apartheid. The titles of the chapters are: “Back to the future? Idioms of ‘displaced time’ in South African composition”; “Apartheid’s musical signs: reflections on black choralism, modernity and race-ethnicity in the segregation era”; “Discomposing apartheid’s story: who owns Handel?”; “*Kwela*’s white audiences: the politics of pleasure and identification in the early apartheid period”; “Popular music and negotiating whiteness in apartheid South Africa”; “Packaging desires: album covers and the presentation of apartheid”; “Musical echoes: composing a past in/for South African jazz”; “Singing against apartheid: ANC cultural groups and the international anti-apartheid struggle”; “‘Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika’: stories of an African anthem”; “Whose ‘White man sleeps’? Aesthetics and politics in the early work of Kevin Volans”; “State of contention: recomposing apartheid at Pretoria’s State Theatre, 1990-1994: a personal recollection”; “Decomposing apartheid: things come together”, and “Arnold van Wyk’s hands”. The contributors include historians, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, musical theorists and historical musicologists — academics from South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

From the above, it should be clear that the essays focus on a variety of musics (popular music, music in the Western art tradition, and jazz), as well as on major composers (for example Kevin Volans) and major works (Handel’s *Messiah*). Several music institutions and previously little-researched performers (for example Amandla, the African National Congress’s troupe-in-exile) are explored. Indeed, the writers move well beyond their subject matter, linking up with debates on historiography, race, and postcolonial epistemologies and pedagogies.

Composing apartheid is the first book ever to chart the musical world of apartheid South Africa. It explores how music was produced through, and was productive of, key features of apartheid’s social and political topography, as well

as how music and musicians contested and helped to conquer apartheid. This meticulously documented work indeed does full justice to the complex interactions between music and politics in South Africa during and since the apartheid era. Not only does it focus on music in the light of its political contexts; it also vividly demonstrates how music can shed light on politics. The book is not merely a showcase of South African musicological scholarship today – it also comprises a persuasive argument for the centrality of music in processes of cultural and political changes.

The thirteen essays contained in *Composing apartheid* probe the multifaceted histories and stories of musical apartheid in South Africa. As Roger Parker (King's College, University of London) correctly states, this is one of the best books to have emerged from South African musicology in recent years. In fact, it opens up a new level of discourse about music during the apartheid era: a level on which the theoretical, the ethical, the historical and the aesthetical offset each other in new meaningful ways.

The essays each have endnotes as well as a bibliography; and where necessary, there are extracts from music scores. Some essays are illustrated. The index will assist the serious scholar to access the wealth of information contained in the book.

Composing apartheid: music for and against apartheid is a fascinating book that deserves to be read by anyone who would like to gain a better understanding of apartheid South Africa in all its complexity.

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