

## Preface

*A Prodigy's Calling* is a musical coming-of-age story chronicling Cosmas Magaya's early life in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) during the 1950s and 1960s, a period of turbulent change in the country. Growing up as the son of a healer/spirit medium/farmer, he would become an acclaimed international performer and leading exponent of the keyboard instruments called *mbira* (sing. and pl.).<sup>1</sup> His version was known as *mbira dzavadzimu* ("mbira of the ancestors") or *mbira huru* ("big mbira"). In the context of this book, *Calling* refers both to prodigies' instant identification with their chosen professions and to the mbira's traditional role at the heart of religious expression: invoking ancestral spirits and enlisting their assistance. As Cosmas's father explained to him, the mbira was not a "mere thing" within their lineage, "but a thing that lived within peoples' lives."

Following Cosmas's childhood, we see how his upbringing guided his journey through the community's social networks and how his early sensibilities, proclivities, and talents shaped his development. At the same time, his deepening engagement with music and the ancestors had unforeseen consequences as he grappled with the overlapping tensions in Rhodesia between Shona cosmology and Christian ideology, rural and urban lifestyles, and the escalating African nationalist struggle and the white supremacist state. Interlaced with tales of his unfolding relationships with family members and mbira experts, accounts of his experiences as a learner teach readers how to listen to the mbira, coming as he did to hear ever-finer details in the music's richly layered patterns and to discover its implicit principles, values, and forms.

*Prodigy* tells Cosmas's story through immersive multimedia: narrative, linocut prints, website audiovisuals (accessible by QR code), notated musical examples, and a beginners' guide to mbira playing. The book is intended

for general readers as well as for college students, music teachers, and musicians. Finally, its recordings and mbira notation system will prepare readers who would like to delve more deeply into the repertory for our larger study's companion works, *The Art of Mbira: Musical Inheritance and Legacy* (Berliner 2020) and *Mbira's Restless Dance: An Archive of Improvisation* (Berliner and Magaya 2020).

Part A ("Childhood Lessons, 1953–63") begins with a chapter providing background about Cosmas's childhood and his family's religious practices. Subsequent chapters in part A and those of part B ("Teenage Growth, 1964–71") describe the events of his life chronologically. Part C ("Maestro") reflects on the formative experiences that led to his emergence as a teenage virtuoso on the threshold of his career.

Preceding each chapter, linocut images by Lucas Bambo—rendered with his playful eye and sensitivity to southern African sociality—contribute atmosphere and telling detail to the story. Italicized interludes follow the linocuts, depicting a typical all-night ancestral ceremony at Magaya village, set in September 1971. These episodes add a complementary narrative to the book, illuminating traditional Shona religious practices and the intimacy and drama of the collective performances toward which Cosmas's training was all along directed. The interlude accounts initially leap ahead of the chapters' chronological accounts by two decades, their storylines converging at the end of the book.

Cosmas and I met in 1971 in Rhodesia, where I was carrying out field research as an ethnomusicology graduate student. He became my primary mbira teacher and research assistant, initiating a friendship and professional collaboration that inspired numerous scholarly and artistic projects over our careers. The idea for *Prodigy* came about as the projects began to bear fruit. For decades, we'd served as teachers and students to one another in different capacities, exchanging ideas and expanding one another's ways of thinking about music. Of course, Cosmas's relationship to mbira music would always differ from mine as an American student of the tradition. Appreciating the specialness and depth of his knowledge, I sought to understand in greater detail how he had cultivated his artistry prior to our meeting and the arrival of ethnomusicology in his life. My first book, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (1978), included several short biographical sketches of mbira players, including Cosmas.

When the subject of his childhood arose in our subsequent conversations, I noted his reflections and pursued them further in interviews with him and

other family members. Working with the accumulating snapshots of his past—fragmentary tales of relationships, musical encounters, trials, and revelations—I wove them into a portrait of his early life. The portrait was also informed by memories and recordings of rituals we attended together in the initial years that followed our meeting.

One of my aims for *Prodigy* was to situate his and his associates' lives in the context of the country's social and political struggles more explicitly than I had in *The Soul of Mbira*. At the time of the latter's submission for publication, Rhodesia was in the throes of an independence/civil war, and I felt compelled to treat such matters allusively. Some forty years later, as part of the historical backdrop to *Prodigy*'s tale, I've incorporated intermittent signposts for the buildup of political resistance that led to the country's protracted guerrilla war.<sup>2</sup> To simplify its complexities, which are detailed elsewhere in the literature, I focus on the roles played by the major nationalist parties, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), and generally refer to their "guerrillas" and "military wings" rather than using the latter's respective names and acronyms: Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) and Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA).

If the book provides a window on the colonial legacy that rendered Africans second-class citizens in their own country, it also illuminates aspects of the legacy that, at the crossroads of African and European cultures, inspired visions of more expansive lives and provided Africans with the tools to achieve them. These were central preoccupations during the 1950s and early '60s for the Magayas, as for other families profiled in *Prodigy*. All the same, few had an inkling that the struggle would one day arrive at their doorsteps, leading ultimately to the collapse of the Rhodesian state.

NB: *Prodigy* emphasizes place names and associated terms for cities, towns, and territories that were current in Cosmas's youth. Reflecting the country's history and cultural diversity, they encompass English names; names in ChiShona (henceforth, Shona), the language of the Shona people who represent the majority population; and names in Sindebele, the language of the Ndebele people—the country's largest African minority. (Appendix 6 gives the spellings of place names that were subsequently retransliterated and successor names assigned after independence.)

The text periodically incorporates hybrid terms that emerged from local multilingual practices. Shona speakers variously incorporate into their speech English words, Shona-ized English words ("Shonglish," as some call it), and anglicized Shona words. For instance, musicians would at times re-

fer to bass notes or bass keys as *mabesi*. With characteristic wit, some made fun of African urban elites who had adopted European diets by calling them *MaSalad*. Conversely, they pluralized Shona words with *s*: referring to cyclical *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* parts (pl. and sing. in Shona) as *kushauras* and *kutsinhiras* and alternative versions of a composition like *Nhemamusasa* as *Nhemamusasas*. Likewise, nicknames for a mbira virtuoso such as *Bandambira* (“One who hits the mbira keys with great force”), *Gwenyambira* (“One who scratches the mbira keys”), and *Maridzambira* (“Mbira player”) became *Bandambiras*, *Gwenyambiras*, and *Maridzambiras* in the plural. Given the country’s legacy of oral and written traditions—and changing conventions of language standardization at official and local levels—I’ve adopted the practices of my Shona interlocutors, associates, and friends.

## Representing the Aural/Oral Repertory of Mbira Music

### AUDIO AND VIDEO RECORDINGS

Cosmas’s musical biography is grounded in illustrative audiovisuals provided on our website (<http://www.mbiraplatform.org>). Its assets can also be accessed with mobile devices by scanning QR codes embedded in the main body of text and in the appendices that reproduce them. In cases in which audio and video are provided for the same example, a single QR code calls up links to both (audio appearing above the video). The options enable readers without musical training or who are new to the mbira to follow Cosmas’s journey through the book’s recordings independently of my transcriptions.

Serving the purposes of pedagogy and ear training, our audio recordings include demonstrations of each piece’s cyclical component parts (*kushaura*; *kutsinhira*) and their combinations (*kushaura-kutsinhira*) played at non-performance tempos. A shaker click-track delineates the beat. Performance tempos commonly fall between metronome beat settings of 120 and 150. Complementing some of these examples are video showing close-ups of Cosmas’s fingerings: the keyboard “choreography” that produces the music. He renders these demos in various tempos (nonperformance and performance) without rhythmic accompaniment. NB: In relation to the transcriptions, some video demos include minor right- or left-hand embellishments or variations.

Another group of recordings, cited at the end of interludes 1–8 and 10, comprises excerpts from my field recordings at religious rituals and secular gatherings. Their purpose is to introduce listeners to characteristic features of

the rich unfolding textures of collective performances and the improvisational interplay between ensemble members and other participants that drives the re-creation of mbira compositions. Appendix 5 provides background information about the excerpts as well as narrative descriptions of the music with counter timings and translations of audible vocals. It also includes accounts of the beginning and ending of the Magayas' complete rendition of *Mahororo* (referenced in chapter 20, ex. 20.1), from which several of the prior excerpts were taken. Finally, Cosmas's multitracked performances of the compositions mentioned in *Prodigy* can be found in the "Mbira's Restless Dance" section of our general website ([mbiraplatform.org](http://mbiraplatform.org)). Its "Additional Resources" section presents his and Hakurotwi Mude's demonstrations of the vocals accompanying mbira music.

I hope that the book's complement of multimedia assets will be useful for a general readership, as well as for teachers interested in integrating an experiential component into courses concerned with African music and culture, world music, and the art of music improvisation. In my experience teaching mbira music, some newcomers are instantly drawn into its complex of sounds: its densely layered melodies and polyrhythms, "kaleidophonic" qualities, diverse tunings and timbres, percussive "buzz" aesthetic (produced by shells or bottle tops loosely attached to the soundboard and resonator), and so on. Newcomers who initially find the music disorienting will discover that with repeated listening and the ear's growing attunement, the music becomes ever more transparent, carrying pleasures of discovery as emergent patterns and their relationships come to light.

#### NOTATING MBIRA MUSIC ON THE PAGE

For readers with musical training and students interested in delving into the music's technical details and theoretical aspects, appendix 1 provides a guide to the system of mbira staff notation that I use for appendix 2's chapter examples, referenced in the main body of the text. For those without a musical background who'd like to learn how to play the mbira, appendix 3 provides a guide to my simple box tablature system that portrays the music's patterns as numerical sequences of mbira keys. Appendix 4's rudimentary mbira method emphasizes this system while also translating its patterns into mbira staff notation for purposes of comparison.

Two icons cross-reference the appendices' musical examples and website audiovisuals: speaker icons (🔊), signifying audio recordings; computer-screen icons (💻), for video recordings; and in some instances, their combination (🔊💻). The icons appear to the right of identifiers for mbira parts and

combinations (for example, “10.kt1.9 ◀”), linking them to related patterns found in our larger repertory collection (Berliner and Magaya 2020). Likewise, as a convenience, *Prodigy* adopts our archive’s practice of identifying alternative versions of compositions and their components with numbers—for example, distinguishing *Taireva* (1) from *Taireva* (2) and *kutsinhira* (1) from *kutsinhira* (2).