



Tribute

## James Stephen Mzilikazi Khumalo (1932—2021)

Innocentia Mhlambi



The year 2022 marks the first anniversary of a double tragedy; the passing of Professor James Stephen Mzilikazi Khumalo (1932–2021), Emeritus Professor in the African Languages from the University of the Witwatersrand, and his wife, Rose Litlhare Khumalo (1933–2021). While his wife left a blazing trail as an educationist in African schools, Professor Khumalo went on to leave behind a rich legacy in African Languages academy, and in the choral music of *amakwaya*, and classical music. Mzilikazi Khumalo's expansive work intersected his intellectual and cultural life with the nation's post-1994's search for a specific South African musical idiom and national identity. His academic work in isiZulu tonology became increasingly a frame on which he built a powerful African musical language as witnessed in his choral repertoire, his oratorio, *UShaka KaSenzangakhona*, and his opera, *Princess Magogo KaDinuzulu*.

Born from a humble family of Salvation Army ministers in KwaNgelu, in Hlabisa, Khumalo went on to study for his teacher certificate at the Bantu Normal College, a Teachers' Training College in Mamelodi. Through correspondence study at the University of South Africa, he qualified for a Bachelor's degree with majors in isiZulu and English. His second degree, Bachelor of Arts Honours was also obtained from this university. His employment at the University of the Witwatersrand as a tutor afforded him space to further his studies in African languages and linguistics. His Master's and PhD degrees contributed to ground-breaking understanding of African linguistics, particularly isiZulu tonology and phonology, respectively. For his PhD studies, he also worked with Professor Charles Kisseberth, a phonologist from the University of Illinois in the United States.

Khumalo grew up in a family and community context which was infused with music. His participation in the Salvation Army church brass band choir sharpened his ear for musical consciousness—an aspect which he pursued with vigour at the Teacher Training College with his *amakwaya* choral composition. Until his time of passing Khumalo was respected for his seminal work on African tonology and phonology and his extraordinary contribution to African choral music of *amakwaya* and classical music. His contributions to tonology and phonology were transposed to his music composition consciousness to experiment with complex processes between speaking and progression to prosody, elements characteristic in African music. In terms of Tonic Solfa, a musical language in which he composed all his work, including his classical ones (the oratorio and the opera), Khumalo linked the pronunciation of certain rising and falling isiZulu words to the musical concept of glissando. In his compositions, he employed these rising and falling tones to open up Tonic Solfa notation to accommodate natural language cadences found in the isiZulu language.

Khumalo also conceptualised his musical consciousness broadly to link up with the sensibilities of the 'New Africanists' like B. W. Vilakazi. His transposition of Vilakazi's poem, "Ma Ngificwa Ngukufa" in 1958, clearly signalled his role in the intellectual, cultural and political life of Africans and the South Africa's renaissance generally. His dialogue with Vilakazi in this poem registers just some of his views about racialism in South Africa:

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Ngimbeleni phansi kotshani  
Duzē nezihlahla zomyezane  
Ngozwa nami lapho ngilele  
Utshani ngaphezulu buhleba  
Lala sithandwa  
Lal' uphumule ...

Akukho mlungu akukho pasi  
Kulele izizukulwane zakithi  
Ziyagiya, ziyagiya ziqethuke

Bury me underneath the grass  
Next to willow trees  
I will listen while sleeping  
The grass above whispering  
Sleep beloved  
Sleep and rest ...

There is no white man and there is no pass book  
Only sleeping are generations of our forbearers  
They dance and dance to their hearts' delight

The last three lines are Khumalo's anti-racist stance, parodying racial supremacy during the height of apartheid repression.

Some of his sensibilities about South African cultural history were registered in his many choral compositions which not only foregrounded African idioms, but also his preoccupation with classical European musical heritage. Just his choral repertoire for *amakwaya* exceeds fifty recorded compositions, which were sung nationally by school, church and community choirs. This feat alone established him as a pioneer among the first black composers to highlight genealogies of music and music making practices in South Africa. There are many accolades with which he was respected for his role in this sphere of music as a composer, a choir conductor and as a linguist. Recognition of his work in this regard include among other awards, The Order of the Star in 1999 by Nelson Mandela; Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007 from MNET Literary Awards; and Via Afrika Prize for Linguistic Studies for his academic work, "Leftward Ho! in Zulu Tonology" in 1990 by the *South African Journal of African Languages*.

Towards the years marking the dying throes of the apartheid regime, Khumalo and Richard Cock responded to Aggrey Klaaste's call for the Nation Building project after years of social strife and fracture. Khumalo, Cock and other South African musicians and composers of note founded the Sowetan National Massed Choir Festival which brought together not only different sixty-voice African national choirs onto one stage, but also white instrumental musicians. It is in this space too that his generosity in sharing his musical knowledge became most noted among his peers and younger generations of composers and musicians. The joining together of African voices and orchestral instruments allowed him to experiment with classical music; his work *Five African Songs* is the result of this experimentation. It was out of such endeavours, mixing of different musical traditions in South African, that Khumalo together with Cock pioneered the dual notation system (a representation of music in Tonic Solfa and Staff Notation). The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) also became instrumental in disseminating his music, establishing a link between these experimentations and the choral communities, and the public at large.

*UShaka KaSenzangakhona*, premiered in 1996, is a composition he started in 1981, which is also a fruition of his musical endeavours in experimenting with western classical music. This oratorio is the first of its kind to be composed by an African in South Africa. Further, he together with composer Professor Peter Klatzow, rearranged the traditional *ugubhu* songs of uMntwana uPrincess Constance Magogo kaDinizulu, titled *Sing Princess—Song Cycle / Haya Mntwana Omkhulu*, sung by the late Sibongile Khumalo (1957–2021). Some of Princess Magogo's songs from this song cycle were included in their original form for his first African opera, *Princess Magogo kaDinizulu*, premiered in 2002 to international critical acclaim. This was the first isiZulu-language opera and it was invited to

major opera centres in the US (Ravinia Festival and the J. F. Kennedy Centre), and in Europe. In Oslo, the opera house recorded the performance, and is the only known existing recording of the performance.

His contributions to South Africa's music were also noted by the Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr. Ben Ngubane, who appointed him as a Chair for the national anthem committee in 1995. In this role, Khumalo was instrumental in reversioning Enoch Sontonga's "Nkosi Sikelel'i-Afrika" (1897) for South Africa's young democracy and national identity. His version joined the new and old anthems, and became a basis for reconciliatory rainbow nationalism discourses post-1994. Younger generations of choral and classical composers acknowledge his contributions to South African art music. Bongani Ndodana-Breen composed and dedicated his first piano concerto, *Mzilikazi Emhlabeni* (2013) as homage to Khumalo. The weight of his work in music, language, cultural and national rebirth has also been recognised by South Africa universities such as the University of South Africa, University of Zululand, University of Fort Hare and the University of Stellenbosch.

His chairmanship of the Southern African Music Rights Organisation is also the most distinctive contribution to the politics of music composition and intellectual property rights. Not only did he participate in the formulation of SAMRO's roles in the entirety of the music landscape but he also was also key in the post-1994 commissioning of new work. His role as the trustee of SAMRO's Foundation made it possible for him to also see to the publication of three volumes of *South Africa Sings*, profiling the choral literature of many black composers to have ever reached the African popular spheres.

Khumalo's work and engagement with South Africa's intellectual and cultural life is indeed a feat to be etched for prosperity. A Zulu proverb, which captures the heroic deed of a national treasure like Mzilikazi Khumalo, says "Kohamba izinsizwa kosala izibongo" (Warriors will leave this world and their names will remain).

Ndlelanhle nina bakwaKhumalo!

#### **Acknowledgement**

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