



Programme Notes: Zimbe! Come, Sing The Songs Of Africa By Alexander L'Estrange

Zimbe! is the phenomenon which has rocked the choral world since its premiere in 2008, cementing Alexander L'Estrange's reputation as one of the UK's most popular choral composers of the 21st Century.

Zimbe is an Anglicised version of the Swahili word 'Ziimbe' meaning 'Sing them', and reflects the spirited, energetic and simple way that is typical of the African song tradition; particularly the various ways in which music plays a part in everyday life in that vast continent.

According to the composer, the act of singing and listening to *Zimbe!* is a communion between people 'in a realm where music imitates life and life inspires music'.

Zimbe! touches the emotions. It is at times moving and at other times funky and grooving, but all the time uplifting for performers and audiences alike.

The excitement, verve and energy are all distinctly African, including the syncopation and contemporary jazz improvisatory styles; which provide a perfect buzz of happiness at any time of year.

The work opens and closes with an attention-grabbing *Njooni Zimbe! Nyimbo za Africa!* imploring us to '*Come, sing the Songs of Africa!*' - By the time you've heard the vibrant sequence of twelve songs, which includes playground, wedding, funeral, drinking, protest, worship songs and lullabies, you will want to do just that.

Within its first four years, the piece had received 150 performances worldwide, including in the USA, Canada, Australia and Kenya, and its popularity with choirs and audiences alike continues to grow; with the 10th anniversary concert at New York's Carnegie Hall involving hundreds of singers from around the world, conducted by Alexander himself.

The key to the success of this 40-minute cantata is three-fold:

First, it is the genius combination of adult SATB choir, unison children's choir and five-piece band. Secondly, it is the fusion of two distinct musical styles, in this case traditional African song and jazz.

And, thirdly, it is that the piece works equally well with choral societies, cathedral choirs, chamber choirs and school choirs, encouraging an amalgamation of different singing groups within one locality, in a spirit of community singing from which folk music arose.

2023 marks the 15th anniversary of *Zimbe!* - Alexander L'Estrange's choral fusion of traditional African songs and jazz still remains one of his most popular and performed works.

1. **Njoooni! Zimbe!** *Come! Sing the songs of Africa!* (Swahili text/original music)
2. **Singabahambayo thina** *We are the ones going through this world, to our home in heaven* (Xhosa/Methodist sacred song)
3. **Sansa kroma** *To Sansa, the hawk* (Akan playground song from Ghana)
4. **Pete, pete!** *Vulture, vulture!* (Akan children's song from Ghana celebrating food and family)
5. **Thula Mama, thula** *Hush, Mama* (Xhosa lullaby for mothers of imprisoned sons)
6. **Ilanga libuya, ilanga liyaphuma** *The sun sets ... the sun rises* (Xhosa text/original music)
7. **Wai bamba!** *You've got him/her!* (Shona wedding song from Zimbabwe)
8. **Hamba Lulu** *Go, Lulu!* (Zulu wedding song)
9. **Vamudara/Njoooni! Zimbe!** *A drunken man dances himself to death* (Shona drinking song from Zimbabwe/Swahili text/original music)
10. **Aleluya/Thuma mina** *Send me, Lord; lead me, Lord ...* (Traditional South African/Zulu funeral song)
11. **We shall not give up the fight** *Together we'll have victory, hand holding hand* (Traditional South African)
12. **Siyahamba** *We are marching in the light of God* (Zulu worship song from South Africa)
13. **Freedom is coming/Hamba vangeli** *Spread the new word!* (Traditional South African song/Zulu worship song)
14. **Njoooni! Zimbe!** *Come! Sing the songs of Africa!* (Swahili text/original music)

“A composer can find inspiration in the unlikelyst of settings, and the genesis of *Zimbe!* is as extraordinary as any. The seeds of my affinity with African music and the gospel tradition were sown in the early nineties through a chance encounter on a train en-route to London.

Sitting opposite me was a woman with a small book of manuscript paper on her lap. I asked politely whether she was a musician and she replied that she was on her way to lead a music group at a prison.

She was working on “African and gospel” music, but, although she knew many excellent songs, she was really an artist, not a musician, and was rather lacking in confidence when it came to leading a singing workshop.

“I could help,” I offered gamely, and it all took off from there.

We struck up a working relationship, and she introduced me to songs, tapes, books, and friends with a plethora of songs to share.

I immediately fell in love with the music. Together we ran singing groups, in Oxford, London and beyond, and I quickly became immersed in arranging, teaching, sharing and performing African songs.

I later produced a collection of choral arrangements for Faber Music entitled *Songs of a Rainbow Nation*, and it was in response to performing these arrangements that Justin Doyle, conductor of the Dorking Choral Society, approached me with a view to commissioning a more substantial piece based on African and gospel themes.

Justin happened to call the morning after *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* had been shown on TV; we had both watched it, and both had been moved by the use of music in the production (filmed on location in Botswana).

One particularly moving moment depicted a funeral scene, involving a huge number of local “extras” breaking into an apparently spontaneous performance of a traditional funeral song. It was decided that my piece would aim to reflect some of the manifold ways in which music plays a part in everyday life in Africa – from the rising of the sun to its setting, both literally and figuratively.

I wanted to capture the essence of the African spirit through glimpses into the human experience – simple children’s playground songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe; a Xhosa lullaby for mothers of the victims of Apartheid; a raucous drinking song; sensuous wedding songs; and some beautiful funeral and worship music – all imbued with the spirit, energy and simplicity that is so typical of the African song tradition.

Zimbe is Swahili for “Sing them”: just as others have shared these wonderful songs with me, I wish to pass them on now.

Scored for SATB choir, unison children’s choir and jazz quintet, with copious percussion, the settings reflect my own musical make-up: within the piece we find references to jazz, pop, the Western choral tradition and, of course, “world music”.

African songs are easy to learn and impossible to forget; that is the very nature of the communal song tradition.

The songs I have chosen to arrange are fun, moving and infectiously tuneful – and through them we find ourselves in a wonderfully simple, joyous realm where music imitates life, and life inspires music. *Njoooni! Zimbe! Nyimbo za Afrika (Come! Let us sing the songs of Africa)*”

Alexander L'Estrange