

A Rainbow of Songs: An Appreciation of the Texts of Selected South African Folk and Art Songs

Deirdré Blignaut-Rautenbach
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Introduction

Afrikaans, isiZulu and tshiVenda are but three of the eleven languages of our colourful South African Rainbow Nation. During a lecture-recital presented at Symposium VIII, Newfoundland, three traditional folk songs (with texts in tshiVenda, Afrikaans and isiZulu) arranged in a miniature set, *Zwikumbu Zwiraru (Three Calabashes)*¹, and a cycle of five short songs, *Vier Elemente en 'n Epiloog (Four Elements and an Epilogue)*² were performed and aspects of the music and song texts highlighted. The set of folk songs was arranged by composer Hannes Taljaard (1971–) and the song cycle composed by his compatriot, Niel van der Watt (1962–) with texts by the poet Daniel Hugo.

By singing their music and informally interviewing these two composers, I have discovered links between their philosophies and texts. Taljaard views songs as containers, somewhat like calabashes or clay pots in which ideas and experiences are stored and shared. Van der Watt believes that only in sharing the ideas and experiences built into his compositions they become art. Taljaard's ideas on the process of arranging or composing remind one of the processes of creating earthen containers, calabashes or pots – at the same time utility items and artefacts in the Venda culture. These ideas connect with van der Watt's views on the creative process of composition that culminates in art once the work is shared with a performer and then utilised as an artefact to communicate with an audience.

Van der Watt's songs are recreations of Daniel Hugo's brief set of poems on the four elements – water, wind, fire and earth – ending with a short, pensive epilogue. I realised that these elements form the basic ingredients of the process of creating clay pots – a cultural process that, for Taljaard, represent both the functionality and aesthetics of a song. His metaphor of songs as calabashes adds to this, because calabashes germinate from seeds, they ripen and dry (a natural process) and are harvested before they are decorated according to culture and individuality (artful actions). This process is reminiscent of the way in which the artist's sub-consciousness produces thoughts that grow and which eventually become art.

Taljaard and van der Watt's philosophies on composition and thoughts on their work were recorded during informal interviews on February 6, 2011 and August 12, 2011, respectively. From August 12 to 30, 2011, I communicated telephonically and via electronic mail with the composers. I have paraphrased their unique insights and together with some of my observations, these highlight compositional aspects and text interpretations that will provide a deeper understanding of their work.

The Composers

For the purpose of this paper, the composers made available the following biographies in August 2011:

Hannes Taljaard was born in 1971 in Venda, the northernmost region of South Africa. Under the influence of his creative mother, he very soon developed a keen interest in music and started

his formal music education as well as his career as young composer at the tender age of seven years.

His studies took him to colleges and conservatoires across Europe, where he also studied composition privately with Wim Hendrickx in Antwerp. He completed his doctorate in Composition under Professor Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph in South Africa in 2007.

Currently, Taljaard is senior lecturer in Composition and Music Theory (Analysis) as well as the composer-in-residence at the School of Music of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus. His compositions have been performed across South Africa, Europe and in North America. He has appeared as guest lecturer in Composition, Music Analysis and Music Education in South Africa (Johannesburg, Cape Town and Stellenbosch), Europe (Norway and Finland), the United Kingdom, North America (USA, Mexico and Canada) and Central America (Panama).

Niel van der Watt was born in Pretoria in 1962 and holds a Masters degree in Music Composition from the University of Pretoria (1992) and a Doctorate in Musicology from the University of South Africa (1996). Influential South African teachers and supervisors during his career include Berta Spies, Marietta Brits, Ella Fourie, Stefans Grové, Heinrich van der Mescht and Douglas Reid.

He has been teaching music at Pretoria Boys High School since 1987 and was appointed head of the music department in 1997. In 1994 and 2011 he was appointed moderator for the Gauteng Department of Education and the National Department of Education respectively.

Van der Watt composes and arranges music of diverse styles and for a variety of forces. Prospect Verlag in Germany published a number of his choir works. He has completed various SAMRO (South African Music Rights Organisation) commissions and the University of South Africa's Music Exams published some of his compositions. Complete CD recordings of his works include *Liedwerk van Klip* (recorded by the choir, Cantamus Corde), *Mass from the Southern Earth* (recorded by the choir of the University of Johannesburg) and *Chamber Music* (recorded by Annalien Ball and other South African artists).

Zwikumbu Zwiraru (Three Calabashes)

Melody is a form of remembrance... It must have a quality of inevitability in our ears.

– Gian Carlo Menotti ³

During the informal interview with Taljaard he expressed some insightful thoughts on his work. One cannot help but come to a deep realization of his understanding of philosophy and his sensitive appreciation of artefacts and processes in a multitude of cultures. I am privileged to share these ideas and philosophies hoping to create a deeper understanding of the composer's highly creative inner life:

“Most of the folk songs that I have arranged are lullabies. It is a genre for which I have a particular affinity. In the oral tradition of transferring stories and songs from mother to child, I find the innocence and spontaneity that marks this cultural process charming and also intriguing. The song and story undergoes subtle changes from generation to generation, but this does not seem to pose a problem – it illuminates the ease and naturalness in which this process is integrated in everyday life. These factors – ease, innocence and spontaneity – are the biggest

challenges when I arrange music. On the one hand I have a deep respect for the culture from which the folk song comes that I am arranging. On the other, I have a deep desire to go about the artistic process of arranging the song with the same spontaneity as that of the original act of creating culture.”

“For me, a song is strongly reminiscent of a calabash or clay pot. In pots – which I regard as utility objects **and** cultural artefacts – various consumables, such as water, grains and beer may be stored and shared. On another yet related level, songs are like containers in which we store and share ideas, experiences and identities. Similar to pots and calabashes, songs help to create culture and in the process enable individuals to become part of that culture. I love working with folk songs, and in particular lullabies, and to think of various ways of enhancing some of their qualities. I create different versions of many of the folk songs I arrange, for example; arrangements for solo voice and piano as well as solo voice and cello and guitars; a variety of choral arrangements; and an instrumental arrangement for piccolo, flutes and piano.”

“A Venda woman making an earthen pot or calabash informally adheres to certain basic cultural conventions of colour and patterns during her creative process. However, the lines and patterns are not meticulously measured; it ‘happens’ spontaneously. When the pots are fired some may break just like calabashes can crack when they dry. These living, organic processes produce very interesting and attractive concepts for me as composer. The pot created by a Venda woman carries her individual, but anonymous imprint, thereby making it a common cultural asset again. Similarly, with my arrangements I wish to create an artefact that may easily be assimilated into the culture from which I borrowed. In my mind the clear line between arranging and composing dissolves into a single, indistinguishable continuum.”

“The question of what may be regarded as mine and what remains the original cultural product is interesting. For example, the melody of the song “Yesu u funa” (“Jesus loves small children”) is not exclusive to the Venda culture. To regard it as such, merely because it is sung in Venda, would not be correct. Another example may be the song “Vhonani zwidenzhe” (“See the feet of the small children”) with the melodic pattern of ‘so-do-do-re-mi-do, so-do-do-mi-re’ which is a fairly common pattern in a number of folk songs. One often finds that intercultural borrowing and the recreation of ideas form part of our process of creating identity.”

“As a creative artist working with another culture’s products, I do not merely want to put sounds together; I wish to engage in another, more profound process with the material. My childhood memory of Venda is one of dense indigenous forests, water, and stories and legends about fantastical creatures inhabiting them. These mystical, magical ideas permeated my mind, shaped my thoughts and influenced my experience of the world. They still do. These happy memories still awaken a desire within me to recreate that magical world of my childhood. An opportunity arose when I was approached by a colleague to write the accompaniments for a collection of Venda folk songs published in 2004 as the beautifully illustrated book, *Venda lashu: Tshivenda songs, musical games and song stories*” (Kruger, 2004).

“During this project, it was not so much the sounds remembered from my childhood, but my memories that ultimately shaped the music. Memories became the sound of my arrangements with which I could recreate childhood innocence and the magical reality of my Venda. This reality is mostly depicted by the piano. The vocal part represents the human beings, specifically the children of this magical world. The style of these songs is simple and inherently innocent.”

I
Ihi (*Be quiet*)⁴

Ihi, ihi.
Mainda, mainda.
Nangwe ndo fura, ndi a la.
Ndi a la, ndi a la.
Thumbu ya tshixele mainda.
Vhomme vho ya fhi?
Vho ya mulamboni.
Zwikumbu zwingana?
Zwikumbu zwiraru.
U lilela ni?
U lilela u la.

(Original song text from Kruger,
2004, p. 30)

Be quiet, be quiet.
It is early summer, early summer.
Even though I am sated, I continue
eating.
I am eating, I am eating.
The stomach of the babysitter in early
summer.
Where has the mother gone?
She has gone to the river.
With how many calabashes?
With three calabashes.
Why does the baby cry?
She is crying to eat.

(Translation by J. Kruger, 2004, p. 30)

“This tshiVenda folk song has a very simple melody consisting mostly of the tonic triad. For me the key feature of this song lies in the child’s distressed question of where the mother has gone and the answer; the mother has gone to the river to fetch water in her calabashes. I found this action very significant. For me, water becomes a metaphor for consciousness or awareness. I already mentioned the symbolic meaning that calabashes have for me; so I interpret the mother’s going to the river to fetch water in her calabashes as her creative efforts to bring consciousness to the child and to her family. This is but a fanciful notion of mine and most likely not what the words ‘really’ mean.”

“In the arrangement for piano, I have used a canon with many voices in different degrees of augmentation to signify flowing water. In some of my other compositions my usage of canons in the context of water signifies consciousness. I wished to represent in music how our consciousness reflects the small tragedies of life as they are hinted at in the text of the folk song – a child’s separation *angst* and a mother being forced to leave her child in another’s care to fulfil her duties. More importantly, I also wanted to hint at the role that artful actions can play in furthering awareness or consciousness and how these actions carry a certain burden, something that I am quite aware of as composer.”

II
Siembamba

Siembamba, mamma se kindjie
Siembamba, mamma se kindjie
Draai sy nek om, gooi hom in die sloot.
Trap op sy kop dan is hy dood!

(Original song text from Vercueil, (2010)

Siembamba, mother’s little child.
Siembamba, mother’s little child.
Wring his neck, cast him in the ditch.
Step on his head, now he’s dead!

(Translation by the author)

According to an apocryphal anecdote, the Afrikaans folk song “Siembamba” gained significant meaning during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa. One popular belief is that the words of the lullaby were meant to banish bedtime fears of children during the war. The words of this lullaby are all but soothing; they literally mean to step on someone’s (or something’s) head with the intent to kill! However, historians do not attach any particular meaning to the apparent violence portrayed in the text. The words may be replaced with others that may fit the metre; the true significance of the meaning lies in the social and cultural interaction between people when this song is sung (Alberts, 1989, p. 26).

According to Alberts (1989, pp. 26-27) the word ‘siembamba’ may have originated from the native words ‘mba’ or ‘bamba’ in Angola (and in a variety of other African language dialects) referring to a type of dance. Research into Afrikaans cultural history reveals that variants of the folk song “Siembamba” evolved over more than 250 years since it was first played and sung in 1881 in the Huile region of Angola, where *Boer Trekkers* congregated to celebrate New Year (Alberts (1989, p. 27). Five variants, a lullaby; a song expressing youthful exuberance; a plea of slaves; a working song and, finally, an apocryphal variant, the meaning of which is connected with a mode of transport – the *ossewa* (ox wagon) – have been identified and associated with the folk song (Alberts, 1989, pp. 27-28).

“When I arranged “Siembamba”, the darker implications of the apocryphal anecdote inspired me to represent the opposite of consciousness; that glossing-over of the harshness of reality. In this case, not only the implied fear and trauma suffered during the war, but also the fears of all parents for the loss of a child prompted me to arrange the folk song in this particular manner. The arrangement in classical style reminiscent of Haydn has ironic intent. The playful nature of this folk song, and especially of this arrangement, is also found in “Ring-o-Rosies” – a very old children’s song believed to have originated in the dark days of the Black Death in Europe. The frivolity of my arrangement – an almost light-hearted scherzo – represents the façades we put on to hide from consciousness, or those aspects of life that we find insufferable. The repetition of the words “trap op sy kop” (“step on his head”) separated by a *pausa lunga* is meant to create the effect of ‘reeling’ that we experience when façades break down. The dissonance, manifested in an awkward open fourth in the third last chord, is a ‘slip’ and musically represents how death will slip through all of our attempts at covering artifice.”

III

Thula thu, thula mntwana (*Hush, hush my child*)

**Thula thu, thula mntwana,
thula sana.
Thul’ umam uzofika ekuseni.**

***Hush, hush my child,
hush my dearest.
Quiet now, your mother will be here in
the morning.***

**Khukh’ inkanyezi eholol’ ubaba.
Imkhanyisel’ indleziy’ ekhaya.**

***There is a light drawing you,
Showing you the way home***

(Original song text from Vercueil, 2010)

(Translation from Vercueil, 2010)

The isiZulu lullaby “Thula thu” has a profound emotional impact and moves audiences world-wide. Similar to “Siembamba”, this poignant folk song has a rich history and has been used as a powerful tool to comment on and interpret South Africa’s troubled past and present. One hears it over the radio, in concerts and in informal performances all over South Africa. With her sensitive interpretations and various performances of “Thula thu”, the late Miriam Makeba (1932-2008) was instrumental in giving this folk song an international iconic status and appeal. “Thula thu” was also part of the sound track of a South African film, *Dingaka*, directed by Jamie Uys (1921-1996). This 1965 film is about an African tribesman, Ntuku Makwena, who revenges the murder of his daughter. His crusades lead him to the courts of a government where justice for Blacks does not exist (“Dingaka”, (n.d.), first paragraph).

Taljaard has made different arrangements of this well-known song; two choral versions, a solo piano version as well as a version for piano, two flutes and piccolo. The same sound material but different timbres and colours characterize these arrangements. The solo piano arrangement is strikingly simplistic with the accompaniment part written in the G clef giving it a delicate, lilting quality. The gentle dissonance provides a contemporary feeling and interesting harmonies for the well-known melodic part. This arrangement is well suited to accompanying a solo vocal part.

Vier Elemente en ’n Epiloog (Four Elements and an Epilogue)

Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first song.

– Jorge Luis Borges⁵

Niel van der Watt’s passion for music is equalled by his passion for literature. An informal interview with the composer revealed an inner world of deep thought, a rich store of memories and inter-textual references as well as a generous, creative spirit, that finds joy in sharing his music. As an artist, I am privileged to sing his music. During the informal interview, van der Watt expressed the following philosophies and thoughts on the creative process that culminated in the song cycle *Vier Elemente en ’n Epiloog (Four Elements and an Epilogue)*:

“The five short songs making up the song cycle were commissioned by Woordpoort (a South African arts festival) in 2009. The texts, also commissioned, were written by the poet Daniel Hugo for the expressed purpose of being set to music. I read many of the proposed texts, but Hugo’s poems captivated me. Something about these short couplets seem to be singing; the texts are very lyrical.”

“I have interpreted the written text and utilised a particular sound palette that will hopefully also reflect the poet’s intentions. In the process of composing, I start with someone who expresses the need for a particular piece of music; the importance of the relationship with another human being initially surpasses the importance of the music. A composition ‘happening’ in isolation has no life of its own. My inspiration comes from people and my composition truly becomes a work of art in sharing it with the performer(s) as well as with the audience. The communicative value of music is of prime importance to me. In order for the listener to fully understand the song, I aim to make the poetic ideas accessible via the music as directly as possible. In order for these songs to be sung internationally, I have translated the poems into

English. Particular attention was given to appropriate vowel sounds so that the singing is as easy as possible.”

“The importance of nature in our African culture becomes evident in the extended metaphors in each successive verse. In the first poem water, dolphins and a seagull seamlessly flow into the second poem’s stormy air currents that are likened to a dove. In the third poem doves will no longer be able to sing in the fallen oak’s branches which were destroyed by wind. The wood is sawn and chopped – the tree destroyed – but fire will give warmth in the winter. The ants, a Biblical metaphor for human beings in the fourth poem, desperately and busily search for their nest only to finally arrive at a hole in the ground, symbolic of the final destination – the grave. The epilogue contains natural elements – gold, silver and quicksilver – and the medieval transformative process of alchemy. The transcendental idea of the poem is embedded in Christ, portrayed as the ‘true’ Alchemist who transforms all spirits called from water, air, fire and earth.”

I Water

**’n wierligte roering gaan
deur die waters van haar liggaam**

*a seaweed-like lolling
stirs in the waters of her body*

**verborge in haar klein gestel
begin ’n golf geruisloos swel**

*concealed in her tiny being
a wave begins to gently rise*

**en in die krul se klam omhelsing
duikel ’n dolfyn wat land toe dwing**

*and in the damp embracing curl
see a dolphin dives towards the land*

**oor die linnewit strand se gruis
breek die golf met meeugekrys**

*on the lily white beach, in force
breaks a wave while seagulls cry*

(Poem by Daniel Hugo)⁶

(Translation by the composer, Niel van der Watt)⁷

The first song (“Water”) – set in the key of A-flat major – is an extended metaphor connected to the water in a woman’s body giving life to the unborn child, as well as the ocean that supports all life. The musical motifs follow the building, breaking and ebbing of the wave; a cycle within a greater cycle of life. Rhythmic motifs consisting of quaver-crotchet repetitions create a lulling effect, similar to movement of water in the ocean. A single chromatic note in the gradually building piano part warns the listener of the approaching textual and musical climax embodied in the breaking wave.”

II
Lug (Air)

die duif kom op donker vlerke aan warrelwinde waai hy met hom saam	<i>the dove flutters closer in the gloom gusty winds impart impending doom</i>
---	---

langsaaam laat hy sy grys stert sak dan trippel daar pote op die dak	<i>ah, he lowers his splendid tail then pattering, tapping on the roof</i>
---	---

in al die geute tortel dit en om die huis lê donsvere wit	<i>in all the gutters hear the proof and in the garden gathers the hail</i>
--	--

op 'n boomtak later sien ons hom kletsnat en koesterend sit in die son	<i>on the branch we see him, there he is, fine but incredibly wet, in the sun</i>
---	--

(Poem by Daniel Hugo)

(Translation by the composer, Niel
van der Watt)

“The musical link to the second song (“Air”) is created by using the relative minor. Here, the wind that precedes the storm is described as a metaphorical dove, which drops its tail like a grey blanket resembling rain. Rapid, stormy sextuplets and various modulations represent the storm. As the storm subsides, we hear an augmentation of the same rhythmic pattern. The sudden appearance of the sun is depicted by a *tierce de Picardi* chord.”

III
Vuur (Fire)

hoor net die tandsaag stotter en brom tot ons gesprekke onvoltooid verstom	<i>hear how the band-saws stutter and wail and our discussions promptly has to fail</i>
---	--

die swart suidoos het gisternag 'n eik ontwortel met geheime krag	<i>the black south wind was foul last night and broke an oak with furious, secret might</i>
--	--

die klokborsduiwe het klaar getortel in die skemerkoelte van sy koepel	<i>the birds that nestled in shady branches they are murmuring quietly and forlorn</i>
---	---

winters wat kom sal uit die droë stam smeul en flikker die singende vlam	<i>when winter comes we will have wood enough, warm and pleasant the comforting flame</i>
---	--

(Poem by Daniel Hugo)

(Translation by the composer, Niel van der
Watt)

“The third song (“Fire”) opens with a *staccato* pattern in the accompaniment part. The rests used in this part mimic the sound of the stuttering chain saws which are used to chop up an oak felled by the strong southeaster wind. The destructive force of the wind becomes the first step in the process of creating warmth; the fallen tree becomes firewood for the winter. The melody in the tenor part of the accompaniment represents the singing flame. The climax of the song occurs in the final note (F5) which sets the word ‘flame’. Only now is the full meaning of the storm, tree and wood revealed.”

IV Grond (Earth)

**ons is maar net miere op reis
en elkeen dra bitter swaar sy kruis**

***our journey we make like the ants
we each have our burden, cross to bear***

**van takkies, blare, liddorings
na die hoop-van-baie-wonings**

***it niggles, injures makes us laugh
yet we yearn for better tidings***

**maar onwillekeurig val ons monde
oop
as ons doodmoeg staan voor die
poort**

***while nowhere we find it, rest is what we
need
when we realise: trumpets shall sound***

**ons het ten slotte gearriveer
by 'n gat in die grond, o Heer**

***we have, at last, arrived alone
at a hole, dear Lord, in the ground***

(Poem by Daniel Hugo)

(Translation by the composer, Niel van der Watt)

“In the fourth and last song (“Earth”) dealing with the elements, a Biblical parallel is drawn between the scurrying of ants and the often futile pursuits of human beings. In our earthly race towards the final destination – the grave, depicted as a hole in the ground – we carry useless baggage which is represented by the comical, motley collection of little twigs and leaves the ants carry. The schmaltzy Viennese character of the accompaniment soon becomes a sombre *dance macabre* when the finality of death confronts us. This is realised with sharp dissonance and a shift to the minor key. As we wearily approach the open grave, the closing chord without a third, eerily echoes the emptiness of the gaping tomb.”

Epiloog (*Epilogue*)

(Translation by the composer, Niel van der Watt)

“The idea of a cycle is a unifying force which is embedded in each poem. Hugo’s metaphors give each element both a contemporary and a universal meaning, and in the process portray the ultimate cycle of life. From a musical perspective the transformation from poem to song, reinforces this cyclic principle.”

This sample of cultural outputs of South African composers serve as a small, yet exciting example of the creative spirit at the southern tip of Africa. The treasure of vocal music of the various South African cultures provides a potentially rich source for research and inquiry. With

this paper, I hope to interest performers, composers and researchers alike to discover the wealth of artistic outputs and inspiration hidden in a variety of South African calabashes.

References

- Alberts, A. 1989. Siembamba: Die Heuningoes-dankdans, Deel 2. *Tydskrif vir Volkskunde en Volkstaal*, 45(1), 26-29.
- Dingaka (n.d.). Retrieved on August 14th, 2011 from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0059107/>.
- Kruger, J. (Ed.). (2004). *Venda lashu: Tshivenda songs, musical games and song stories*. Potchefstroom: Printing Things.
- Vercueil, A. (2010). *Suid Afrikaanse Musiekkonsert* [South African Music Concert]. Potchefstroom: Information Centre for Southern African Music.

¹ Unpublished. The manuscript was made available to me in June 2011 by the composer, Hannes Taljaard.

² Unpublished. The manuscript was made available to me in October 2009 by the composer, Niel van der Watt.

³ This quotation was taken from the following source:
2004. Music. *The Essential Dictionary of Quotations* (p. 283). Dingley: Hinkler Books.

⁴ Where applicable, all song titles in the original language will be followed by an English translation in brackets and italics. The original song text will be provided underneath the title, together with an English translation that is printed in italics. This method of quoting song texts is applicable to *Zwikumbu Zwiraru (Three Calabashes)* and *Vier Elemente en 'n Epiloog (Four Elements and an Epilogue)*.

⁵ This quotation was taken from the following source:
Jorge Luis Borges. (1977). *The Divine Comedy*. Retrieved on August 17, 2011 from http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jorge_Luis_Borges.

⁶ Daniel Hugo's poems were commissioned by *Woordpoort* (a South African arts festival) in 2008 and were set to music by Niel van der Watt. The song cycle was premièred in 2009 in Pretoria, South Africa. This song cycle has been made available to me by the composer and the executive of *Woordpoort*. These poems do not appear in any other publication.

⁷ Due to popular demand, Niel van der Watt commenced with the translation of his song cycle in August 2011. He considers it a work in progress. The final translation of the song cycle will be discussed with the poet, Daniel Hugo, before the formal release of the English version.