Learning Through Drum and Dance

"It is inside dancing and playing that laughter laughs"

[Dagomba proverb]

Approximately forty students participated in the course, "Music and Dances of Ghana", a four week intensive study of the traditional drumming, dancing and singing originating in the West African nation of Ghana, which was held during summer (1990) at York University in Toronto. The instructors, Abraham Adzenyah and Helen Mensah, taught, respectively, drumming and dancing, and shared responsibilities for the teaching of traditional songs. Ghanaians by birth, both were, for several years, leading members of the internationally renowned Ghana Dance Ensemble before leaving it to pursue professional careers and to further their education in the United States.

Perhaps our biggest challenge, as participants in the course, was the fact that we were taught wholistically, through an oral tradition. Helen avoided giving verbal instructions, for example, as she preferred to demonstrate, physically the dance movements, and have us repeat them over and over until they were perfect. Only when flagrant coordination problems occurred did she stop to analyze movements verbally. Helen also preferred to show entire dances or large sections from the dances instead of analyzing their individual steps in sequence, as often occurs in Western dance instruction. Abraham also taught in a wholistic manner. He insisted, for example, that all of the drummers (which varied in numbers from 5-12 depending upon what piece was being played) continue playing while he taught individual parts. This technique seemed to lessen tension on the individual being taught and improve his/her capacity to learn complicated rhythms.

The instructors' heuristic methods seemed to emphasize the group more than the individual. For example, Abraham constantly reminded us that it was more important to coordinate one's playing with that of the group than it was to develop a virtuosic solo technique. In addition, individual parts were usually taught only once by Abraham, thus leaving it up to the students to teach themselves. The instructors also emphasized the fact that in Ghanaian society (and in most African societies) most dancers must learn how to drum, and most drummers learn how to dance. Indeed, both Helen and Abraham were exemplary of this tradition as each could easily identify and correct any missed dance steps or incorrect rhythms in the other's teaching. Eventually, most of our class developed at least some skill in both disciplines.

In addition to the actual drumming and dancing, we watched films depicting traditional Ghanaian culture and had many informal discussions with our instructors, thus enabling us a uniquely personal, humanistic insight into the customs and values of the various traditional and contemporary cultures which exist in Ghana.

Not surprisingly, both instructors included what I would call 'Western' methods in their teaching of the summer course. These methods were, however, treated less favourably by the instructors and seemed, in fact, to have been used partly in order to conform with the academic environment of York University. For example, the printed handouts we received (which included explanations of the origins of Ghanaian dance-forms, a discography/bibliography and an "Introduction to African Music") were seldom referred to by the instructors, and therefore seemed more supplementary than essential to their teaching. We were also permitted to take notes. The instructors preferred, however, that if we felt we simply had to copy something down, it should be the words of the songs and not the melodies and rhythms of the music, as copying the latter, they thought, would 'confuse us even further'. (They were right, of course.) Abraham, who, incidentally, never writes down the music he composes, often jokingly referred to written notations as 'chicken scratches.'
The City of New York

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Clearly, it was as much the content as it was the effective teaching techniques which made the summer course at York University a challenging learning experience. The contents of this course (Ghanaian cultural values) were, in effect, re-created each time we rehearsed and performed the dances and songs. The traditional roles played by men and women in Ghanaian society were displayed, for example in the Siki, a co-ed dance in which the male dancers of our group were constantly reminded that they were too feminine and that they could not "stand like real men" (we tried our best); and the women that they were either too "soft" or too "hard". The latter example is understandable in light of the fact that the Ewe tribe of southern Ghana (of which Helen is a member), would consider a woman who dances "hard" to be sexually "frigid" or even infertile--a situation which would undoubtedly bring disgrace to her and her family. Each time the female dancers of our group digressed on this point they were reminded of their "sexual responsibility" to society through Helen's cries of "How do you expect to entertain your sweethearts?"

Certainly, the affective aspects of our learning experience were like any I had ever experienced in a classroom situation. Independent of the occasional religious and moral overtones from Helen and Abraham, the drumming, dancing and singing produced feelings of joy and fellowship which were perhaps most pronounced during performances, when the audience was invited to share in the singing and dancing of our final piece. It is important to note that the laughter and celebration which we experienced with the audience/patrons during these performances are feelings which manifest themselves in the everyday lives of most Ghanaians, and are not (as tends to be the case in Western cultures) restricted to performance situations.

Clearly, the "Music and Dances of Ghana" course was a challenging learning experience. By the end of four weeks we had not only shared in an unwritten tradition which emphasized group interaction and participation in a wholistic and humanistic manner, but had also experienced an assault of cultural values previously unknown to us--in a manner which seemed to celebrate life itself.

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Book Review.

THE SONGS OF WADE HEMSWORTH.

Hugh Verrier, ed. Illustrations by Thoreau MacDonald. Penumbra Press, Waterloo, 1990. 143 pages, paperback, distributed by the University of Toronto Press. (Re-hardcover edition, see below.)

If it can be said of any songs by a Canadian singer-songwriter that they have become part of our national heritage, then claim can be made for the songs of Wade Hemsworth. From such a small total corpus, what is especially remarkable is that so many of Hemsworth's songs are widely known: "The Blackfly Song" heads the list, followed by "The Wild Goose", "The Log Driver's Waltz", "Foolish You" and "The Land of the Muskeg" (and the Shining Birch Tree). Although The Songs of Wade Hemsworth contains but 15 songs, it represents a rich legacy.

The book was published in October 1990. This is an especially happy accident, for it would have been a birthday present for Hemsworth, who was born in October 1916. What is no accident, however, is that the whole book, from its design and appearance, to its comprehensive contents, radiates an aura of celebration. So, if not a birthday present, the text is as public acknowledgment of and tribute to an artist in song at the end of his 74th year.

The songs appear in sequence from page 19 to page 127, with an average 7.2 pages per song. Each song is given a full page for its title, one or two pages for the English text (with Hemsworth's chords) and the same for the singable French translation (without chords). Between the English and French translations is the music, set for piano; and with chords and tempi indicated, the settings occupy from one to five pages. In addition, each song has an introductory comment or comments by Hemsworth himself. Since the page size is 8.5 in by 31 cm (8 3/4 inches by 12 inches), the book is clearly designed for the piano.

The Songs of Wade Hemsworth is a unique book: it is both a book of song and a book of art. The designer uses the light-cream-coloured paper generously, and creates a comfortable rhythm of open and filled space. Complementing the songs in theme and mood, some 36 black-and-white images have been selected from archival holdings of woodcuts and drawings by Thoreau MacDonald. These make the book a pictorial gem. Although small images are elegantly placed to set off the typography, such as the canoe which decorates the title pages throughout, the two dozen medium and large-sized images are displayed to their own advantage, ten of them given a page to themselves.

The book is planned for both a general and a specialized audience, for those who are being introduced to Hemsworth and his work, for those who wish to share in this celebration, and for scholars who want all the relevant documentation available. It begins with a short preface by Hemsworth (in which he tells us that the idea for the book was Hugh Verrier's). This is followed by a two-page foreword by Kate and Anna McGarrigle, who share anecdotes of the folk scene in Montreal in the 1960's, and by a four-page introduction by Diane Larkin. Larkin sketches Hemsworth's life and puts the songs into that context. Before the song book there is a page and a half by Peter Weldon titled "Wade and the Guitar", quoting Hemsworth on guitar accompaniments and describing his right-hand technique, and finally there is a half-page note by the translator of the lyrics, Philippe Tatarcheff. Following the songs are eight pages by editor Verrier giving full information on the recordings, films and publications relating to Hemsworth's songs. Verrier acknowledges the assistance of Edith Fowke and Sheldon Posen in preparing his lists.

This volume is both a public book and a very personal one. It is public in that it appears with the help of the publishers' assurance from the programs of the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council and the Exploration Program of the Canada Council. It is personal, for Hemsworth's presence permeates all the verbal and musical material. In the piano music, for example, we are told it was prepared by Marilyn Mulkins with Wade Hemsworth. The arrangements are essentially his. In the commentary Hemsworth gives us little insights which help to explain the charm of his songs, such as the information that he consciously used aonsonance in certain of his lyrics. And in a more fundamental way it is clearly personal,

How do you expect to entertain your sweetherts?