

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
with
Mr. Simphiwe Mguye
By Melikhaya Potwana
King William's Town, South Africa
August 12, 2008

Interview with Mr. Simphiwe Mguye

Interviewed on August 12, 2008

Location: BJT Tyamzashe Senior Secondary School, Zinyoka Location, King William's
Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Interviewer: Melikhaya Potwana

Transcribers: Pumza Williams, James Chapnick, Ryan Koons

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Translators: Melikhaya Potwana and Pumza Williams

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Melikhaya Potwana: My name is Melikhaya Potwana. I'm going to be the interviewer today. I come from the Ginsberg Youth Council. Tell us more about yourself, father: who you are, where you are from?

Simphiwe Mguye: My name is Simphiwe Mguye. I am from Stutterheim— that's where I was born; I was raised in Mdantsane. Now I live in Bisho.

Melikhaya Potwana: Tell us about your work and school.

Simphiwe Mguye: I am a teacher; I started in 1997. I was employed to teach mathematics and physical [i.e. natural] science.

Melikhaya Potwana: This music we saw you doing [conducting], where did you encounter it?

Simphiwe Mguye: I encountered this music in 1987— I was studying instrumental music in Rogano Music College in East London. I went there to do instrumental music—in particular, organ. Then from there, I went again to college in 1990 and 1991 doing with [studying?] Tonic solfa there at the college. That is where I already had a love for the music, but that is where I got formal training.

Melikhaya Potwana: Why did you choose to do choral music in particular?

Simphiwe Mguye: I think from my youth, when I was very young, that is where I had a love for singing, you know? I even used to sing in church. I remember when I started singing— I think I was age 8—I sang with my cousins and my sisters, so from there it developed to love, and basically it's part of worship, so as I progressed in church, it got into my system. I ended up loving it socially: outside the church.

Melikhaya Potwana: You said you arrived here in 1997, right? When you arrived, did this kind of music exist in [the BJT Tyamzashe] school?

Simphiwe Mguye: Yes! It existed, but it was starting to die down. I think the students were not very into it. And for me, by the way, I think that was an irony, because of the person [BJT Tyamzashe, a choral music composer] the school is named after.

Melikhaya Potwana: As you are speaking about this person the school is named after, do you think that this name brought a change to the school?

Simphiwe Mguye: I think the reason why the school was named after the composer was... there were three other people in the Zinyoka [Location] area who could have had the honor of the school being named after them, but I think the community chose the less political [person] because the other two were political and they had contributed a lot to the Zinyoka area; like Rhoji [Skhenjana] and Steve Biko. Now there is this man Bika T. Tyamzashe, who is a composer of songs. I think they chose Bika T somehow as a point of compromise in the political situation. They said, "Let's choose this one of the songs," not because he was a composer, nor because they loved music; because it showed in the end that it [the choice of namesake] was not because of that [the above reasons], but the school itself was affected by the name which ended up developing the school musically, so I think it did make a contribution.

Melikhaya Potwana: When you are teaching the music to students, do you think the music improves their studies?

Simphiwe Mguye: Yes! A lot—you see, when a person looks especially at climate we are in, you know, you realize that the learners in the school are still trying to discover themselves. They are adolescents so they are at the stage of discovering who they are and their identity. So when you introduce things like this music into their lives, you discover that, amongst the students, some of them show potential—that this person can

sing, but they have no love for this music. So we put a person like this into a situation where he realizes that, "This is what I want." Whereas he realized what he wanted—can you see that? So what I'm saying is: for sure that there is a huge difference. On students' morale, they have discovered this thing they love in schools. As a result, some learners—as much as we are mentioning here... music, which is something they—those certain learners—love. But even in other areas like sports and things like that, once you introduce those activities to them, you will find that the learner has something to be complemented about and something he is good at. Then that thing makes him keen on coming to school because he has something to look forward to and that will boost his morale. Once the morale is high, it is easy even to notice that there is a change because he feels comfortable with other learners, so it's easy for his studies to sink in. You will see that the learner is being successful, so somehow music is indirectly involved in the success of that learner.

Melikhaya Potwana: What are the challenges that you encounter when you are teaching these children about this music? Do you perhaps have resources to teach them?

Simphiwe Mguye: Yes! You see, that's one of the things we want to incorporate in the vision of the school. Because we have now realized that we've been named after a person who is so important; he had a profound affect musically, nationally—not only here, in this area. As a result, we had a wish, you know, as a school, to become some sort of Academy for learners who excel in music, but now there are challenges we encounter outside of these general [i.e. public] schools such as security or technology

advancement—things like that. Even the buildings, but also now the music facility itself, for instance, you may have noticed, as I was conducting the music, I was conducting without a very basic thing: the melodica, you see? Now things like that are tremendous challenges in the teaching of music. Now you are teaching the children music; you are teaching them theoretically, you see? Even the melodica—they see them in the books with piano; they will be able to see them only in the books, but if they are lucky, they will be able to see them in the libraries or the museums or wherever in town. So we do have such challenges in terms of facilities now for music. In order to develop it further, as I have mentioned to you that one of our main aims is to produce classical musicians, you see? Now, if you're talking about classical music, it means that these people must be introduced to such instruments that assist to that.

Melikhaya Potwana: All right, as you are mentioning these challenges, who is inspiring you personally to teach this music?

Simphiwe Mgyue: Besides my Lord God, because I think he has been the biggest inspiration for me to continue because that is how I worship. But also, I have a mentor. This mentor is in the church. He's been a conductor, I think for about 20 years now. So he started mentoring me about five years ago there at church because I myself am also a conductor in the church. So he mentors me in that. And he knew that he has [been] a mentor to most of the youth, especially the singing youth at churches. He has been a mentor for all of us, this father. He lives in Mdantsane, does father Poswana, so he has been my mentor in music matters.

Melikhaya Potwana: Can you maybe tell us any songs that you love which touch you?

Simphiwe Mguye: Songs that touch me, some are gospel songs; then in terms of choral, everything in choral touches my soul, and also everything in gospel. Or in choir competitions, for I always make an effort because I even went to Old Mutual concerts [a series of choir competitions] so that I would accomplish because everything is choral or classical, even the CDs that I buy our CDs that are choral or classical. So the choral and classical music is my number one. It's what I do.

Melikhaya Potwana: Do you think this choral music played a role in the liberation struggle?

Simphiwe Mguye: The choral music—not itself, exactly. Because what happened, the choral music has taken some songs from [the repertoire of] the liberation songs. I think the choral music, instead of giving, it has gained from the liberation struggle with the people who were there. One of the instruments that was used in bringing liberation to the fore, it was that people were singing, you know, black people. They sang even though it was hard, even when there was a loss of life. They sing also when they are happy; everything they do involves songs. So in the end of the liberation struggle, people saw they were getting freedom. The choral music has gained those numbers. So some of them entered there because they love music—those were in the toyi-toyi—not because they were motivated by politics; it's because they love music. These songs that were

sung here are songs that are very nice, you know? And you can even sense that there is some kind of choral [aspect] involved in them, just like the one we just presented, *Senzeni na* ["What have we done?"]. If you hear its parts, it has parts that are choral, and you can create a choral song out of that. And some other songs that we can present here like *Sothi xa simbona uMandela* ["When We See Mandela"], those songs which have been adopted by today's youth, they sing them very nicely in choral [style]. So, I can say the choral has always been there although it was not recognized as part of the struggle. But it has always been there in the struggle of the black people. But it prevailed more when the fight for power was ending. The black culture prevailed which exposed choral music.

Melikhaya Potwana: From the days of father Tiyo Soga, coming to this present day that we are in, do you think composers have changed their way of composing music?

Simphiwe Mguye: It has changed with the influence of time because now our generation is advanced in such a way that this world has been united into one, so it is easy for one person to be influenced by different cultures all over the world. That you cannot avoid when you write music if your rhythm can be influenced—even the songs we were singing here by Bika T. because his family is a Scottish descent. You see, he is a composer from back in the day, but his mother was of Scottish descent. So you looked into such things; it has influenced his music. And the fact that he traveled a lot from place to place; he lived in Alice, he lived in Transkei, he again lived in this side [Zinyoka]. Things like that influence your music. Also, he learned Xhosa at an old age. He had already started

composing songs by them. So what I'm trying to say is: music—even by Tiyo Soga and other composers from the beginning—was influenced by the fact that their education was from the missionary schools. They were the most prevalent of the times of the past. So I am saying that their education was influenced a lot by white people, in particular, the British. These composers have the background and it influenced their music and you find that their rhythm is as much as it is a Xhosa or traditional beat, but at the same time it is influenced by other nations. So, I think that we are not that lost, even today, in as much as we don't have that rhythm from back in the day. They did that deliberately, but people from back in the day, they did not do it deliberately—it just showed itself.

Melikhaya Potwana: When you sing this music, where do you sing it? Do you sing it in competitions, or do you just sing it anywhere?

Simphiwe Mguye: The music we sing comes from any situation. There are situations of competition and I think that they have got an element of killing the music because of the pressure; but there are situations here in a choir as much as in a competitor in functions and all sorts of places like that and a choir can also serve its social responsibility by presenting at funerals, for example. When they arrive at the funeral their purpose is to comfort, so the songs they sing are going to serve as a comfort to that family they are presenting to, so what I am trying to say is that the choir does not only sing for competitions, but for different purposes and if you go to deeper and deeper, you will find that it's not any of these purposes; there is a purpose that we always run away from, or rather we shy away from, that is the purpose of worship, a purpose of relationship, a

purpose of faith which is served by the choir. So I don't know about many different religions, how they interpret the choir, but for us as Christians, it plays a big role and its role can only be linked to the role of the preacher. So what I am saying is: a choir takes on different roles in different places and in different situations; it's not only there for competitions.

Melikhaya Potwana: When I got here, people were singing and dancing. Is there maybe a style of dancing in choral music?

Simphiwe Mguye: No. Actually what happens when we were rehearse a beat of a song usually guides the choreography because the important thing in a choir is to do things in a uniform way. Your singing must be uniform and your voices also must combine—even the movement of the choristers. Sometimes, even if it's not a well rehearsed, but at least it can be done in a way that makes sense. It's easy for a chorister to move to a song that is familiar because they're used to it. As a result, I can even call a chorister from Mdantsane [Township] who I have never met and sing a song that is familiar to him. He won't even struggle to get into the choreography because we have common movements in choirs. Basically, we have music inside and this music is demonstrated in the movements that we make.

Melikhaya Potwana: Thank you. When you see yourself in the near future, do you think you will continue with choral music?

Simphiwe Mguye: I will never stop singing choral music. There is no situation where you can say choral music has promotions—and then if you are a conductor, I think that's the highest position you can reach—especially if you want to be hands-on with the choir because there are some positions, such as an organizer, a director. And those are on the sidelines of music. You can follow your career in those ranks even in the government. You can coordinate choirs all over, but my fear is that you won't be able to be hands-on in a choir because to me music is to be hands-on. Being there as one of the guys, I even sing in the background. I sing bass or tenor, then I assign one of the choristers to conduct the choir because that is how much I love music. So, as far as the future is concerned, I will be an old man with the children, singing in the choir.

Melikhaya Potwana: I thank you very much for your time. We have learned a lot about music today. I think that's about it.

Translators Note: We found it hard to translate the Xhosa transcript because the narrator used both [the English and Xhosa] languages, so that made it hard for us to understand exactly what he [was] trying to say. So we had to try and make sense of [some of the things] he said. This transcript is our best work.

-Punza Williams and Melikhaya Potwana.