

Unforgotten Fantasies



Leslie Nkuna

**Leslie Nkuna
talks to Michael
Blake**

*This interview
took place on
Wednesday 17 and
Thursday 18
October 2001, on
two beautiful
autumn days in
Switzerland at the
home of Paul and
Paulette Robert in
the town of*

Morges (where Stravinsky had lived and composed Les Noces and Histoire du Soldat), and in the Grand Suisse Hotel in Montreux. Leslie's son, the tenor Musa Nkuna, had organised a tour of Switzerland for four South African musicians (the Blake Quartet) performing inter alia Leslie Nkuna's recently completed Unforgotten Fantasies.

MB: Leslie, correct me if I'm wrong, but this is probably your first composition for a group of instruments rather than for a choir, which is what I understand you've composed for mostly up to now? When I first heard the

piece at the third performance on Friday night I was delighted, because it seemed to me like you are very at home in this medium: it was like you'd been composing string quartets for years. Are there some particular qualities about the string quartet that you like and that you feel comfortable working with?

LN: Michael, I was very much acquainted to and I'm still very much acquainted to choral music which I studied long, long ago – years ago. I wanted to change the type of music that I compose and of course the string quartet that I have composed is the first one. It is not actually very much different from choral music, but then I tried by all means to divert from the choral side to string quartet so that my music could be played by instruments. I felt very comfortable with that, and I never imagined my string quartet to be sounding the way it is sounding now. It sounds very, very beautiful. Well this is a start.

MB: It's a very auspicious start.

LN: It's just the beginning of a new era in me. I was inspired to write something for string quartet by you, when we attended the seminar at the New Music Indaba in Grahamstown. You said we had to change the mode and the type of music that we are very much used to, of course the choral music. And I felt inspired.

MB: That's when we had Kevin Volans and the Duke Quartet.

LN: And you remember that I promised I'm going to write something for string quartet. This is it now. I have written one, and I have started writing more and more.

MB: So you're going to do a cycle, like Beethoven?

LN: Exactly. This is *String Quartet No 1!*

MB: Was it a problem for you not using a text?

LN: It was not difficult for me. Only if you've got sounds in your head, it's very easy for anybody to write a string quartet.

MB: Would you say that you're a composer, even if you're writing choral music, who thinks about sound in the first instance and the words are perhaps secondary?

LN: In choral music what I'm used to doing is, I write poetry first and then thereafter I set it to music. Firstly I read the poetry I've written, to see whether it is a mourning song, a happy song, whatever. Then I follow the sound of the lyrics themselves. Then in string [quartet writing] you realise you think of something, say for instance you think of your olden days or you think of the future or you think of happy things that you have encountered in your life. Then you've got those 'lines' and you compose something that fits. [You think] of a happy mood, then you do it.

MB: And the title, *Unforgotten Fantasies*?

LN: You see it is in relation with what has occurred in the past. One may not easily forget that. For instance I've stayed perfectly with my parents, I've stayed peacefully in the area in which I was born, and I stayed in a thatched hut. You know all those things and you cannot easily forget these things.

MB: Tell us a bit about your choral works, the inspiration for them, how you go about them and the kind of performances that you get.

LN: Well let me start here. I was born from a musical family myself, way back in the '40s, and at home we used to sing, we used to dance, we use to do everything that is in music; more especially we used the hymn book. My mother was a good singer, she had a very good soprano [voice], and then she used to teach us how to sing, and she used to teach me to sing tenor while she takes soprano or alto, whatever the part. So were my sisters too, they were given parts to sing, in a hymn. But from there we developed music at home. And sometime I was a shepherd: I used to look after cattle and donkeys. But then while looking after the cattle on the farm I used to sing and to compose very, very short songs. And I even taught my friends the music that I was composing. During the evenings we used to sing at home, and with my friends, I used to teach them the songs that I had composed. And then I developed a love of music in that way. Well now I have composed a good number of choral songs.

MB: What's a good number?

LN: Over 200.

MB: Sounds like a good number!

LN: (Laughs) And all these are choral songs. In Tsonga, and English and a few in Sotho. Others are a mixture of English and Tsonga and then I've got a few that are composed in multi-languages. Now I have just changed. It's not that I hate choral music. I still love it, I can still compose and I will go on composing it. I just want to branch out a little bit, to make a turn to a new trend altogether, and that is string quartet. As I have already started I think I will go forth.

MB: You mentioned that your choral pieces are often used for choral competitions.

LN: Yes, all over South Africa.

MB: So on average how many performances do you think you might have in the course of a year?

LN: You mean public performances?

MB: Well, in the competitions – they're public performances, aren't they?

LN: Almost every year my songs have been prescribed in competitions, and some of the competitions I don't even know. I just hear from the radio, the TV, that there was a choral performance somewhere.

MB: So you sometimes hear and see them on radio and TV?

LN: Definitely yes. And we've got organisations like PEU (Professional Educators Union) which organises choral competitions. And that goes as far as the highest body of competition for the whole of South Africa. All the winning choirs go and compete. That is one of the competitions. We've got [many other] competitions.

MB: I imagine that your music probably gets as much if not more currency than many of the composers that are based in the universities. You probably have as many performances, but perhaps you don't see as many royalties. I think there's still an imbalance in the system there.

LN: Most competitions don't declare what they're doing, so maybe SAMRO doesn't know about it.

MB: That's something that needs to be looked at, because I'm sure that when UNISA has their piano competition in Pretoria, and everyone comes along and plays the new commissioned piece by Mr X or Y, I'm sure they get all those royalties, because UNISA will declare everything. So it seems like some kind of system needs to be put in place for composers whose works are sung so often in competitions.

The next question is to do with the character or the nature of your music. I think most people who have been at the concerts [this week] would say that your music is very definitely South African or African. What you think makes it so, and is this unconscious or is it very consciously something that you do, or did that just happen?

LN: Yes it was just the way it had to happen: I did not do that consciously. In fact the type of music that I always compose, like the music that I have just composed for string quartet, reflects, depicts the type of rhythmic pattern of where I come from. That is African or South African, whatever. You see it is actually the rhythm that matters in the music, the rhythm of the song, of the music itself. And that alone brings out the picture of an African type of music.

MB: Do you actually start with rhythm, or do you start with melody?

LN: It's the melody that comes. And it comes automatically together with the rhythm. The melody doesn't come into my head alone, but it comes with the rhythm. I do everything the same time, because whenever the sounds of music come into my head, what happens is they come in either two parts or four parts, sometimes in

three parts. The three or four parts go together in my head, then I start writing. You find that when I write, I take both ... what do you call it?

MB: Call and response?

LN: Call and response. It's a call and response system that happens in my songs, not disregarding it's the bass that plays the most important part in the whole music.

MB: Do you get inspired when you sit down to compose or do you sometimes get inspired when you're walking down the street or in the middle of the night?

LN: Well, songs come to a person at any time.

MB: Do you sometimes wake up with a tune in your head?

LN: Yeah well I sometimes dream. And I have a very cautious wife who always puts a pen and a paper right on the headboard every night. She knows that I always dream and sometimes I sing aloud. And then after dreaming I will wake up, and then as soon as I wake up there is a pen and a paper. We just do it like [that]. Well more especially when I'm alone, driving alone, yes beautiful sounds come ... but it's not as good as when I dream. When I dream then everything comes well.

MB: Did *Unforgotten Fantasies* come in your dreams?

LN: Yes, some of them, some of the sounds they came into my dream. And another thing you see is that I'm very, very fortunate I think. My mother is long dead, 1965. Whenever I'm asleep sometimes, she comes, she comes with a good music, I can hear her singing. I think that is because those sounds that she sang some years back while she was still alive, always come back, always come back in my head. They come in the form of a dream.

MB: Leslie, what are you up to next as far as composition is concerned?

LN: It's a string quartet, but it's not another string quartet alone. I've already started with a song cycle consisting of a string quartet with a tenor. I think in two or three months from now I will have finished it. Then I dwell again on string quartets. You know there are many sounds that come into my head about the string quartet, and they disturb the course of the song cycle, but I'm trying to eliminate some of them so that I concentrate on one thing at a time. However I'm not going off the choral. I'll still pursue the choral side.

MB: For your choral pieces do you use tonic sol-fa or staff notation?

LN: There's quite a difference I've learnt because Musa has taught me a lot about that, for him having studied music so much. I'm used to composing in tonic sol-fa because that reflects the background where I come from.

I didn't learn staff notation. And now I'm a little bit slow at writing staff notation, but then what I do is to write in tonic sol-fa most of the songs. Thereafter I write in staff notation, the same songs in staff notation. So it becomes a little bit easier for me.

MB: What system did you use for your string quartet? Did you write that directly in staff notation?

LN: I'm a little bit slow as I say. That's why I say it takes me some time to finish a song in staff notation, to finish a piece of music, because in staff notation I'm a little bit slow. But then if I have to be a little bit faster, then I will have to do it in tonic sol-fa, and it works.

MB: I mean there's absolutely no reason why you can't write a string quartet in tonic sol-fa, except that the players won't be able to read it. But then you could always translate it afterwards.

LN: But it becomes easier thereafter. After writing it in tonic sol-fa then you transcribe that into staff notation; it becomes very, very easy.

MB: Well I mean once you've written your fifteenth string quartet, you'll be very fast.

LN: I think so!