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PEER REVIEW FOR : *Mayihlome-Aahwaan: a Dialogue Continued – a Musical Conversation between India and South Africa*

Mayihlome-Aahwaan is collection of eight compositions that were performed live. The occasion for the performance was the 18th Poetry Africa Festival, which took place in 2014, and was hosted by the Centre for Creative Arts in the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The show also reached Cape Town, where it was curated by Sumangala Damodaran and Ari Sitas. The broader context of the music captured on this CD is a collective work of poetry and music by artists from India and South Africa, which has been described as ‘a defiant celebration of hope in times of violence and war’ and first took on life under the name ‘Insurrections’. The project involves at least sixteen artists; this review focuses on the discernible contributions of Dr Sazi Dlamini (who plays bows, strings, winds, guitar and sings in the programme) and Prof Jürgen Brauning (who composes the electronic soundscapes), as well as their significance to the project more generally.

The project’s expressed intent – to voice dissent and legitimise defiance through celebration and musical remembrance – is well served by the *Mayihlome-Aahwaan* collection. The opening piece, ‘Malibongwe’, protests women’s erasure from dominant histories of resistance both in South Africa and in India. It begins as a haunting melody indebted to the traditional ‘Heer’ ballad from Punjab, transitions to English and a more contemporary groove to translate the awareness of gendered histories of oppression, and then to isiZulu to reassert silenced stories in the form of sung praises. The song is broadly popular in idiom, thus enabling its message to be transmissible to broad audiences. ‘Aaranyani’ follows as a paean to defiant women who are wrongly read as weak or inefficient. In an irrepressibly upbeat song, the musicians here enact the challenge contained by Vivek Narayanan’s poem, on which the song is based. ‘Women Dreaming’ continues the theme of gender and resistance, but does so in a different musical voice to the songs previously described, since it contains improvisatory passages that disrupt the ‘ease’ of singability but paint this evocation of womanhood and affirmation of life that the tune boldly proclaims.

‘Song for Ourselves’, an ode to the lost and missing that is loosely based on a poem by Walt Whitman, musically reinforces its radical spirit of remembrance through its employment of an ostinato figure that underlays that persists throughout. This song’s lyrics are in numerous languages that reflect the countries of the artists involved. What is noteworthy here is that each language’s peculiar sonorities and grammatical shape is retained; yet, it is simultaneously complemented by a music bed that remains coherent in its melodic shape. The militant ostinato or groove that grounds the music allows for this remarkable feat of intercultural collaboration.

‘Let Me Lie to You’ is a medium paced musical dialogue of the most haunting beauty. It achieves its unity not only because of its deft reinterpretation of images of violence into those of love, but also because, as a lullaby, the artists involved have teased out resonances between Kerala and isiZulu music (the latter is also an excellent example of certain black choral or group singing styles). Thus, although the piece is sung in English and Malayalan, it remains a single artistic statement. The eponymous tune is rightly named. As the notes explain, ‘It is the voice of a woman who has been condemned for dreaming and standing up to religious intolerances and whose final plea is for a re-gathering of energies, a *Mayihlome/Aahwaan* for personal and social freedom’. The piece is equally rationed into English and Zulu lyrics, with one being a translation of the other.


Perhaps the best compositions in this collection, for this reviewer at least, are ‘Migrant’s Lament’ and the closing tune, ‘Relah’. The first piece, ‘Migrant’s Lament’, is an imaginative musical translation of poems by the late black working class poet and hero, Alfred Temba Qabula. Qabula’s migrant lament, which he composed in 1984, is a descendant of a venerable, if tragic, tradition. Its poignant lyrics express the iniquities that rendered migrancy for the purposes of work and the depletion of wealth in the countryside. It addresses the loved one who (always) had to be left behind and, heartbreakingly, wonders what the migrant has done to deserve this fate. In other words, it rehearses the themes rendered audibly by earlier laments – such as ‘*Izikhalo zika Zuluboy*’ or ‘*Izikhalo zeGoduka*’ – as well as the numerous *maskanda* songs that speak to similar predicaments. ‘Migrant’s Lament’ however differs markedly from its forerunners. Sung in isiZulu by Dlamini, the depth of feeling is conveyed by its relentlessly dark texture, a darkness that is thickened by a musical accompaniment consisting mostly of instruments from India. These instruments convey the tragedy and pain of the sung narrative. But, this is not all. Remarkable here is how Dlamini adapts the singing style common in Zulu laments to enter into dialogue with the soundscape painted by the instruments. So effective is this piece of musical dialogism that, for me, it is a rare instance of ‘authentic syncretism’ in the album and prompts one to search for new terms like ‘Zundian’ or ‘Zindian’ to describe its aesthetic milieu.

‘Relah’ is similarly remarkable, although its transition from Indian Bihu rhythm to ghoema at the end is less than convincing. That said, this is a complex composition that is characterised by the harshly beautiful electronic soundscapes of Brauningger – showing off his genius for this type of composition to elegant effect. Even prior to the song’s poem that decries the destruction of forests and other natural life, Brauningger’s soundscape narrate a beauty on the edge of destruction – where it tends to shine most brightly.

Mayihlome-Aahwaan was recorded live, and the success of its experimentation is captured by the audience’s response heard at the end of each piece’s rendition. Indeed, I am convinced that the work has commercial viability and such could be pursued because what is presented here can only enrich the musical public sphere. Indeed, the compositions’ partial home in some African American popular music styles and spoken word poetry extends its possible audiences even further. It is also this factor that lends the album its critical and cultural significance. The critical significance is due to the album intervention in current discourses of the Indian Ocean and South

Africa's relationships with it.¹ Scholarship on this has called for new paradigms to think through transnationalism. Since black South African musics have long been associated with the black Atlantic, and have indeed contributed greatly to that discourse's musical contours, this work bravely departs from a long tradition to consider South Africa's other coastline. I would argue that this is a welcome and critical innovation, since it perhaps only in South Africa that the Indian Ocean and the black Atlantic may be so simultaneously recognised. More recently, scholars of 'Indian Studies in Africa' (for example in the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) at Wits University), have called for more culturalist analyses of these relationships to supplement historical writing – the dominant epistemological paradigm through which Indian Ocean studies have proceeded thus far. They have tentatively termed this 'Indian Ocean Energies', in order to capture the human agency that activates these networks. It is apt, therefore, that the title song calls for 'a re-gathering of energies'; for, in buttressing the best of the Indian 'subaltern' traditions and the best of South Africa's adversarial cultural traditions, *Mayihlome-Aahwaan* does just that.

Yours sincerely,



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¹ See Isabel Hofmeyr (2007) The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South – Literary and Cultural Perspectives, *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 33:2, 3-32