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## **UCT researcher reviving the history of great African composers**

Internationally recognised cellist, composer and University of Cape Town (UCT) researcher, Dr Thokozani Mhlambi, has shed light on a rich history of great African composers which he hopes will spark a revival in music that has been hidden for years.

For his current work – ‘The Early African Intellectuals as Composers of Music’ project, which will culminate in a [concert on 27 September 2019](#) – Mhlambi has been digging deep into the archives and looking at musical scores and sound samples of some of the great compositions South Africa has produced.

“The whole concept behind the project is to revive interest in the archive of the early works of composers, such as unknown female composer Nokutela Dube, as well as the composer of our national anthem, Enoch Sontonga, and many others whose visibility was erased by our history,” he says.

Dr Mhlambi is also blending exciting new work into this textured musical past. The project promotes new compositions based on old works in the form of hip-hop arrangements and gqom remixes.

The history of the early African intellectuals is intertwined with global connections. “As we seek to reintegrate the South African story – which was hidden in secrecy and conspiracy for so long – into a bigger world story, we will draw from this internationalism,” Dr Mhlambi shares. “It is this internationalism that will allow us to overcome the issues of xenophobia we are currently facing.”

It’s hoped the project will carry the music far, so that more people are able to appreciate, understand and enjoy the work of the early composers.

“In Europe, they had the early music movement in the 1960s, which sought to revive interest in the old composers, like Bach and Corelli. This is a chance for us to do the same, using the African continent as our source, which is our location in the world.”

The project also sheds light on the compositions of the first African in South Africa to receive a degree in music, Reuben Caluza, who wrote ragtime syncopated numbers in the 1920s.

Dr Mhlambi is the National Research Foundation (NRF) Postdoctoral Fellow in Innovation at the Archive & Public Culture Research Initiative at UCT.

The project has given him the opportunity to reflect on his own journey. Music rippled through his life when he was a young boy growing up in Madadeni, a township in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal. There, family would gather to sing from the Wesleyan hymn book before going to bed.

Mhlambi has published on numerous music-related topics. His paper on kwaito, "[Kwaitofabulous](#)", remains one of the most cited papers on popular music in South Africa. Through his research and performances, Mhlambi wants to convey a message of African internationalism, which draws inspiration from the integrated nature of humanity.

"It is this message that prompts me to search for different sounds – from places as far afield as Asia, the Middle East and South America – from which to weave a magic of my own. I think this freedom is important and has not always been easily available to us."

***ENDS***



Dr Thokozani Mhlambi

**Credit:** Njabulo Magubane

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Dr Thokozani Mhlambi

**Credit:** Val Adamson

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### **Note to editors**

The Early African Intellectuals as Composers project will culminate in a concert combining digital and live performances at the South African College of Music in Cape Town on Friday, 27 September 2019. It will be performed by Dr Thokozani Mhlambi and will feature singers from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Opera School, Nomonde Duma and Bulelwa Msane, together with a UCT College of Music jazz-pianist, Lonwabo Mafani, as well as special guests. The concert will form part of South Africa's Heritage Month celebrations and is supported by the National Arts Council and the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

[Tickets are available from Webtickets.](#)

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