



Human treasure: Madosini Latozi Mphahleli (centre) at the National Arts Festival. She is widely celebrated, but her music is not included on many tertiary curriculums. Photo: Justin Sholk

Dance to a different (archival) beat

As seen in the African Open music project, archivists can use their practice to effect curricular reform

COMMENT
Lizabé Lambrechts

In September this year, Heritage Month was launched under the theme, “celebrating South Africa’s living human treasures”, and three women, including the musician Madosini Latozi Mphahleli, were honoured for their contributions in preserving local knowledge and idioms.

Mphahleli is widely celebrated, yet very few tertiary institutions in South Africa include her music as part of their curriculum. The call on music departments to critically engage with their curricula to reflect the broader music landscape in which they function was raised almost 40 years ago, yet most departments remain largely set in ideological practices, value frames and conservative syllabi conceived to serve the previous dispensation.

Musicologists Willemien Froneman and Stephanus Muller recently wrote in *Fault Lines: A Primer on Race, Science and Society* that “institutionalised music at South African universities historically assume white cultural interests as normative”, resulting in the “embrace of a canon and its constituent ethnocentric and nonrepresentative practices that is ‘neither practical nor ethically defensible’”.

Whereas some departments have included more diverse musics into

their curricula, Froneman and Muller argue that integrating diversity into the central “tradition” of Western art music, “does not displace or affect institutional commitment to the Western art music tradition, in fact, it props it up and serves to strengthen its holds at tertiary institutions”.

South African music studies is not alone in this debate. In a recent article, titled “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame”, Philip Ewell from Hunter College in New York argues that music theory as it is currently taught assumes Western notation, theory and harmony as normative, ignoring the rich music theories of India, Asia, South America and Africa. Although adding black and female composers to our textbooks is important, Ewell maintains, it is not enough, because it still leaves intact the epistemological frame by which value is judged.

It is within this field of discursive engagement and political actions directed towards change, that archives can play an important role in epistemic delinking and decolonising higher education institutions.

Although recognising that archives work to a slower beat than that which is currently demanded in debates on decolonisation in our universities, this temporal differential is important in terms of long-term institutional and curricular reform; reform that does not fall into “solutionism” and quick fixes, but commits to the

questions and thinking involved in epistemic delinking.

The archive is involved in this process in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, it serves as evidence of the past, and can be deconstructed to reveal the systems and rules imposed to maintain epistemological authority. On the other, it can be used to explore alternative structures and registers through engaging with new collections or by exploring previous collections in new ways to empower multiple paradigms and epistemologies.

What does it mean to think with, and through, an interrogation of archival practices? How does one delink disciplinary thinking through such archival, process-based interrogations?

These are the type of questions that we are asking at the Africa Open Institute for Music, Research and Innovation through archive-centred music research projects on material preserved in the Documentation Centre for Music (Domus) at Stellenbosch University.

Domus was established in 2005 by Stephanus Muller to collect, preserve, protect and promote South African music, as well as advance research into this subject. The centre was conceptualised as an archive-centred music-research project to effect change within conservative institutional spaces by promoting and gradually institutionalising forms of epistemic delinking.

This process was supported through an active expansion of the existing archive collections of mostly Western art music to include jazz, indigenous African music (both orally composed

and notated), opera, popular music, boeremusiek, klezmer, folk music, films and material from New Music composers.

The increasingly diverse collections and projects the centre allowed the archive to launch created a space for a wide spectrum of communities and musics in South Africa not accommodated within the dominant paradigms of the discipline to form connections. This helped to counter the carelessness towards individuals and communities practised by the historical and contemporary academy.

From enabling academic discussions and seminars and curating a range of conversations about isiXhosa and Western art music, to recording albums and supporting avant-garde jazz and popular music concerts and events for new music composers, the projects launched through Domus strategically acted in expanding the academic musical imaginary, while pursuing an eclectic collection strategy.

In this way, the archive not only challenges the discipline and the kinds of research and projects the discipline regulates as viable and possible through institutional structures like committees, curricula, guidelines and the like, but the execution of these projects and research begins to require different archival mechanisms of control, decision making, description practices and user strategies.

Although one may argue that the archive-driven projects at Domus have yet to engage fully with the

potential of alternative ways of knowing, the pressure towards systemic change and reforming top-down institutionalised managerial systems may point in the direction of how archives and their custodians can play a role in transforming our higher education institutions.

It is through active archivists, invested in the task of decolonisation through constant evaluation of their practices and collecting material in tandem with in-depth and critical research, that our institutional doors will be opened to diversity and change, as well as other ways of creating knowledge.

Embracing slower epistemic change driven by archival, process-based interrogations, versus immediate changes called for by sociopolitical actors, will begin to cultivate long-term institutional and curricular reform.

Archives are vital for the present moment of decolonisation and epistemic delinking, addressing the social and political imperatives of our time, while at the same time working towards the future by preserving the material remnants that will allow the next generation to ask the questions of the future.

Dr Lizabé Lambrechts is a senior research fellow at the Africa Open Institute for Music, Research and Innovation at Stellenbosch University. This article is based on her recent paper in the journal *Social Dynamics* titled “The becoming of an archive: perspectives on a music archive and the limits of institutionality”

