

HONORARY GRADUATE

Khabi Mngoma

We have in Professor Khabi Mngoma a mind and soul that encompass the poetry of the African people. His activities in promoting music as a cultural act, as an act of poetry and as an academic discipline sum up the man and his quest for beauty: beauty, which in John Keats' words is truth, as truth is beauty. Mngoma's career is studded with high and splendid moments of spiritual self-fulfilment, deriving in turn from the inspiration he has the graciousness to acknowledge he received from the choir and orchestra he conducts, the students he teaches, the colleagues who support him, and the community that appreciates the life-sustaining poetry his music provides.

Born in Johannesburg in 1922, Khabi Mngoma studied at Adams College from 1945 to 1947, where he obtained the post-matriculation Teacher's Certificate. It was here that he came under the influence of R Caluza, famous composer and music teacher, whose music is a regular feature in the repertoire of Khabi's choral performances. Another Adams music teacher whom we remember with affection was Simon Ngubane, also a mentor of Khabi's. Thus began a music career for him that was to span forty years and more and enrich our cultural life across the country. Mngoma and Es'kia Mphahlele founded the Syndicate of African Artists in 1948, and under its auspices promoted music and theatre throughout the fifties.

Through sheer self-application and without the benefit of full-time study Mngoma attained several professional qualifications in music: Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music in London - Teaching and Performance; and Teachers' and Performers' Licentiates in Music at the University of South Africa.

He studied singing and choral conducting under Ngubane at Adams College; harmony and counterpoint orchestration and orchestral conducting under Joseph Traunack; violin with Joseph Spira; violoncello with Mrs Dancer; singing with Annie Lam-brechts; piano with Milton Oerson; and keyboard harmony under Dr William Patt.

Since 1945 Mngoma has made the most significant effort in bringing African music and serious Western music to the African communities across the country. No one that we know has brought to musical performance, teaching, organization, appreciation and interpretation in his community service the wealth of experience and discipline from both the Western and African traditions that Mngoma has.

In all these functions he has constantly and painstakingly sought to enrich musical experience and the teaching of the discipline and choral performance with his authoritative knowledge of the two streams of music. He has constantly treated music teaching and its performance as functional in the humanistic process of education and cultural consciousness. To promote this consciousness and give it purpose Mngoma has often insisted that students and teachers of music should immerse themselves as long as possible in the other arts, such as literature, painting, sculpture, architecture and theatre. This is to enlarge the student's field of reference, to establish a cultural context necessary if music has to be experienced as an educational process.

Of Mngoma's own performances as a lyric tenor, a music critic in *The Daily News* commented in 1955 on the singer's "rich musical culture, his clear realization of the most subtle stylistic differences between composers, his sensitivity and impeccable taste." The critic concluded his review with the sentence, "I have no hesitation in predicting a brilliant future for this admirable artist".

The *Rand Daily Mail* critic, Dora Sowden, referred to Mngoma as "one of the most remarkable musicians in South Africa. Apart from his personal attainments, his work in the townships has probably been the greatest contribution to good music that anyone has made."

As music organizer and adjudicator Mngoma is a household name in several parts of the country. In 1948 he formed the Orlando Music Society and in 1954 the Moroka Township Music Appreciation Group. For five years from 1959-1964 he worked for the Johannesburg City Council as a cultural officer, with music as his specialization. Six years earlier he had set in motion the highly regarded annual choral performance of Handel's *Messiah* - this while he was in charge of Chiawelo Community Centre in Soweto. During his five years of service with the Johannesburg City Council Mngoma took charge of the annual Bantu Music Festivals, bringing together several choirs to Johannesburg from various parts of the country for every such occasion. He also tutored choirs for these events.

One of Mngoma's greatest and most enduring achievements, especially in the midst of heartrending urban poverty, where stability amounts to sheer day-to-day survival, was his founding in 1959 of the Ionian Music Society in Johannesburg. He directed it until 1986. This was the realization of a dream to have a central choir as a model. He formed the Ionian Orchestra which accompanied the choir. Five years later the Orchestra was twenty-two strong. He subsequently organized and nurtured a youthful Ionian Orchestra of twelve players into the Soweto Symphony Orchestra. The day Mngoma conducted two hundred and forty voices in a performance of Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* in Johannesburg City Hall, for which he was highly commended by the City Council, stands out as one of the highest points of his career. The Ionians were to perform as far afield as Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho and West Germany.

From 1966 to 1975 Mngoma was principal of the African Music and Drama Association under Union Artists at Dorkey House, Johannesburg, at the same time teaching music theory and vocal and instrumental performance - violin and piano.

The music and educational associations of which he is a member and the music honours he has received are legion. The choral performances at which he has been adjudicator are so many that it must suffice to mention but one, the Roodpoort International Eisteddfod of 1981. He has served as chief adjudicator and consultant for the Ford Choirs Contests. He has also been music examiner at various times for national and provincial education departments.

In 1975 Mngoma was asked by the University of Zululand to establish a Department of Music, which he is still serving as Associate Professor.

Khabi Mngoma has a son and a daughter and grandchildren, all of whom have at different times been inspired by him to learn and perform music as singers and instrumentalists. In August he lost his beloved wife, Grace. She had sung with

the Ionians. We know that Khabi Mngoma would like this event to serve also as a tribute to Grace and all she meant to him in their forty years of partnership, the resonances of whose unbroken song we are confident will continue to sustain him.

The University of the Witwatersrand wishes to signify its deep appreciation of Khabi Mngoma's service to the culture of the nation and to music, his warm personality and resilience, and his undaunted courage, by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*. The University is itself so much the richer for being able to count him among its illustrious members.