

# BOOK REVIEW

**Andrew Lilley.** *The Artistry of Bheki Mseleku*. Somerset West: African Minds, 2020. 247pp. Appendices. \$52.00. Paper. ISBN 978-1-928331-66-7.

*The Artistry of Bheki Mseleku* by Andrew Lilley represents a significant and valuable contribution to the study of jazz in South Africa. Lavishly produced, the large format book (at just under A4 size) contains a wealth of resources for exploring Bheki Mseleku's musicianship and his relationship to several significant North American jazz musicians such as McCoy Tyner, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane. The author, himself a highly accomplished and respected jazz pianist and pedagogue, seeks to delineate the contours of Mseleku's "distinctive South African voice" by systematically analyzing his approaches to composition and improvisation.

Mseleku (1955–2008) was—and remains—a very influential figure in South African jazz, and his compositions (for example, *Angola*) are part of the country's developing jazz canon. In his 2008 obituary for *The Guardian*, the British jazz critic John Fordham characterizes Mseleku as a "self-taught Natal-born pianist, saxophonist, guitarist and singer." An enigmatic figure, Mseleku arrived in London in the mid-1980s and performed some of his earliest gigs there, sometimes appearing solo and occasionally playing piano and tenor saxophone simultaneously.

He recorded his debut album *Celebration* in 1991, and the live recording *Meditations* appeared the following year. In all, he produced a total of seven albums, including the posthumous *Beyond the Stars* (2021), a previously unreleased 2003 solo London session (Ansell 2021). Mseleku worked with a range of respected international jazz figures, such as Pharoah Sanders, Charlie Haden, Elvin Jones, Marvin "Smitty" Smith, and other luminaries. The company he kept and recorded with speaks volumes to his international stature and musical accomplishments.

*The Artistry of Bheki Mseleku* is divided into two main sections. The first, "Analysis of Compositions," provides detailed transcriptions and analyses of some twenty of Mseleku's compositions. There is a wealth of material on offer here for the serious jazz scholar; in addition to harmonic and motivic

detail, Lilley provides insights into the bebop canon (what we might term bebop's common practice). Understanding this material does require some prior knowledge of the technical nuances and complexities of jazz, but the reader is well rewarded by the sophistication of Lilley's analytical approach.

The question of influence in jazz is undoubtedly complex, with some North American scholars claiming that South African jazz musicians merely absorbed the recorded soundscapes of the time. This begs the question of the interpretive and creative lenses that local jazz musicians brought to focus on the North American canon, and how they transformed the existing material and understood it through their own individual histories. Lilley points out how many of Mseleku's compositions explicitly acknowledge such influences in their dedications (to Monk, Coltrane, and others) in similar fashion to Mankunku's dedications in a previous era (*Yakhal'Inkomo* comes to mind). At the same time, he recognizes the "local" elements (Afro-pop and traditional township) which manifest as cyclical forms in Mseleku's compositional oeuvre.

The second section, "Improvisation," provides nine transcriptions of Mseleku's solos, an object lesson in musicological detail and analysis. Here Lilley draws together significant elements from the North American jazz canon to demonstrate the range of material and sonic resources Mseleku's playing encompassed, from Monk's angular whole-tone phrases to the rich quartal voicings of McCoy Tyner. Once again, though, Lilley reveals the profound musical transformations Mseleku wrought on this material and how these transformations contribute to his unique voice.

The two appendices contain a transcription of Mseleku's South Bank show interview (1992) and twenty or so complete transcriptions of Mseleku's compositions from the original recordings. These are resources of inestimable value in understanding Mseleku's uniqueness as a major South African jazz musician, and they provide a platform for further investigation of his artistry, as Lilley aptly puts it.

Clearly a labor of love, *The Artistry of Bheki Mseleku* is a significant addition to the developing canon of South African jazz, with rich analyses and authoritative transcriptions of Mseleku's compositions and approaches to improvisation. As such, it may well serve as an exemplar for future analyses of local musical practices and stands as a first-rate contribution to jazz scholarship. Highly recommended, the book deserves much praise for its wealth of resources in understanding the unique creativity of Bheki Mseleku.

Marc Duby  
 University of South Africa  
 Pretoria, South Africa  
 marcduby@me.com

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.60

**If you liked this, you may also like:**

- Miller, Ivor. 2000. "A Secret Society Goes Public: The Relationship Between Abakuá and Cuban Popular Culture." *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 161–88. doi: [10.2307/524726](https://doi.org/10.2307/524726).
- Barber, Karin. 1987. "Popular Arts in Africa." *African Studies Review* 30 (3): 1–78. doi: [10.2307/524538](https://doi.org/10.2307/524538).
- Sanga, Imani. 2010. "Postcolonial Cosmopolitan Music in Dar Es Salaam: Dr. Remmy Ongala and the Traveling Sounds." *African Studies Review* 53 (3): 61–76. doi: [10.1017/S0002020600005679](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600005679).