

Elanga N'Kake singing to his craft

A dramatic soliloquy for solo percussionist/vocalist

One of the most touching and memorable musical performances I have ever had the good fortune to hear was that given by the Zairean musician, Elanga N'Kake, when he visited London's 'Music of the Royal Courts' Series at the South Bank a few years ago. He sang, simultaneously accompanying himself (with the most incredible virtuosity) on the mbira (a small thumb-piano with metal tongues). The songs he sang were simple moralistic tales, interspersed with fragments of gossip with his friend, the blacksmith, who would occasionally help him craft new tongues to try out .

The intimate dialogue between N'Kake's voice and his tiny, handmade instrument seemed to epitomise that rare and mystical union of composer, performer and craftsman, all in the same person.

Whilst my ideas for *Elanga N' Kake singing to his craft* were initially inspired by this performance, it was not until many years later that they were to achieve their final musical form. I had originally thought of an instrumentation of purely unpitched percussion instruments, but when Robert Van Sice suggested I write him a solo piece for quartertone marimba, I began to see the rather richer possibilities of combining this instrumentation with the marimba. In the instrumentation I finally settled upon, woodblock, bamboo, 2 small cowbells, djembé, 2 chinese tomtoms, tambourine, sandpaper-board and a small gong are all arranged tightly around the quartertone marimba to form a single 'hand-made instrument'.

The starting point of the piece is a series of seven distinct emotional 'characters' - quiet happiness, passion, curiosity, calm austerity, anger, mystery and childlike cheerfulness - these are presented in their simplest form in seven 'character-sketches' of varying length and instrumentation, which occur at irregular intervals throughout the piece. Between these comparatively static episodes come the six 'scenes' in which these characters are developed into a continuously unfolding drama.

As in many of my vocal works, the text is an invented language whose consonants and vowels are associated with rhythmic quantities, and are thus totally integrated into the rhythmic structure. However there are many allusions to words and phrases of real languages (including drum languages), the most noticeable of which can be heard during the opening character-sketch -

- "niño malo . . . niño ralo . . . niño vago! . . . "

- ["bad child . . . weird child . . . unpredictable child! . . . "]

Elanga N'Kake singing to his craft was composed in May 1993, and is dedicated to Robert Van Sice .

James Wood