

Review

***Hearing Maskanda: Musical Epistemologies in South Africa.* By Barbara Titus. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022. 280 pp. ISBN 978-1-501-37776-1 doi:10.1017/S0261143024000126**

Maskanda is a popular South African music style that has remained largely unknown outside its homeland. Following Apartheid, attempts were made to market the genre to audiences outside Africa. However, it gained only a small global fan base (see De Jong & King Madzikane II Thandiswe Diko 2020), being considered by musicologist David Coplan to be too ‘opaque for non-Zulu people’ (2001: 121). Barbara Titus, with her book *Hearing Maskanda: Musical Epistemologies in South Africa*, attempts to demystify the genre, introducing it through personal accounts of those who rely on it to ‘make sense of their world’ (p. xiii). Titus interviews a variety of maskanda musicians, audiences, music critics, media representatives, and music researchers – the *maskanda musickers*, who, to borrow from Christopher Small, build a ‘set of relationships [wherein] the meaning of [maskanda] lies’ (1998: 13). Drawing on their words and her own reflections on practising, performing and researching maskanda, Titus explores the complex ways in which maskanda takes form and assumes significance, revealing in the process that musickers’ personal and group identities are not only represented in maskanda but constructed through it.

Musickers form ‘moments of community’, Titus argues, where ‘aural experiences’ of maskanda and musical and cultural histories converge to ‘signify, evoke, present, produce, interpret and comment’ (p. 4) on some of the complexities of everyday life in South Africa. Different ‘moments of community’ are explored across the book’s eight chapters. Chapter 1, for example, presents the Zulu war song ‘Sab’ Inganono’ (‘Afraid of the Cannon’), which, having been recorded by two white maskandi, Johnny Clegg and David Jenkins, enables a challenging discussion on race in South Africa. Titus’ analysis reveals the ‘unequal power relations between the subject positions of various human musicking bodies, social bodies and bodies of sounding and kinetic repertoire’ (p. 45), emphasising a multi-cultural imaginary of democratic South Africa that is ‘critically [determined by] who is (re) creating what “soils of significant” (Hoffman), who is mimicking and menacing which authority (Bhabha) and who participates in the circulation of acoustic assemblages between different listening entities (Ochoa)’ (p. 45).

Chapter 2 turns to South Africa’s long history of intra-regional migration, with maskanda introduced as a genre ‘on the move’, continually transforming to accommodate the changing needs of its musickers. With each transformation, ‘the past is being (re)claimed, enriched with new meaning and reconstituted in the face of the here and now, with unpredictable and contingent outcomes for future and present as much as for past events’ (p. 47). Using melody, instrumentation, dance moves and poetry, Titus shows how the ‘intricate connection of maskanda styles with various peoples in South Africa coincides with the ways in which styles are geographically located’ (p. 52), and, in the process, exposes the ‘multifarious and

sometimes contradictory ways in which [migratory] movements have acquired meaning' (p. 22).

Chapters 3–5 'focu[s] on the events and the spaces in which maskanda becomes heard and becomes legible to its audiences' (ibid.). The Durban-based women's festival, *Kushikisha Imbokodo*, is the topic of Chapter 3, with Titus using a performance by Khombisile S'kho Miya to discuss maskanda's complicated gendered realities. While maskanda is often defined as a masculine tradition, Titus shows how S'kho Miya upsets that script by composing lyrics that emphasise a woman's perspective and by re-appropriating common masculine signifiers like the *ibhodlo* (a 'vocal groan' often equated with a 'lion's roar') (pp. 81–2).

Chapter 4 examines S'kho Miya's performance of 'Sithi Khuzani' at the MTN Onkweni Royal Cultural Festival, held in Ulundi (considered the Zulu capital). This chapter highlights the complexities of historiography, which, with regards to maskanda, have been showered with 'colonial cultural fetishes' – from notions of polygamy to expectations of polymetre – that continue to shape how the genre is discussed and presented (p. 113). Although we may question the validity of such fetishes, even 'rhetorically distancing ourselves from them' (p. 107), their influence remains 'so self-evidently associated with maskanda that they are only partly acknowledged by those ... operating in it' (p. 93).

Chapter 5 introduces an Amsterdam performance of 'Asinankomo' by Shiyani Ngcobo. Titus, in comparing maskanda performances in the Netherlands and South Africa, points to 'a mutual awareness of difference between performers and audience' (p. 124), writing that,


In South Africa, members of the audience jump up, enter the stage and dance on stage *with* the maskandi. In Europe, despite the 'swing set-up' of the concert hall, enabling the audience to dance, performers and audience remained in their fixed positions facing each other (ibid.).

In response, Ngcobo 'teases this [European] audience in a discursive convention common to maskanda performance'. Although not intentionally trying to 'please this foreign audience', Ngcobo nonetheless uses his performance of 'Asinankomo' to 'stage his version of the Zulu stereotype as a fetish that resides in the minds of European audiences'. Yet, it is not a straightforward appropriation: 'he menaces this stereotype by taking command over it and employing it for his aims', leading Titus to conclude that, 'The maskandi are anything but passive victims of commodified cultural stereotypes. Rather, they have active agency in using and embellishing these tropes in ways they see fit' (p. 133).

Chapters 6–8 emphasise maskanda as a 'third space', a 'continuous sonic and aural re-organisation of space and re-assemblage of concepts' that has enabled the genre to resist homogenising labels (p. 138). To substantiate her claim, Titus uses Chapter 6 to introduce two of Bongani Nkwanyana's performances of 'Inkunzi Emnyama'. One is grounded in the past, drawing from established Zulu performance practices, while the other assumes a more modern position by integrating jazz and pop idioms. The versions represent a *maskandafication*, Titus argues, that 'validat[es] Zulu culture as both traditional and contemporary, as both unique and open to the world' (p. 139). Chapter 7 looks at maskanda 'between South African and global musicking trends', with the song 'DJ Gogo,' by hip-hop artist Mxolisi Majozi (aka Zuluboy) offered as a case study. By emphasising how 'DJ Gogo' borrows on 'global forms of musical expression as a funnel to present maskanda to a larger

audience as traditional heritage' (p. 171), Titus furthers the claim that maskanda adopts 'conscious acts of appropriation and grounding' that extend beyond 'reactive confrontations to global musical norms' (p. 22). Chapter 8 introduces three versions of S'kho Miya's song 'Sithi Khuzani': (1) on stage; (2) in rehearsal; and (3) from the recording, *Ungcayi Lweqhkikiza*. What Titus' analyses show is that maskanda is intricately connected to its musicking contexts, again supporting the argument that meaning-making is a social practice, legitimatised by the musickers. 'Maskanda is not just about adopting a specific style or technique', Titus reminds: it 'concerns the music that makes you the person who you are' (p. 185).

In *Hearing Maskanda*, Titus draws freely on a rich background of texts and interviews as well as on her own personal experiences performing and studying the genre. While this has enabled her to contextualise maskanda in a variety of settings and from a variety of viewpoints, it also makes the text dense and the thread sometimes difficult to follow. Yet, a huge amount of scholarship and personal engagement and commitment have gone into producing this work, and the result is a book that delivers on its goal of demystifying maskanda. It provides a wealth of insightful analyses that will probably change the manner in which readers 'hear maskanda'.

Nanette de Jong 

Newcastle University, UK
nanette.de-jong@ncl.ac.uk

References

- Coplan, D.B. 2001. 'Sounds of the "Third Way": Identity and the African Renaissance in contemporary South African popular traditional music', *Black Music Research Journal*, 21/1, 107–24.
- De Jong, N. and King Madzikane II Thandiszwe Diko. 2020. 'Maskanda, Umkhosi wokukhahlela and the articulation of identity in South Africa', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 145/1, 167–90
- Small, C. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing And listening* (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press)