

ROY TRAVIS

BIOGRAPHY (BY AKIN EUBA, 1993)

- The American composer Roy Travis's interest in the use of African material began in the 1960s when he participated in the African Music Study Group, led by the Ghanaian master drummer, Robert Ayitee, at UCLA.

A deep level of synthesis in African-derived works

- As a Professor of composition and theory in a department with a strong ethnomusicology programme (the UCLA Department of Music) Travis' approach was more than casual. He transcribed and thoroughly researched the traditional material that he used in each of his African-derived works and thus achieved a deep level of synthesis.

Travis' first African-derived work

- The first work produced by Travis in a neo-African idiom is the *African Sonata* for piano, which was completed in 1966.
- Its four movements respectively make use of elements derived from (i) *sikyi*, an Ashanti dance, (ii) a Bambara dance song, (iii) *sohu*, an Ewe dance and (iv) *adowa*, another Ashanti dance.

Further exploration of the neo-African idiom



- Travis continued his exploration of the neo-African idiom in the five-movement *Duo Concertante* for violin and piano. Here, only the first and last movements include African material, which consists of rhythms derived from two Ewe dances, *gakpa* and *asafo*.

An experiment on African and Western Instruments (*Switched-on-Ashanti*)

- In *Switched-on-Ashanti*, Travis combines African and Western instruments. Each of the three movements is based on an Ashanti dance, as follows: (i) *akom*, (ii) *tachema-chema*, (iii) *sikyi*. According to the composer's sleeve notes for the LP record of *Switched-on-Ashanti*, the entire rhythmic basis of the score was supplied by Ghanaian master drummer,

An experiment on African and Western Instruments (*Switched-on-Ashanti*)

- Kwasi Badu, who used authentic traditional instruments to record the dances in successive, synchronized, polyphonic layers. In a 'live' performance, a solo player of Western flute/piccolo performs with a tape that comprises African instruments, Western flutes and synthesizers.

Travis' most ambitious work

- The most ambitious work by Travis in which African elements are used is the full-length opera, the *Black Bacchants*, which is scored for five principal singers, triple chorus and a full symphonic orchestra combined with a large ensemble of African traditional instruments (selected mostly from Ghana).

Travis' most ambitious work continued

- The *Black Bacchants* is a challenging exercise in intercultural craftsmanship and in this work, Travis extends not only the frontiers of operatic writing but of orchestration as well.

Travis is an Emeritus Professor of Music at UCLA.