

Indeed a composer in Africa

Muller, Stephanus & Walton, Chris. 2006. **A composer in Africa: essays on the life and work of Stefans Grové.** Stellenbosch: Sun Press. 175 p. Price: R160,00. ISBN: 9 781920 109042.

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This book on Stefans Grové is a fascinating mix of personal accounts by those who have known one of South Africa's foremost composers, and critical commentary on his oeuvre. Grové's oeuvre includes musical as well as literary texts, but the focus of the collection falls on the musical oeuvre and justifiably so, since Grové has been and remains a composer who is also a writer.

Stefans Grové was born in Bethlehem in 1922 and with the exception of an 18-year period spent working in the USA (1953-1971), he has always lived and worked in South Africa. This is the first volume dedicated to the life and work of this important composer.

The editors' intention was to document Grové's extensive oeuvre as thoroughly as possible, and it is clear that this book makes an important contribution not only to the study of so-called "art music" in South Africa, but also to the wider understanding of South African culture and the interaction between art and politics in the second half of the twentieth century. The book contains more than an impressive work list, an extensive bibliography and biographical information which will no doubt form the foundation for further research on Grové. The editors also took upon themselves the scholarly task of examining the intersection between the international achievements of the composer and the roots of his cultural identity. Given the vastness and complexity of this task, some of the essays are indeed a tough read. The enthusiast who sets out to peruse this

work from cover to cover may become discouraged, and this would be a pity, because this is a book which deserves to receive a wide audience. It is definitely one that should not be read only by musicians, and for this reason, my review is aimed at the general reader.

I suspect that for this audience, the easiest entrance into the book and the world of Stefans Grové is to be found near the middle of the book on page 75, with the collection of eight of Grové's *Hoofstad Sketches* which were written in Afrikaans and are presented here in the original language. Stephanus Muller, currently one of the leading musicologists in South Africa, offers a short and enlightening introduction to the sketches. I am convinced that for those who are fortunate enough to understand the language, at least three of these, namely *Beurtsang van die eensaamheid*, *Die stille kring in die lou son* and especially *Monna Osoro het gekom* will provide the necessary impetus to want to get to know the composer/writer better. I certainly sat up, took note and read them a number of times, except for *Monna Osoro het gekom*. I am still working on building up enough courage for the second round.

The reader's interest now piqued, the path would best be resumed through the very charming introduction to the life of Grové found in the first three pages of John de Courteille Hinch's essay "Stefans Grové: the flute in his life". The next steps on this journey should, in my view, lead the reader to the first essay in the book called "Place, identity and a station platform" by Stephanus Muller. This essay is biographical and aims to arrive at a contextualisation of the composer's life and work in terms of his family, contemporaries, studies, personality and his Afrikaner heritage. In giving an account of the political implications of Grové's life and work, Muller demonstrates the fact that he is neither unwilling, nor too wary to delve into our country's tumultuous past in order to interpret events against the backdrop of the then prevailing times.

By now, our stroll has become less than leisurely, but the pace is still comfortable as we turn towards Chris Walton's essay "Connect, only connect: Stefans Grové's road from Bethlehem to Damascus" of which the striking empathy, even tenderness, makes this a must-read. Walton sets out to understand the reasons for Grové's return to South Africa in 1972 in the context of his biography, the difficulties he was facing at the time in the USA and the political climate awaiting him in his home country. In so doing, Walton manages to beautifully integrate the different strands that went into the creation of "a remarkable creative outpouring that shows no sign of ceasing"

which “the wider musical world is all the richer for”. Walton’s essay enriches our ways of thinking *as artists* and *about artists* in South Africa and makes our journey through the book well worth the effort.

Our reader should stop for a breather before tackling Muller’s other two essays. For this, the introduction by John Tyrell who studied under the young Grové at the University of Cape Town and three essays by other students of Grové’s will do. Elam Sprenkle opens up an intriguing vista on Grové as a teacher in America during his time at the prestigious Peabody Conservatory. The conflicting descriptions of Grové by two of his South African composition students, Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph and Etienne van Rensburg, will whet the appetite for the steep climb that awaits those who seek to discover something that most resembles “the truth” about this enigmatic composer/writer. And this search certainly comes to the fore in Muller’s other two essays, “Imagining Afrikaners musically: reflections on the African music of Stefans Grové” and “Stefans Grové’s narratives of lateness”. But since I promised to write this review for the general reader and not only for brave musicologists, I will allow our paths to part with my best wishes.