

HOW MUSICAL IS MAN? by John Blacking. University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1973. \$6-95.

It is hard to know exactly what this book is trying to do. Is it a vindication of ethnic music? An enquiry into the musicality of man? A theory about the social importance of music? An argument against the view that cultural simplicity implies inferiority? A theory about the foundations of music? An attack on systematic musicology? Certainly the book — which originated as the John Danz Lectures at the University of Washington in Seattle — attempts too much too quickly. There are nevertheless a number of valuable ideas in it, and these it is necessary to recognize.

The best parts of the book are those where Professor Blacking restricts himself to concrete analyses of his own fieldwork or to discussions of the aims and methods of ethnomusicology. Most — possibly all — of this material has been presented by the author elsewhere, in his book *Venda Children's Songs*, in a series of articles for *African Studies* (1969), in articles for *African Music* and other journals. And there the material was presented more fully; here the arguments are usually set out too briefly to do them proper justice; and to anybody who has not encountered them before they will seem at times unnecessarily cryptic (one thinks particularly of the many diagrams and musical examples which have been simply lifted from those other writings and reproduced here without really adequate elucidation). Despite this weakness, enough is communicated to remind one that Blacking has many valuable things to say about the relationship between musical and social structures. There is, for example, the discussion of the way "the various styles of Venda music reflect the variety of its social groups and the degree of their assimilation into the body politic"; there is the analysis of the music and dance of the *domba* initiation school, which well illustrates how "formal and expressive elements may be combined to portray symbolically in music the essential themes of a culture"; and we are reminded that the relationship between the music of *domba* and that of *tshikona*, the national dance, reflects the function of the two types of music in Venda society.

For anybody involved in the business of musicological *explanation* the basic point at issue here is a vitally important one, and if Blacking's book serves to popularize it one will forgive it many of its shortcomings. The point might be elaborated as follows. Mere (orthodox) empirical musical analysis remains shackled to the phenomena immediately *given* to it in the surface structures. From this follow two consequences. First, such analysis can never hope to explain adequately the *process* by which those structures come into being. And second, the analyst can therefore never know whether the 'facts' with which he deals are truly significant or whether they are merely the invention of his own theoretical myopia. For, as Blacking shows, "the principles of the creative process cannot always be found in the surface structures of the music, and many of the generative factors are not musical" (p. 97). These factors, says Blacking, may be sociological, or cultural, or biological, or psychological, or purely musical — which of these, or which combination of them, is not to be assumed, but is in each case to be discovered anew. (Incidentally, the status of these various factors as distinct and separate entities is not wholly satisfactory; can we speak meaningfully of 'psychological' and 'cultural' factors *apart from* 'sociological' ones? And what, in the light of the present argument itself, might 'purely musical' factors be?)

Blacking's hope for the discipline of ethnomusicology is that if it can succeed in the task of analyzing ethnic music as the tonal expression of different kinds of social and cultural experience, then the explanatory richness of this approach might convince musicologists of the desirability of analyzing all music in the same way. It is thus "a discipline that holds out hope for a deeper understanding of all music". Clearly this remark is directed not simply at ethnomusicologists; it is aimed also at most of the academics of Western musical scholarship, who for all their historical awareness usually analyze musical works as things-in-themselves, existing outside of any historical context except an 'intrinsically musical' one. This procedure, the author suggests, may be one reason why the journals of European music are so full of contradictory explanations of the same music. Blacking also takes the best-known attempt in English to come to grips with the question of meaning in Western music—Deryck Cooke's *The Language of Music*—and neatly shows it to be spurious because "it is not sufficiently context-sensitive". No musical meaning is absolute even within the same European musical tradition. "Tonal music between 1400 and 1953 cannot be isolated as a thing-in-itself, especially if it is to be related to human emotions. The aesthetic conventions of the eighteenth century cannot be considered apart from the experience of the social groups who were or were not involved in them" (p. 72). The minuet, for instance, has "entirely different social and emotional associations before and after the French Revolution". Arguments such as these are so fundamental, and yet so seldom made and even less frequently understood, that anybody who is prepared to express them is to be congratulated. But it is precisely because they are a minority view that their articulation must be characterized by rigour, lucidity, and impeccable scholarship. Unhappily these are not the virtues of Blacking's book. Most of the argumentation is so lacking in precision of any kind, and so circular, that reading the book is an exhausting rather than an exhilarating experience. To an alarming degree the discourse proceeds by means of words and phrases such as 'may', 'seems', 'suggests', 'apparently', 'perhaps', 'in a sense', 'it is possible that', 'it seems to me', 'it is tempting to see', 'I do not see', 'I doubt if', 'I regard', 'I believe', 'I do not believe'. Then by sleight-of-hand the tentative ('may') is frequently read as the absolute ('is') and leads without more ado to a conclusion ('therefore'). An example at random: "Many, if not all, of music's essential processes

may be found in the constitution of the human body and in patterns of interaction of human bodies in society. Thus all music is . . ." (p. x). Key words are used in a somewhat promiscuous fashion: "An African 'folk' song is not necessarily less intellectual than a symphony . . ." (p. 113) — one knows what he means (that the process of generation may be very complex), but 'intellectual' is patently *not* the right word.

One consequence of the lack of rigour is that the argument tends toward inconsistency. On the one hand Blacking takes the trouble to show that music cannot meaningfully be understood abstractly, apart from its social and historical situation; on the other hand, he treats certain musical and other categories as abstractly as possible, by simply removing them from their historical and social context and regarding them (in the absence of any declared evidence) as though they were universals. Thus, for example, all music is 'a metaphorical expression of feelings'; all music is made by 'the composer', and always the feelings relate to his 'experience of his environment'. And evidently it is permissible to speak of "the complexity of the mind of man", as something in itself, apart from society (p. 35). Throughout the book, too, there is a harping on a somewhat mysterious 'biology'; music has 'biological' foundations, and 'biological' processes are at work in its creation. And so there may be; but Blacking is never explicit enough about what these are, or what his evidence is, to enable us to decide.

A bibliography would have been an advantage.

CHRISTOPHER BALLANTINE

DANCES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA. Produced and filmed by Gei Zantzing, edited Conley Benfield, sound Ruth Zantzing. 16 mm. colour, 53 minutes, commentary Dr. Hugh Tracey, interview with Andrew Tracey. Distributed through Pennsylvania State Psychological Cinema Register, Audio-Visual Department.

The film offers a program of recreational dances performed by groups of people who work on the South African and Rhodesian mines. Nearly all of the dozen or more dances are performed principally by men who represent various tribes. In a brief introductory conversation with Zantzing, Andrew Tracey states that his interest in recording dances and their accompanying songs includes revealing their meaning to Africans and to the Western world. While this film does not in any ostensible way deal with interpretation of the dance phenomena, there is much in this film to recommend. The dances are inventive, varied and enthusiastically performed. Particularly spell-binding are the intriguing Xhosa shaking dances, sensational high kicking Ndlamu dance of the Zingili Zulu and somewhat humorous tumbling dance of the Ndau.

Primarily, the film is important for two reasons. First it contributes strong evidence of the abundance, variety and distinctiveness of African dances. Secondly, for the dance ethnologist, it is a resource for the study of social change as reflected in choreographic transformations. While most of the dances appear to be based on or related to stamping as a main choreographic motif, there is much evidence of group and individual style and structure change partly due to the use of Western dress, shoes and modified traditional costumes (many of them provided by the mine authorities). Compared to the high energy level in the vigorous stamping Gumboot Dance of the Baca, the Yao tribe's Malipenga featured an almost dream-like restraint in the gentle tapping of the foot, almost a touching of the foot to the ground without transference of weight. The Bakumba step dance of the Shona/Karanga dancers presented another version of stamping dances. In this dance, especially as performed by a young woman, an intricate audible rhythm beaten out by the shoes, as the dancer moved toward and away from her dance companions, formed a main theme over which a kinetic harmony in the whole body flowed. Sometimes, it seemed unmindful of the music but always somehow belonging to it.

In making this film Mr. Zantzing was concerned with reporting each dance as completely as possible so beginnings and choreographic continuities could be studied. It is appropriate, therefore, to comment on the filming of continuous sequences of movement uninterrupted by non-choreographic close-ups. The sequences are of sufficient duration to facilitate recognition of recurring themes as distinguished from chance improvisations. Ground patterns, kinetic shapes, space patterns, effort flow and rhythmic configurations are clearly discernible to choreologists who wish to transcribe the dances into Labanotation or into another system of movement notation. This kind of motion picture might well help to fill a gap in the archives of available transcriptions and analyses of African dance music which so often record tonal and rhythmic structures in the music but neglect the very essential role of the dancing body as a prime instrument in the total music performance.

Certainly contraposition of polykinetic elements in the choreography and polyrhythmic configurations in the music can provide some new insights into the dances of African people. It may also help to illuminate the uniquely African-American phenomenon called Jazz Dance.

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