

On Migration, Exile, and Cosmopolitanism: A Brief Survey of South African Art Song

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One of the genres that comprise the different musics of South Africa is that of the art song. Imported through its European heritage, the art song has found a place in the portfolios of South African composers throughout the twentieth century. However, against the backdrop of its complicated history, South Africa's art songs often seem to reflect themes of exile, inner struggle and nostalgia. This article contemplates how these themes resonate through South Africa's complex history, and how they have subsequently been reflected in the genre of art song, with specific reference to songs by composers S. le Roux Marais, Hubert du Plessis, Arnold van Wyk, Peter Klatzow, Hendrik Hofmeyr, and Bongani Ndodana-Breen.

Things that go unnamed, wander through the world, not knowing where to look, or where to go. — Lebogang Mashile

THE ARTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A way for societies to narrate their histories, comment on their present, and philosophize about their futures. They create a meeting place for disparate cultures within a society, a place to understand similarities and consider differences, and a means through which these cultures can integrate and write their assimilated narrative. South Africa's musical heritage covers a large spectrum of genres of both indigenous and adopted musics, and studies investigating music in this country inevitably include discussions of music's relation to the country's complex political history. While it is essential to recognize that history, especially in relation to the arts, I will consider the trajectory of a specific musical genre across twentieth and early twenty-first century South African history.

As an adopted genre from Europe, the art song, by its import, can be considered a displaced genre in South Africa. By investigating the genre's development in South Africa from the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 through its status during the apartheid regime from 1948–1994, and its subsequent place in the musical landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, this survey will explore how issues of nostalgia, displacement, and exile often permeate the genre throughout these three periods.¹ Through its search for an identity within the South African sphere, the art song genre actually loses its Eurocentrism and its association with European “otherness” so that by the twenty-first century it can no longer be termed a displaced genre.

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