

The Rough Joy: Handel in the Congo

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Western classical music is often thought of as something placeless: a grammar of sound that belongs everywhere and nowhere, drifting free of soil, climate, history, on some variation of Henry Russell Cleveland's axiom from 1835, that "Music begins where language ends." Thanks to this pre-modern response to our post-modern doubts, there is, we tell ourselves, a Schumann for all seasons. Africa, by contrast, is so often burdened with place—with heat, rhythm, drum, dance—that the meeting of the two is treated as an oddity, a contradiction, a curiosity to be explained away. Of course, if one believes the first instance, the second is a pretense. What surprises the outside observer is not that African children might take up cellos or clarinets, but that we ever believed such instruments were not already theirs. On a sultry November night in Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo, as I sat listening to the Orchestre Symphonique des Enfants de Brazzaville (OSEB), I heard not an imitation of Europe, or a cultural stunt, but something livelier and more curious: classical music stripped of its manners and reintroduced to the rough joy of making sound together.

The orchestra is the brainchild and endeavor of Brazzaville-born pastor Josias N'Gahata, a multi-instrumentalist whose previous musical experience had only extended to leading church choirs. "I had no experience in symphonic music," N'Gahata told me recently from Hamburg, where he is studying for a doctorate in theology and music. "It wasn't until after my classical music training at the National Institute of Arts in Kinshasa in 2013, where I specialized in composition, that I considered creating a symphony orchestra in Brazzaville." Across the swift, brown water of the Congo River, Kinshasa, capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, lacks many things that Brazzaville, a smaller and more peaceful city, enjoys. It does, however, have the Kimbanguiste Symphony Orchestra, which, since its founding in 1994 by an airline pilot, has been Central Africa's only professional (and internationally touring) orchestra.

Kimbanguiste served as a model, but N'Gahata had a feeling that although an adult orchestra might start with vigour, it would shortly fizzle away to nothing. "I thought it would be better to train our own musicians," he said. "That's why I chose to work with children. Because if children persevere with something, they always end up succeeding." Though somewhat sentimental, this was the kind of enthusiastic idealism I rarely encountered in professional musicians, whose years—often a lifetime—in the gears of the

classical machine can lend them a discordant tone. Once he returned to Brazzaville, N’Gahata recruited amateur musicians Tanguy Fouemina and Privat Babingui, and, in 2018, they appealed to the Goethe Institute, via Brazzaville’s German Embassy, for support. Through those channels, the group received its first donation of 8 violins, 2 violas, 1 cello, 1 double bass, 2 flutes, an electric piano, and 22 music stands.

Those items and more, including woodwinds and brass, are now kept at a high school in Brazzaville’s Baongo district, where the group rehearses on a weekly basis. With N’Gahata in Germany, Fouemina and Privat share the leadership role. Soft-spoken and gentle-mannered, Fouemina, 53, is in his everyday life a practicing otolaryngologist at the Hôpital de Référence de Baongo. He arrived at the rehearsal directly from the hospital, wearing dark trousers and an orange dashiki, a hip-length shirt. At times, his glasses would slide down his nose; rather than push them back up, he would simply tilt his head to alter his angle of sight. What he lacks in formal musical training, Fouemina makes up for in experience. He has played music since childhood, taking piano, guitar, and saxophone lessons from his choirmaster father. His three children are also part of the orchestra; he arrived with his two youngest, Vencianne, a 12-year-old violinist, and Elza-Raphaël, a 14-year-old flautist.

The room allotted for rehearsal was small and stuffy, crowded with chairs and music stands, and lit only by two bare lightbulbs. Against one wall were stacks of instrument cases for violins, cellos, double bass, horns, and guitars. Mr. Privat, the group’s provisional luthier, was roughly restringing a violin. Shoved into bookcase were innumerable sheaves of loose sheet music. A large map of Germany hung on the wall, an homage to the group’s connections to that country, as well as advert posters for previous concerts—the group has played at some of Brazzaville’s best venues, including the Palais des Congrès, the Préfecture de Brazzaville, and the Institut Français du Congo. The orchestra performs two or three shows per year, to audiences who may have had little to no contact with European music.

Rehearsal was set for 5 p.m., but it took another hour for 20 students to trickle in. Most of them, when they arrived, pulled a case from the stack—mostly violins, a couple flutes, a double bass—and began noodling away without tuning. They held their instruments loosely; each bow hold was unique and original. A young boy, Benjamin Bassoka-Sika, age 11, took his place at the piano and began playing the first phrase of Bach’s “*Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*,” ad infinitum, a sheepish frown never once leaving his face. Finally, Fouemina called the group to order. They made an attempt to tune using an “A” from his phone and set into Vivaldi’s “*Concerto No. 9 in D major*.”

Compared to other youth orchestras I had seen, it was a scene of slapdash chaos. Notes wavered. Entrances were late. Phones chimed. Idle students chatted away. One violinist stopped, corrected her fingers, and tried again from where she left off, now three measures behind the group. Meanwhile, the *pwong-pwong* of Mr. Privet tightening strings cut through the music. During every available moment of silence, and sometimes when the orchestra did not require him, Benjamin would begin on either “Jesu” or “Für Elise” at breakneck speed. Between pieces, several of the violins swung into the theme from “Pirates of the Caribbean.” On occasion, Fouemina would motion for silence; other times, he would simply let the clatter ebb to a natural calm before counting onto the next piece. It was, I realized, a fatalist’s orchestra—it sounds how it sounds. What mattered was not the sound itself, but the insistence behind it, which carried touches of seriousness, curiosity, and an emerging sense of ownership.

Fouemina’s music stand revealed a lack of aesthetic hierarchy: “Amazing Grace,” a condensed version of “Swan Lake,” Handel’s “Messiah,” Charpentier’s “Te Deum — Prelude.” Their repertoire was not strictly Eurocentric; after the Vivaldi, they played from memory an untitled work Fouemina introduced as “a Chinese piece,” which sounded duly pentatonic in tone. N’Gahata, who curated the list, also included a large selection of his own arrangements and compositions, these being largely *rumba congolaise*. “Classical music can always be adapted to any genre,” he told me, adding that part of his mission is “the universalization of traditional music from Congo and Africa, and particularly Congolese rumba.” Rumba, a popular, danceable genre heavy on heptatonic basslines and polyrhythmic drumming, is rarely out of earshot when walking on the streets of Brazzaville. (N’Gahata’s compositions made for softer, easier-listening than much of the popular rumba, centered more on repetitive piano lines and sinuous string melodies.)

I asked the students how they perceived the differences between Congolese and European music, and from the hullabaloo the question raised, I picked out Merun Elysé, a 21-year-old whose borrowed violin had “15” scrawled across its face in black marker. “Classical music is so slow,” he said. “It’s so calm compared to local music!”

“Classical music is more rigid and scientific,” cut in Stephano Huldruche, a 16-year-old violinist seated beside Merun. “Our local music is looser, more open.” There was, no doubt, a cultural aspect to this consideration of classical music as “scientific,” just as there was when Fouemina declared the genre imbued children with discipline and concentration (neither of which was on high display during the rehearsal). Pitted against the largely improvisational and communal rumba, classical music, with its written instructions for tempo, dynamics, and tightly interlocking articulation, may seem overly calculated, if not expressively limiting.

Come the end of the rehearsal, I was surprised when only a few students took their instruments home. Didn't they practice?

I asked Nissi Bokazolo, a tall and well-spoken 18-year-old flautist, who stood out as a leader among the group. "We have no time to practice at home," he said. "After school, we have homework. It's very difficult." I was suspicious of this reasoning, given the sheer number of children I saw out and about on Brazzaville's streets at any given time. A greater barrier seemed to be that many youths don't own their instruments. Those belonging to the OSEB, including those gifted by the Goethe Institute—all of them marked, like Merun's, with numbers—remained in the practice room. When Fouemina told me that students may take them home in the lead-up to a concert—Fouemina's daughters, it might be noted, owned their instruments, and left the rehearsal with them—I suggested that the opportunity to practice daily would no doubt be a greater advantage. Looking at me down his tilted head, he shrugged, and the point drifted away. It was one of those puzzles of Congolese life that few people have an answer for, and even fewer think to question.

The Republic of Congo, like the neighboring DRC, is rich with natural resources. And, at a glance, Brazzaville shows signs of prosperity. Two new steel-and-glass towers dominate the riverfront, one a posh Hilton hotel, the other an office building; at night they glow with the likeness of President Denis Sassou Nguesso. Along the high streets are blocks of luxury condos, clothing shops, and patisseries that wouldn't be out of place on Paris' Rue Saint-Honoré. Men in extravagant suits sashay down the street with aplomb. Amid the growing suburbs, the 60,000-seat Kintélé Stadium, built for the 2015 All Africa Games, shines like a golden wedding ring.

But look again: the Hilton is near empty. The condos were never inhabited, and the windows are broken, the walls inside covered in mold. The well-dressed men are part of a cultural clique known as *sapeurs*, whose conspicuous consumerism often sends them into debt. (One bragged to me that his ensemble cost \$12,000 US dollars. His salary, he said, was somewhere around a quarter of that.) The stadium, which cost a reported 380 billion CFA francs (€500 million), has been shuttered for ten years, while children play football in goat-nibbled vacant plots. Two civil wars in the 1990s left millions displaced and infrastructure damaged; today, the roads are broken, the sewer channels open, the electricity heaves with blackouts.

Here, where the average monthly income is approximately 120,000 CFA francs (around €200), classical music can be an expensive pastime. Private lessons can cost upwards of 6,000 CFA francs (€9) per hour. Instruments are difficult to come by locally and

are generally of low quality. Even then, costs hover around 90,000 CFA francs (€140) for a violin, 150,000 CFA francs (€230) for a flute, 200,000 CFA francs (€300) for a French horn, and 700,000 CFA francs (€1,070) for a cello.

To help the orchestra cover costs such as repairs, photocopying sheet music, and renting the rehearsal space, members pay 5,000 CFA francs per month. Money is a preoccupation for N’Gahata. “Everyone keeps praising the orchestra’s initiative and performances,” he told me. “Unfortunately, no one or any organization is approaching us to offer support.” However, he revealed that the group receives €100 per month (roughly 65,000 CFA francs) from the Eppendorf Symphony Orchestra of Hamburg.

And there has been critical educational support, mainly through the [Senior Expert Service](#) (SES), a German program that sends experienced professionals around the world to volunteer their particular skills. Once a year, several musicians from Germany spend weeks at a time in Brazzaville, offering both instrument-specific and general musical pedagogy. I spoke over the phone with Ernst Bechert, a German composer and pianist who has provided musical instruction to the group since its inception. “In the beginning, the kids could barely read the notes, and were absolute beginners on their instruments,” he told me. “Very soon you could see that some of the kids were more gifted, and would advance more quickly.”

“They love to play,” he went on. “When we give lessons, they never say, ‘Oh, I’m tired, I want to go home,’ or something like that. For example, with the piano kids, I usually have a rather big group of 15 or 20 little kids, and everybody gets only 15 minutes to play. But, after this, they sit at a keyboard and play another two hours or something like that. In a way, they are the perfect students.”

Henriette Mittag, a violist with the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra, has travelled to Brazzaville with the SES program, tutoring the OSEB in string performance and instrument repair since 2021. She praised N’Gahata’s vision and the children’s enthusiasm, but felt the habitual disorder of the rehearsals didn’t foreshadow great musical improvement. “When there are three, four weeks of rehearsing every day, with actual professors who can teach the instruments, there is huge progress,” she told me. “The children are very good with rhythm, for example, but intonation is so horrible—you cannot imagine! They really want to learn, but they don’t really know how to learn. They try to catch everything; they hear immediately, but they don’t know that it is a process. I really find it amazing how they keep going. Even so, I feel it falls apart a little bit more during the year.”

The laissez-faire attitude that both purges any sense of immediacy from Congolese life can feel incongruous against the world of classical music, which operates on principles of exactitude and diligence. As a Congolese friend explained to me, “You Europeans have the

watches; we Congolese have the time.” Mittag related to me an experience with Mr. Privat: “When we went there, it was clear that he had lessons with me,” she said. “When I arrived, he greeted me, but the next day he disappeared for two weeks. We were like, ‘What’s wrong? Where is he?’ And then someone told me, ‘Yeah, he has a project with a choir.’ But no one told me! He was just gone. And this is how it usually goes.”

During my time in Brazzaville, I had a similar experience when I followed up with Fouemina, hoping to see the orchestra at rehearsal again. To my surprise, he mentioned the group would that day be performing a concert. Days before, there had been no mention of this. The concert was slated to begin at 4 p.m. at the Église Évangélique du Congo, in the city’s Ouenzé district, and managing expectations, I left my hotel in central Brazzaville at 2 p.m. It was a day of intermittent but heavy rain, and the traffic, normally slow and savage, had become slow and tepid, every driver creeping over the large pools of water that mottled the road, lest they hide a cavernous pothole. Traveling this way, the five kilometers to Ouenzé took almost an hour. Outside the church, alongside a gutter that threw up a reeking pong, a group of children made a game of flicking small fish out of the grey sludge with their bare hands.

At 3, I was the first audience member to arrive at the Église Évangélique. The orchestra was beginning their sound check under Mr. Privat (a prior engagement meant Fouemina would not be there). The students looked smart in their concert apparel: white dress shirts under red vests with black pants. Several sound engineers milled about, placing microphones and running cables to large amplifiers that flanked the performance area—the half-moon of the orchestra, several choir risers. Mr. Privat lifted his baton—a thick, hand-carved stick of wood—and, without tuning, the group charged into a trial run of “Magnifique est le Seigneur.” The result was acoustic trauma; the sound, doubled through the amplifiers, pinged off the steel girders holding up the tin roof, knocked against the empty pews, and was sucked through the ventilation holes in the concrete walls. Mr. Privat turned to the engineers and flashed a thumbs-up.

Rehearsal over, many of the students continued to practice, energized by the coming concert. A few ran through a slippery rendition of “Pirates of the Caribbean.” Benjamin, at an electric piano, played a thunderous “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,” until someone graciously unplugged the damned thing.

I fell in beside Mr. Diahoua Garcia, a piano teacher at Brazzaville’s École nationale des beaux-arts Paul-Kamba, who teaches some of the OSEB students, and had been brought in as a ringer to perform some of the more complex piano parts. I asked him about the

challenges of teaching classical music in Congo. “Rumba,” he said, “Tout c’est rumba!” He shook his head forcefully and slapped his fist into his open palm as a kind of conversation-ending gesture. I broached the subject of nervousness—if the church was full, it would be a performance for hundreds. “They are not nervous. They have performed with the president sitting right there,” he said, and karate chopped the air, as if the matter needed no other explanation. “Right there—the president!”

I wandered off to find Nissi. Of all the students, he showed perhaps the most promise. His tone was clear and fluid, and both Bechert and Mittag had singled him out to me as a distinct bright spot among the group. “He’s so good,” Mittag told me. “He sees his world there with a bigger mind.” During one of her teaching stints with SES, the young flautist had asked Mittag about studying music abroad. “I told him, ‘Yes, of course, but be careful.’ I feel that if he actually starts to study somewhere...it’s just so, so hard to keep your mind and not get broken in the classical music world.” Nissi and I discussed this—he would be graduating high school soon, and decisions about future studies loomed. “For now, I will stay here and focus on computer engineering,” he said. And would be continue with music? “Of course—I feel great responsibility to represent my country and show that we, too, exist within the world of classical music. It’s everywhere, isn’t it?”

4 o’clock came and went; there was hardly anyone in the church, and the choir hadn’t arrived. I checked in on Mr. Privat, who explained, “La pluie! La pluie!” The occasional deluge rattled onto the tin roof, and was still delaying traffic. I consoled myself with the idea that the processes of the Congo bore similarity to other processes across Central Africa, which were only performed with a touch more hysterically sluggishness than those I had become accustomed to after years of living among the Portuguese.

Finally, at 6 p.m., enough of the chorus members and a critical mass of audience had arrived so that the concert could begin. The orchestra members took their seats, and the choir, some 70 singers strong, filed in behind. They began, and the chorus of “Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates,” from Handel’s Messiah (listed as “Dongika ntu (Porte des cieux)” in the handbill), filled the hall, driven by the choir’s powerful harmony. And while Mr. Garcia’s electric piano could be heard buzzing away, as could the clarinet, whose squawking fed back through the speakers, much of the orchestra’s performance was lost beneath the enormity of the voices, including Nissi’s beautiful flute. Still, the students played with a wild looseness; leaning gleefully into the notes—whether they were in tune or out, it hardly mattered. The audience certainly didn’t mind, so passionately invested they were in the performance. When the chorus sang “The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory,” they exploded with rapturous ecstasy, spilling into the aisles, throwing up their hands and applauding, screaming, crying, shouting out “Oui! Oui!” It was quite unlike any performance of the

Messiah I'd ever seen, and it was difficult to imagine the same thing happening at the Concertgebouw. I thought of the reserved delight I had seen expressed during classical performances in Europe and North America, which had felt based more in the exceptionalism, or in the perceived technical perfection, of the performance. This was something else. Over and above the religiosity of the music, it was a celebration of communalism. Intonation and structure be damned; togetherness was all that mattered, and the music had made it happen. Beneath it all, the OSEB played on, the strings sawing away, the woodwinds blowing, the brass puckering, all of them adding to the wall of sound and rhythm. The song ended, and the audience's standing applause transitioned from percussion to ovation. Emboldened by their role in this collective thrill, the orchestra, smiles pinned to their faces, eyes lit with excitement, stood to bow, though there were five more pieces yet to play.