

*...drowned out...* is built around four albums, three of which I have stumbled upon in the crates of second-hand record shops, in London. It seeks to illustrate some processes – most of which are unconscious – that feed into clichés and deep-rooted prejudices, mixing ‘superiority’ and ‘condescension’ of the West over the ‘rest of the world’. Those different discographic discoveries triggered the idea of this sound project, which is to bring together these scattered items, or traces of a political and ideological domination attitude as well as of a cultural appropriation mindset. *...drowned out...* questions those recordings as well as the discourse and rhetoric around them. The underlying ideal of universality and notions of authenticity, folklore, and preservation get shaken by this shift of perspective.

*Missa Luba* (1958) is the first record I picked up. According to the description on the cover, it is ‘a mass sung in pure Congolese style’. The text at the back flaunts both the Belgian priest who wrote the piece and the choir singing it – *Les Troubadours du Roi Baudouin*<sup>1</sup> – while also underlining the absence of any kind of Western influence in the music itself. Released under label Philips (UK, ref. BL 7592, stereo), this record is considered one of the first world music successes. It has become the soundtrack of many films such as Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) and Lindsay Anderson’s *If...* (1968). The album cover is also seen in Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), as Alex is wandering in a record shop. Additionally, rock band *The Clash* quotes this record in their song *Car Jamming* on the album *Combat Rock* (1982)<sup>2</sup>.

*Misa Criolla* (1965) is another mass, also released by Philips (Netherlands, ref. 842 763 PY, stereo), which follows *Missa Luba*’s principle of a traditional mass – the success of the latter probably encouraged Philips to turn to ‘other territories’ again and renew their experience. This time they looked towards Argentina, Latin America (as well as Bolivia, though only Argentina is mentioned on the cover). Composer Ariel Ramirez (1921-2010) is believed to have written this piece – covering five parts of a catholic mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei) and bringing together rhythms, forms and instruments of

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<sup>1</sup> Congo was a Belgian colony from 1908 to 1960. Yet, let us not forget that before that time, the country had been the private property of Leopold II King of Belgium. He had acquired it at the 1885 Berlin’s Conference. From this perspective, the name of the choir, referring to King Baudouin (who reigned over Belgium from 1951 to 1993) takes on a different meaning, which is also accentuated by the medieval term ‘troubadour’ that alludes to the idea of a royal court...

<sup>2</sup> Title *...drowned out...* comes from this song: “*Now shaking single engined planes / Traffik-king stereos from Cuba / Buzzed the holy zealot mass/ And drowned out Missa Luba (x2)*”. In English, ‘drown out’ also evokes the idea of one sound covering another and making it hard to hear, almost inaudible.

Argentinian and Bolivian traditional music – during a trip in Germany, soon after World War II. He wanted to write an ode to life that would transcend races and beliefs.

There is a precedent to ‘hit’ *Missa Luba. Messe des Savanes* was recorded in 1956, inside Ouagadougou’s cathedral, in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso today), West Africa. This album completes the selection of sound sources<sup>3</sup> and is the only record to have been specifically bought for the project.

Finally *Sounds of the Serengeti* (1970) is a recording of animals in the Tanzanian natural park, released by label Music for Pleasure (UK, ref MFP 1371, stereo). Recorded by British naturalist Grahame Dangerfield, the album features different animal sounds with narration by Sir Peter Scott (1909-1989). He describes the recorded scenes and speaks in favour of the conservation of this ecosystem, hoping that ‘these creatures can survive, for the infinite enjoyment of people in the future’. This famous ornithologist, nature painter, sportsman (Olympic bronze medallist for Great-Britain in 1936 Berlin Games) and former Royal Navy officer, invented a warship camouflage technique during World War II, which was then applied to the entire Atlantic Fleet and for which he became a member of the Order of the British Empire. Scott was also a candidate for the Conservative Party in the 1945 general elections. What is particularly interesting with this record is the discourse and rhetoric around it. On the back cover, Grahame Dangerfield’s text describes a land exclusively populated by animals and Western men (mostly conservationists and scientists), while presenting technical anecdotes to do with field recording. The cover, which shows sunset and pictures of animals, insists on the ‘incredible’ dimension of these recordings and associates wildlife to the heart of Africa<sup>4</sup>. The album is part of a collection of recordings called *Music for Pleasure* and including Maurice Chevalier, Franck Sinatra, music from the Pacific Islands, Ravel’s *Boléro* as well as the soundtrack of *Doctor Zhivago*...

...*drowned out*... is made of those four records, used as unique sound generators. Except for audio editing tools to manipulate sounds, no other musical instrument was used throughout the project. This is not an aesthetical stance. I wanted to look at each of these records as a whole; not only the music itself but everything that comes with it, that is to say the overall discourse, the position that some protagonists occupied within the socio-political context of the time as well as the physicality of the medium itself, the story of which feeds this work. It is no coincidence that these albums, widely distributed particularly in the UK, France and Germany have often ended up in flea markets, sold for modest sums. They are usually inherited, passed on when emptying houses after an old person’s death. Reappearing on market stalls, they then somehow reflect consumption habits and tastes of the time. Were their original owners longing for exotic things? Or

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that Philips France later on published a double album featuring the three masses as well as a fourth composition, inspired by flamenco music and gypsy culture, called *Missa ‘Sacred Music’* (ref. 6612 082, stereo)

<sup>4</sup> Full title: *Grahame Dangerfield brings you Sounds of the Serengeti. Incredible live recordings of wild life from the heart of Africa.*

perhaps nostalgic of a holiday in a colonial territory? Was it just a fad? No matter what encouraged them to buy these records in the first place, what one can sense is that the mass distribution of such albums inevitably contributed to insidiously convey the clichés and distorted views of an 'elsewhere' that the dominating ideology of the time wanted to shape or make its own.

Whether the sound of a lion or the combination of prayers in Latin with non-Western rhythms, both reveal a certain way of looking, an attitude, unconscious leanings, which all ignore the essential parameters that have contributed to establishing the historical, political and ideological conditions upon which those records themselves rely: conquering, imposing a religion, developing a system of domination, and appropriating a natural and cultural heritage. With this way of looking and mindset, one cannot see that behind the laudable intention of wanting to produce a 'universal' piece of music, hides the violence of an original act that we thus let carry on. Observing and sanctifying a unique fauna and flora, and expressing a desire for conservation, is an attitude that derives from processes of domination and projection, wishing to appropriate a land that is fabricated and that therefore certainly differs a lot from the actual real habitat that these populations live in. ...*drowned out*... feeds on these crossed, distorted and opposed viewpoints.