

# Skilled keys explore the sounds of Africa



Kathleen Tagg straddled two Bösendorfer concert grand pianos during *African Piano* in the Beethoven Room.  
Photo: Jeffrey Stretton-Bell

**Review: Kathleen Tagg – *African Piano***  
**Jeffrey Brukman**  
**Cue specialist writer**

In his most recent book, *The African Imagination in Music*, Ghanaian-born musicologist, Kofi Agawu, outlines the appropriation of African musical materials in African art music – a cross-cultural encounter that has western aspects (instrumentation or formal structures, for instance), but incorporates distinctive African elements. It is informed by the spirit of African music and the thinking that lies behind it.

Introducing the audience to the music of six composers who embody this idiom, pianist Kathleen Tagg's programme, *African Piano*, draws on notions surrounding African art music. Four of the nine compositions are composed by Tagg, making this programme heavily weighted toward her work. As continued reception of South African music beyond its initial premiere is a problem, other composers should perhaps not have been left out in the cold. The piano works of Bongani Ndodana-Breen, Paul Hanmer, Michael Blake or Kevin Volans – music positioned in the idiom explored by Tagg – would have benefited from a hearing.

Opening the concert with a piece by Nigerian composer Joshua Uzoigwe, *Ukom* – itself taken from a set of piano pieces, *Talking Drums* – Tagg established herself as a performer of note. Drawing from Nigerian and Ghanaian drumming traditions,

Uzoigwe turns the piano into a sonic representation of a rural African landscape. In a mesmerizing performance, Tagg imparted an improvisatory feel, colouring the multiple ostinatos with apt tonal shadings, and creating sonic space for each strand to shine through the layered tapestry.

In the digital electronic age, multimedia compositions – where a variety of media sources interact in the performance of a work – have become fairly commonplace. For instance, this interaction can include text, sound, graphics, animation, video clips and acoustic instruments. Tagg's *As the Flowers Bloom* is one such composition.

Written in 2014, the 20th commemorative year of South Africa's movement to full democracy, this work features the recorded voice of President Nelson Mandela delivering his inaugural presidential speech, the computer as a performing instrument (featuring traditional African instruments), prepared piano and extended piano techniques. It also references the popular tune *Ntyilo Ntyilo*.

Handling the multiple aspects of this performance with aplomb, Tagg needs to ensure that the balance between computer and acoustic sounds is more realistic. It was only in the last of her pieces, *Berimbau*, that sound balance was sonically aligned.

Performing with panache, Tagg traversed a range of idioms in her composition, *Second Time Around*, in which interlocking rhythms, African-styled themes treated

with western contrapuntal techniques, and jazz-inflected harmonies are juxtaposed and performed on a prepared piano. Tagg enters the core of the music and communicates the essence of the score.

Peter Klatzow's *Makoemazaan* (based on AG Visser's poem by the same name) did not lie easily within this programme, its expanded tonal quasi-Impressionistic language being at odds with the other music on offer. Nevertheless, Tagg played with artistic understanding, with haunting, evocatively shaped phrases projected through the texture. Notable was her expressive use of the sustaining pedal.

Strongly influenced by Ghanaian drumming

techniques, American composer Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* for 2 Pianos or *Marimbas* received a phenomenal performance. This amazing feat of concentration and control saw Tagg straddling two Bösendorfer concert grand pianos and playing both simultaneously. Sustaining this work for nearly ten minutes, Tagg explored the cyclical nature of African music as ostinato patterns moved in and out of phase.

Cape Town jazz pianist Andre Petersen's work, *Time Watchers*, received an exquisite interpretation. In Tagg's hands, the piano replicates the sonic worlds of African, Romantic period and jazz, as she conjured

a vast vocabulary of tonal colour, replete with extended piano techniques. Here is an authoritative performer at one with a variety of idioms, with the capacity to meaningfully utilise metrical inflections to aid musical understanding.

*Lullaby After Brahms* and *Berimbau*, both multimedia works by Tagg, enter the African spirit and generate an apposite soundscape that is instantly recognizable and is constructed with thoughtful understanding in Tagg's capable hands.

If you are willing to explore Africa through a unique sonic medium, then this concert is strongly recommended.

*Kathleen Tagg – African Piano, Beethoven Room tomorrow, 3pm*

