

Bonse Aba

“Bonse Aba” is an arrangement of a traditional folk song from the Bemba tribe of Zambia, Africa. It was arranged by Andrew Fischer in 2004, and popularized by Lawrence Kaptein. It contains elements of both Native and Christian Zambian music.

This report is divided into the following sections:

[Lyrics](#)

[I. Bonse Aba](#)

[II. Bonse Aba](#)

[III. Zambian Music](#)

[IV. Zambian Music](#)

[V. Bemba Tribe](#)

[VI. Bemba Tribe](#)

[VII. Andrew Fischer](#)

[VIII. Lawrence Kaptein](#)

[Audio Links and Discography](#)

[References](#)

Lyrics¹

Bonse aba mu pokelela
Ba li pele maka akuba bana
kuba bana kuba bana
kuba bana bakwa lesa

All who sing have the right to be called the
children of God

I. Bonse Aba

From introduction to the Sheet Music, by Andrew Fischer and Lawrence Kaptein²

Translation: **All who sing have the right to be called the children of God.** (from the original Bemba (Chibemba) language which is spoken primarily in Zambia. Providing a word-for-word English translation of any Bembe text is challenging, since many Bembe words have multiple meanings and can vary depending upon the context in which they are used. The English translation provided here (similar to John 1:12) is intended to convey the broad sentiment of the piece.

"Bonse Aba" is a Christian song of celebration that is popular throughout Zambia. Though often sung without accompaniment, "Bonse Aba" may be performed with drums or other percussion instruments. Using a combination of several low- and high-sounding drums (playing contrasting

rhythms) with several types of hand-held African percussion instruments can be very effective. For both aural and visual authenticity, African percussion should be utilized rather than Latin American instruments such as maracas, tambourines, etc. The use of movement within the choir is also stylistically appropriate and adds tremendously to the overall impact of the piece. Uniform swaying from side-to-side on one verse, with the addition of hand claps (usually on primary beats: one and three) is but one of many movement possibilities. Encouraging the singers to suggest and experiment with movement can also enrich the learning experience for the chorus. Keep in mind, the piece has a sacred text, so regardless of the energetic character of the music, movement should remain dignified.

This short piece may be repeated as many times as desired. It could be effectively used as a choral processional or as a free-standing piece on a choral program. The soloist(s) could be male or female or a combination of voices. "Bonse Aba" could be performed using all women, all men, all children, or any combination that is practical. This flexibility is also part of the idiom and singers should be encouraged to try the piece in a variety of voicings. Experiment with voice parts; male and female choristers should find the part that feels the most comfortable and is the most enjoyable to sing. Vocal embellishments are easily improvised (also part of the idiom) and should be tastefully executed and in the style of the song. Celebratory whoops and shouts could be added and are used to indicate an intensification of feeling and excitement as the piece progresses. A tone that has a sturdy, folk-like quality should be utilized on "Bonse Aba." A more conventional choral tone appropriate for most western art music, including the use of vibrato (at least for the chorus) should be avoided.

II. Bonse Aba

Editor's Note: This section is a transcription of my email and telephone interviews with the Arranger, Andrew Fischer

"Thanks for your interest in Bonse Aba. I hope you and your choir are enjoying the piece. I don't know much of the history regarding the piece, or who wrote it. I learned it while traveling through the bush in Zambia. Most of the information I know is on the inside cover of the music. It's just a song they sing in church. The name Bonse Aba is not the name of the song in Zambia, it's just the first two words of the text which we started using to refer to the piece, and it stuck as a title.

I had just finished my Junior year in high school in 2004, and then took the summer to go to Zambia and Ethiopia. I was there digging wells and putting in drip irrigation systems for schools and villages. A bush is just a term that refers to the rural "outback" of Africa. It is the middle of nowhere literally fifty miles (or more) from any city, electricity, water, paved roads...

I heard this song in a rural church of a village called Lufenyama. The village is in a region of Zambia called the Copper Belt, where the primary language spoken is Bemba, or ChiBemba. There are a series of about 40 villages that comprise what I called "The village of Lufenyama"

earlier. Each little group of huts is an extended family. They are often in situations of too many children and not enough adults which makes economic progress rather challenging.

A woman taught this song to me while we were riding in the back of a truck. (I did not have an audio or video recorder with me.) I only learned that woman's version of the melody. I don't even know the name of the church that woman belonged to. She was just visiting our camp to see what we were up to. I don't even know her name. As for the harmonies, I learned the general feel of what harmonies they tend to use and so I just made up four in that style to fit a four part choir.

They sing all the music from memory. It is taught through oral tradition. They sing for fun and for worship and songs like this are about six verses longer than in the version I've published. They sing when they feel like it, they harmonize when they feel like it, they clap and dance when they feel like it, and they make up new verses when they feel like it.

The pieces don't have names, they just sing them and everyone who recognizes it joins in. I encountered several songs that had different versions in different sections of the Copper Belt.

Religious services consist of a man or woman who speaks to the group and occasionally is so overcome with the group energy in the room that they start to sing. Everyone joins in and then they all sing for about thirty minutes, shifting seamlessly from song to song. Songs are either monorhythmic/polyphonic or call and response, with the response being monorhythmic/polyphonic.

When I returned from Africa for my Senior Year, I told my High School music teacher about my experience in Africa. She told me that she would help me with the piece, but not until I wrote it down. I immediately went to the library, and within an hour had written the piece, which I then showed to my astounded teacher.

I arranged the song for a group called the Arapahoe Singers, directed by Kelly Parmenter. The Arapahoe Singers were a group of 16 singers from Arapahoe High School in Littleton Colorado, the school which I attended. They sang in school, and at various venues in the community. The original recording of Bonse Aba by the Arapahoe Singers is available as an audio file, which I may upload to YouTube. There is a second recording on CD of the Arapahoe Concert Choir. In my opinion, later performances by other choirs surpass these original recordings.

A year later, in my Freshman year at Colorado University, I mentioned my love of the Zambian choral sounds to Dr. Kaptein in my first audition with him. I told him about the piece my friends and I had sung. He looked at it, and then offered to get it published. Pure strokes of luck!

I have seen a few of the performances on YouTube. It is often used as an encore piece. There is a wide range of interpretations of the music, and I find that the best ones are usually the groups that follow the instructions I've published the least closely. This is a piece that lends itself to creativity. For example - adding voices, and experimenting with different movements and percussion instruments.

So much effort is given to reproducing the aural experience of Zambians singing the song. While that is important in its own right, I feel that a much more worthwhile goal is to attempt replication of WHY the Zambians sing the way they do, and not necessarily HOW it sounds when they do it. They sing for community, expression, freedom, worship and release. They sing at the tops of their lungs or from the bottoms of their hearts, and it is never an isolated activity.

You can see them singing even when their mouths are silent as they walk from the well with the buckets on their heads or as they sit alone in the dust in front of their hut. They sing for no audience but themselves, and I think it is important for western choirs to achieve that mentality during this song, even if they are letting people sit and watch as they do it. Studying and replicating only the sound will render Bonse Aba devoid of all it has to teach us in the west about the hearts of the Zambian people.

Look up Texas All-State Men's choir 2009 under the directorship of Dr. Kaptein singing this song. It is a wonderful example of creativity and energy that really brings the piece alive. And Kaptein clearly used Bonse Aba as an effective tool to give the students a powerful musical experience, which you can see by reading the comments under the video.”

III. Zambian Music³

Zambia has a rich heritage of music which falls roughly into three categories: traditional, popular and Christian.

Traditional Zambian music is rooted in the beliefs and practices of Zambia's various ethnic groups and has suffered some decline in the last three decades. Traditional Zambian music once had clear ritual purposes or was an expression of the social fabric of the culture. Songs were used to teach, to heal, to appeal to spirits, and for mere enjoyment. Despite the decline of traditional music, its influences can still be heard in many of today's Zambian musical forms. The ubiquitous African "call-and-response" can be heard in almost every Zambian song no matter what the style. Traditional drum rhythms and polymeters are evident in many different kinds of Zambian music. Contemporary popular forms such as Zambian *Kalindula* also exhibit traces of traditional music in the finger-picking style used by guitarists.

Christian music: Not surprisingly, music in today's Zambian Christian churches exhibits traditional, colonial, and popular musical elements. Traditional influences can be heard in the call-and-response method of performance practice and in the use of traditional drums and percussion instruments in some churches. Vocal timbre also reflects traditional aesthetic preferences. Ululation is a frequent feature employed by women when religious sentiment is particularly high. Although most early Christian missionaries to Zambia frowned on the use of traditional instruments in worship, the use of drums has become increasingly more common since the middle of the twentieth century. Dance has also become a regular feature in some Zambian worship.

Popular influences can also be heard in the newer repertory, some of which is borrowed from urban contemporary gospel, some from so-called "contemporary Christian music" from the United States, and some from Zambian popular idioms. The use of electronic synthesizers and guitars has also made its way into the church. The flow of influence between church music and the popular realm can also be heard in recordings by groups such as The Glorious Band, Zambian Acapella, and Glorious Hosanna Band.

The influence of Euro-American hymnody is also evident in the music of many Zambian congregations. Hymns from British and American hymnals continue to be part of the musical fabric of many churches, and many harmonic practices are derived from Western hymn influences. Among the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a unique system of notation called Tonic Sol-fa is used to transmit hymns. Invented by John Curwen, the system was imported into Africa by the British in the nineteenth century. The Heritage Singers Choir and Heritage Brothers of the SDA church helped popularize this form of harmonious music.

IV. Zambian Music⁴

Long before nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and colonial rule altered its fate forever, the country now known as Zambia had many self-governing kingdoms. Each king had his own highly esteemed royal musicians, and each kingdom had its own music, often played at tribal ceremonies. Drums — such as the high-pitched "talking" *vimbuzza* — were most popular, but stringed instruments, such as the babatone, as well as bows, reed flutes, horns, bells, xylophones, and the *kalimba* (or hand piano) were played, too. Singing often accompanied instrumental music, with one voice leading while others responded in a chorus.

As the twentieth century overtook the nineteenth, these kingdoms were replaced by centralized rule, and political, economic, and social change buffeted the country. Beginning in the 1920s, the rich ore of Zambia's Copperbelt was exploited. Zambians poured in from all corners of the country to work the mines. This migration created a melting pot. As a result, musical styles influenced each other and were enhanced by foreign instruments, such as the accordion and guitar, brought into the country by the British ruling class.

As the century progressed, folk music joined traditional African rhythms as the most-played music in northern Zambia's mining towns. Troubadours travelled between the mining camps, entertaining exhausted workers with music and morality tales. At the same time, an interest grew in collecting and preserving traditional music.

In the 1960s, as the British released their hold on Zambia and the country became independent, the Zambia Broadcasting Service (ZBS), Zambia's radio station, was formed. ZBS made a concentrated effort to collect ceremonial, festival, and work songs nationwide. Alick Nkhata, ZBS's director and a musician himself, formed the Lusaka Radio Band (later called the Big Gold Six Band). The band promoted Zambian music, translating original rural recordings into Westernized scored music. Go to the Inter-Continental Hotel in Lusaka and you might still find that band playing, minus a few members.

However, most of Zambian radio at the time played the Congolese rumba, popular with former colonials and privileged people in urban areas.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, rebellion was brewing in Zambia, just as it was elsewhere. "Zamrock," Zambia's contribution to rock 'n' roll, served as a soundtrack for protests over a variety of topics, including tribal taboos.

Many Zamrock songs were a mixture of English and local languages, and the music was extremely popular. A Zamrock group called Musi-o-tunya released Zambia's first commercial LP. Zamrock hit a high point with the band Great Witch, which had a huge following. Still, it wasn't until later in that decade that Zambia produced what some people consider uniquely Zambian music.

In the 1970s, Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, a musician himself, decreed that no less than 95 percent of music on the radio had to be of Zambian origin. Kaunda's intention was to create a solely Zambian musical presence, but things didn't work out exactly the way he wanted. Rather than creating their own music, Zambian teenagers scrambled to become pop stars by playing exact copies of the music of other African countries.

One musician, however, Paul Ngozi, a former member of the Musi-o-tunya Zamrock group, is credited with creating *kalindula*, a new urban style of music, which featured a lead guitar and a rock/rumba beat. Ngozi infused the music with lyrics in local languages. Extremely danceable, *kalindula* (named after a traditional bass instrument) became the generic Zambian style of music in the 1980s.

In 1991, Kaunda and his United National Independence Party were voted out of office. Frederick Chiluba became president, and his Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) party promoted political and economic pluralism. Facing a major economic slump, the new government had other issues to focus on besides the protection and promotion of music. At the same time, new radio stations, TV, and video flooded the country with outside musical influences, such as reggae, ragga, rhythm and blues, hip-hop, and gospel. And piracy hit Zambia hard. With no safeguards to stop them, bootleggers in Tanzania, for example, were able to make money by copying and selling the music of Zambian artists.

Musicians themselves were battered by the bad economy, and most *kalindula* bands broke up. Many veteran musicians died. There were a few exciting events that marked the decade: women singers became popular and folk music enjoyed a revival. Nonetheless, notes Chisha Folotiya, managing director of Mondo Music Corporation Limited in Zambia, the Zambian music industry went belly up in the late 1990s. Folotiya has been instrumental in reviving Zambia's failing music industry ever since.

Zambia's only professional record company, Mondo Music Corporation Limited, began operations in 1999, and is making a bold attempt to revive the country's music industry. To do this, it offers its audience diversity — everything from traditional recordings to the country's most modern music.

"Our most ambitious release, The Rhythm Nation Project, showcases sixteen up-and-coming artists who we feel will be defining Zambian music in the new millennium," says Folotiya. "Like their predecessors in the 1970s who adapted rock 'n' roll to a Zambian flavor and called it Zamrock, our young artists and producers have interpreted the music they have grown up with — R&B, rap, and ragga, for example—and have given it a local twist."

Again, it seems, Zambian music is redefining itself, stirring its melting pot to produce a uniquely Zambian mix of music. Only this time the stirrings seem to be reviving the music industry, too. As Folotiya notes, "Our country once had a vibrant music industry that was decimated by piracy during the 1990s. But now we are selling 50,000 albums per year within our own borders, and are targeting 150,000 records over the next two years. Such volume might seem small compared to more advanced markets, but it's a sign of good things when you consider that before Mondo Music, no Zambian artist had sold more than 3,000 copies of anything for over ten years."

V. Bemba Tribe⁵

The **Bemba** (or 'BaBemba' using the Ba- prefix to mean 'people of', and also called 'Awemba' or 'BaWemba' in the past) belong to a large group of peoples mainly in the Northern, Luapula and Copperbelt Provinces of Zambia who trace their origins to the Luba and Lunda states of the upper Congo basin, in what became Katanga Province in southern Congo-Kinshasa (DRC). Bemba history is a major historical phenomenon in the development of chieftainship in a large and culturally homogeneous region of central Africa.

The Bemba are those who consider themselves subjects of the Chitimukulu, the Bemba's single paramount chief. They lived in villages of 100 to 200 people and numbered 250,000 strong in 1963. There are over 30 Bemba clans, named after animals or natural organisms, such as the royal clan, "the people of the crocodile" (Bena Ng'andu) or the Bena Nona (Mushroom Clan). They were the people who finally put a halt to the northward march of the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana descended Ngoni people, through Chief Chitapankwa.

In contemporary Zambia, the word "Bemba" actually has several meanings. It may designate people of Bemba origin, regardless of where they live, e.g. whether they live in urban areas or in the original rural Bemba area. Alternatively, it may encompass a much larger population which includes some 'eighteen different ethnic groups', who together with the Bemba form a closely related ethnolinguistic cluster of matrilineal-matrifocal agriculturalists known as the Bemba-speaking peoples of Zambia.

The Bemba language (Chibemba) is most closely related to the Bantu languages Kaonde (in Zambia and the DRC), Luba (in the DRC), Nsenga and Tonga (in Zambia), and Nyanja/Chewa (in Zambia and Malawi). In Zambia, Chibemba is mainly spoken in the Northern, Luapula and

Copperbelt Provinces, and has become the most widely spoken African language in the country, although not always as a first language.

VI. Bemba Tribe⁶

By the late nineteenth century, several important Bemba chiefs had become involved in the region's slave trade. At around the same time, Roman Catholic missionaries of the White Fathers order tried to extend their influence to the northern Bemba area. At first rejected by the local chiefs, the Catholic priests were able to take advantage of a complex and, for the Bemba, deteriorating situation. Pressure from the colonial government, the British South Africa Company, hostile neighbors such as the Ngoni, and the slave traders seeking to increase their influence inspired some Bemba chiefs to meet with and test the intentions of the missionaries.

After the European priests were allowed access to some villages, the formative event of Bemba-Catholic relations took place upon the death of chief Mwamba in 1898. Mwamba actually left the custodianship of his people to Father Dupont of the Kayambi mission. While the French priest "ruled" for a fairly short period, his presence and negotiations allowed the Bemba to form alliances and pacts that kept their various chiefdoms from some of the feared social and political upheavals of the period. Although other Christian missions arrived and made some headway, there remains a particularly strong tie between the Bemba of chiefs Mwamba, Chitimukulu, and Nkula, and the Catholic Church.

Religious practices among the Bemba are focused on ancestors and nature spirits. The intersection of these older forms of worship and control of the spirit world with imported Christian practices is rather complex. It is common for Christians to participate in certain localized seasonal practices of communal rites carried out by chiefs and their surrogates. Christian services regularly employ traditional Bemba musical forms in the creation and performance of hymns. However, the more that Christianity is combined with older rites, the more likely it is that these rites will be the practice of syncretic or apostolic churches rather than that of mainstream Catholic or Protestant congregations. There is also a tacit recognition of the Bemba spirit called Lesa as the equivalent of the Christian "God." While evidence suggests that pre-Christian views of Lesa relegated him to a relatively ordinary status as one of many spirit beings, over time, Lesa has been accepted as the creator spirit among Bemba Christians.

VII. Andrew Fischer

Editor's Note: This section is a transcription of my email and telephone interviews with the Arranger, Andrew Fischer

I was born in 1986 and am currently a Junior at CU Boulder earning a Music Education degree. I'm actually twenty-two. I will be twenty-three on December 26, 2009. I don't have a resume.

Pretty much I've played piano since second grade. I've sung in choirs since seventh grade. I decided I wanted to be a choir director while I was sitting in a rehearsal my senior year of high school for the mixed Colorado All-State choir, directed that year by Rene Clausen. Now I am a junior Choral Music Education student at University of Colorado, Boulder set to graduate in spring of 2010. After that I hope to continue my education in conducting both choral and instrumental ensembles.

I have arranged another African song for SATB chorus. In my opinion, this song is even more interesting than Bonse Aba. The publisher rejected it because they wanted something more tame. I have written other solos and choral music that has yet to be published.

Dr. Kaptein is the director of the University Choir where I sing Tenor at CU, Boulder. I've sung with him for six semesters and have taken choral conducting classes from him. He is a brilliant and inspirational conductor with as much passion for the people making the music as the music itself. I am happy to be working with him and can only hope that some of his musicality rubs off on me.

VIII. Lawrence Kaptein⁷

Lawrence Kaptein is Director of Choral Activities at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He conducts the highly acclaimed University Choir and the Colorado Conductors Chorus (a chamber ensemble composed exclusively of professional choral conductors in the Denver-Boulder area). Kaptein also teaches both graduate and undergraduate choral conducting. Choirs under his leadership have distinguished themselves at state, national, and international choral events throughout Europe and the United States: including the 1997 and 1991 ACDA national conventions, 1994 regional ACDA convention, 1992 Tolosa (Spain) International Choral Competition, and three European concert tours in 1998, 2001, and 2007.

Professor Kaptein has conducted honor choirs and presented choral music workshops throughout the US. In 1997 and 2008, he traveled to Korea at the invitation of the Ansan City government (their professional City Choir is under the direction of CU choral alumnus Shin-Hwa Park) to conduct concerts and present clinics and workshops for Korean collegiate institutions and professional choral organization. Professor Kaptein has published articles in the *Choral Journal*, *American Choral Review*, *Bulletin of the International Federation of Choral Music*, and *Austrian Musikerziehung Österreichischer Bundesverlag*. His *Selected List of Ethnic and Ethnically-Inspired Choral Repertoire* has appeared in over twenty state choral music periodicals. He served as a major contributor to "The Foundation of Artistry" – an annotated listing of quality high school choral repertoire published in 2002 by the American Choral Directors Association. Kaptein is editor of the *Lawrence Kaptein Choral Series* published by Alliance Music of Houston, Texas.

He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in choral music from the University of Southern California, where he was inducted into the Pi Kappa Lambda Honor Society. Over the past several decades, Kaptein has been a champion of contemporary American composers and

multicultural choral music. In 2007, Kaptein received the Marinus Smith Teaching Award from the University Parent's Association.

Audio Links and Discography

Select YouTubes

Texas All-State Men's Choir 2009

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpUkS9-ObDM>

Amis Honor Choir – London

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIq-bYUCmhw>

Garden Grove High School Vocal Ensemble

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdgx1Qwedl0>

St. Patrick's Concert Choir

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APx2kLzGIT0>

Schuylkill County Chorus

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPoWHsfhcM4>

Countryside High School

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8MIFO51oEs&feature=related>

Julia and Isabella Middle School

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsSfOELZg1s&feature=related>

Select MP3 Downloads:

If you subscribe to iTunes, BuyMusic, Rhapsody or a similar service, keyword in “Bonse Aba” where you can listen to a sample from each artist, and then purchase/download the song for 99 cents. Or, you can listen to a sample from *Select MP3 Downloads* below, which are cuts from CD Albums - then purchase/download the song for 99 cents.

There are no MP3 downloads for “Bonse Aba”

Search for “Language” “Bemba” at this link to find and listen to samples of authentic Bemba music

<http://ilam.ru.ac.za/gsearch.html>

References:

The above article about the song “Bonse Aba” was extracted from these websites. For more information, please read the articles:

¹ <http://ph.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070906183857AAXcGr8>

² <http://www.alliancemusic.com/product.cfm?iProductID=765>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Zambia

⁴ <http://www.exploratorium.edu/eclipse/zambia/music.html>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bemba_people

⁶ Book: African Folklore, Peek and Yankah: <http://tinyurl.com/br6c82>

⁷ <http://www.colorado.edu/music/faculty/kaptein.html>

<http://www.jstor.org/pss/849981>