

Trials that Trail
Suite for solo viola by Monthati Masebe (2020)

Monthati Masebe and Louise Lansdown
A collaboration

A little about Monthati and Louise

South African born **Monthati Masebe** (she/them), carries a voice that extends far beyond their years. A composer/ pianist and performer. She has done a number of works varying from live music performance commissions to film and television work, art installations and theatre works. She is also very passionate about archiving and challenging the use of preservation in societies today. Their academic work focuses on the nuanced ways music challenged predominant systems and structures- acknowledging the overt political statements and also considering unnoticed ways that influenced a future generation when no one was paying attention. Their current Masters work looks at the existence of queerness in pre-colonial southern Africa, paired with electroacoustic music composed with indigenous instruments.

In Monthati's words...

Louise Lansdown contacted me about doing a commission about the Rivonia Trial. Little did she know that I come from a very political family and that we were quite close to Madiba. I can remember being 6 years old on the phone with Tata on his birthday 18 July, and telling him that I don't agree with his birthday breakfasts with kids because he's taking us away from school. I said "we also want to be big and powerful so we must go to school not sit on your lap". Looking back I laugh at that audacity but it also shows the resilience and strength that our generation had to carry forward from our parents. All the struggle heroes from the Rivonia Trial gave us a taste of freedom. Many of us feel let down, and that the promises we were given didn't come to fruition, but I wanted this suite to offer a platform for us to redefine our struggles and ways we can extend the rope of freedom that was handed to us in a tangled ball.

Our liberators broke down the physical doors that barricaded access but we had to break the intangible chains which were embedded into systems which couldn't be simultaneously broken. So when this opportunity was presented we brainstormed ways that we could teach the history of South Africa's road to liberation in a way that can provide relevance and create an impact. I'm grateful for the guidance Louise gave me both physically (the practicalities about the viola) and conceptually (crafting the message and shared solidarity between South Africa and the United Kingdom). All my

personal aspirations about drawing links and highlighting intersections between western and african art manifested into this reflective suite entitled: ***Trials that Trail***.

South African born violist **Louise Lansdown** studied at UCT and University of Stellenbosch, where she was a student of Jack De Wet and Eric Rycroft. After being awarded an ABRSM Overseas Scholarship to study at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester Louise moved to the UK in 1998. Shortly after finishing her studies at the RNCM in 2000, Louise worked as senior lecturer in the Strings Department at the RNCM until her appointment as Head of Strings at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in 2012.

Louise is the founder of the Cecil Aronowitz International Viola Competition and Festival <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/conservatoire/eventscalendar/cecil-aronowitz-viola-competition>, launched at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in October 2014 as well as the founder and President of the British Viola Society <https://www.britishviolasociety.co.uk/>

Louise, along with her viola students is the founder of a major distance learning education project that the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire runs in collaboration with the Morris Isaacson Centre for Music in Soweto, South Africa called "ARCO". The project was launched in July 2015 and was nominated for a guardian internationalization award in 2018. <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/conservatoire/about-us/arco>

She plays on a French Viola c.1750 and 1890 Sartory bow, both previously belonging to the South African violist Cecil Aronowitz. She has also recently acquired a beautiful viola made by Antoine Gourdon. Louise plays mostly chamber music and solo concerts, collaborating with violists and other musicians across the world. She commissions new music for the viola and concocts hair brain schemes to perform music by Paul Hindemith and much unknown viola music, bringing the viola to many unsuspecting and innocent people. She is a member of the South African "Ubuntu Ensemble". Louise was awarded a PhD from the University of Manchester in 2008.

In 2020 Louise got in touch with Monthati in connection with this commission — all of the world premieres of each of these 10 pieces were given in "live" online concerts performed by viola students from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire during August and September 2020. This concert series raised over £3,000 for the ARCO Project.

In Louise's words...

The idea was to create a set of pieces for the viola remembering in music those who sacrificed their freedom and risked their lives fighting for democracy and equality. The Rivonia Trial was a decisive moment in this journey, and with the last of the trialists passing away in 2020 I desperately wanted to be able to capture something of each of the uniqueness of their characters, struggle and triumphs. The voice of the viola is one

that can cope with extremes, and Monthati's extraordinary creativity and knowledge has resulted in a musical kaleidoscope – an incredible addition to South African music and the viola repertoire. Working with Monthati has been a privilege and I have learnt so much from our collaboration. Their natural feel for the timbre and qualities of the viola, along with their amazing use of rhythm, singing and the instrument itself to create sound is an inspiration.

Trials that Trail

1. **Golden:** Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Arthur Goldreich is a South African-Israeli abstract painter who uses art, his courage and his experiences to speak out on the racism in South Africa and Israel. He's saddened that despite fighting the apartheid regime in South Africa, his home Israel continues to oppress Palestinians to this day.
2. **A Healthy Grave:** James Kantor was a writer, film maker and one of the defense Lawyers in the Rivonia Trial. He was discharged quite early like many white trialists, but used the opportunity to write many stories on the atrocities of the apartheid system. Many of us carry privilege, are we aware of the ways we can use that privilege to empower?
3. **Baleka Bob-** Bob Hepple was a revolutionary academic, I mean imagine having a lecturer who is actively fighting the apartheid regime? The activist in him never died, and we thank comrades like himself, for the 'mzabalazo (rebellion)' he took with him to London when exiled.
4. **Madiba, Dlomo, Yem-Yem:** Nelson Mandela, Tata. a humble leader and a Xhosa royal. We take the opportunity to explore the Mthembu clan and the spiritual force that birthed a political king.
5. **Bombs, books and guitars:** Govan Mbeki left many secrets in the frets of the guitar which carried throughout his sentencing. This complex mind had no choice but to translate his feelings and emotions through music.
6. **Color me welcome:** Mixed race complexities in South Africa are beautifully depicted by Walter Sisulu, as he carries Italian and Xhosa blood. Growing up in a racially segregated South Africa could not have been easy.
7. **Afritecture:** Lionel Bernstein was an architect and political activist. Space is very political. Feeling comfortable in a space is external and internal. Bernstein understood this and made sure to consider the ways that colonial thought is perpetuated by structures and spaces. How do we use physical space and buildings to reinvent an inclusive society?"
8. **Kathy:** Ahmed Kathrada knew the power of enlightened youth, the power of solidarity in shared struggle amongst all marginalized groups.
9. **Backroom Boy:** Andrew Mlangeni defines humility to this day. Known for countless accolades, he still prefers to be defined by his township roots. And embraces the culture that being a backroom boy brought.

10. *Unlearning to heal the Wounds:* Elias Motsoaledi represents a large unspoken voice of rage, fury and necessary mistrust of members outside of black communities. He thanks many of the ANC Youth League debates for helping him see the power of solidarity, but that initial anger comes from a very important place. We are in changing times and what we can now learn is that to dismiss the ideologies of some because they don't align with yours, is to counter-progressive. Many people watched their parents get backpack bombed in front of them, were tortured just for being black. How do we learn to acknowledge people's experiences and pain in a way that makes them see our empathy and shared desire to abolish oppressive systems (even if we are in the superior position of that system)?

The history

The ANC was getting international funding to train Mkhonto veterans to fight back, at the time pain was a predominant factor, and so room for negotiation seemed unfathomable. Years and years of oppression had built numbness and an inability to see a way to set our people free and co-exist with the perpetrators. The mandate was war. South African Indigenous tribes come from generations of warriors, spiritual practice, wisdom and civilization. We have always had african names for divine power, mining, infrastructure, agriculture, economics, trade, culture. We have always had diverse languages. We hear of stories about how the Basotho defeated Zulu warriors and colonizers using their landscape and topography. Instead of fighting with weapons and risking the deaths of our own people, we climb to the top of the mountains and push large rocks down every point till all the enemies are injured by "natural causes". We have many stories of defeat. Many women who led revolutions and kept colonizers from conquering all of Southern Africa. So, when we were systemically oppressed and reduced to slaves in our own land it felt like our history and pride was polluted by struggle and the misrepresentation of Africans. I grew up with family members who spoke about all the military training they received and all the soldiers they killed to steal their weapons and build their arms. I also grew up in schools that taught us that "the blacks" had no order and structure which made oppressing us easier. The inaccurate depictions of history being institutionally condoned brought pressing questions to the surface. Why do we have such a warped narrative, why are we painting perceptions of a rainbow nation without reconciling the truth with the indoctrination? South Africans across race and class can all agree that everybody was impacted from white men being forced into conscription to young children having broken homes with deeply traumatized parents. The atrocities could not be ignored by anyone. We have an interesting opportunity to reassess what we give space to, and how to brighten our corners. Unfortunately we are still very segregated. One of the wealthiest business districts in

Africa lies a stone's throw away from one of the most impoverished townships in South Africa. We recently had a break out of riots and looting that led to racial turmoil and class segregation. Videos of vigilantes taking their arms to the street and shooting at the poor as a means to protect their property, political infiltration and talks about a coup. All the unrest and lack of resolution really showed itself in July 2021, and while the situation diffused it became quite clear that South Africa could be on the brink of resurgence. So where does that place us? How does it affect the lense we use to look at our history? What power do we have as the youth?

I knew that I did not want to write a metaphorical history lesson for the performers, I didn't want to pull at their heart strings with hopes to evoke empathy because many artists who came before me had already done so. Bongani Ndodana- Breen wrote an opera about Winnie Mandela, Miriam Makeba spoke out at the United Nations about what the apartheid government was doing and of course one of the biggest things which helped South Africa - the sanctions that many countries imposed on our country. I chose instead, to reflect on the historical impact on youth from all over the world now. I wanted to place performers and audiences into a cultural portal that invokes wander and pondering. I wanted to open the desire to question.

Trials that Trail are an intriguing combination of a deeply personal musical *hommage* to history and a window into our present reality.

The Music

Each piece uses the viola in a different way, in **Golden** the viola is used as a hand drum at the beginning and the voice as an exclamation, followed by a plaintive and repetitive melody, closing with eerie finger percussion on the body of the instrument.

Golden

3

Monthati Masebe

begin the piece seated with the viola
on your lap as if it were a hand drum

Viola

4

Vla. Ahhhhh Riye riye riye riye

9

Vla. 3 trill

15

Vla. 3 3 3 3

Monthati's direction to the performer in ***A Healthy Grave***: "When playing this piece try to find a sweet spot between disbelief and acceptance. Feel free to play this piece in free time. Monthati's skilful use of the viola register reveals a questioning and at times stark melodic line. In addition, the seamless use of simple with compound rhythms creates a restless and simultaneously static status quo.

A Healthy Grave

3

Monthati Masebe

freely, almost bitter sweet

9

Vla. 6

16

Vla. 7

The third piece **Baleka Bob** means *runaway Bob* in isiZulu. It looks at the trial of Bob Hepple, who just like most white trialists, got to escape their sentence and flee the country. This was deeply troubling for Hepple because he was fighting white supremacist systems. This is the only piece in the suite that includes the piano with the viola. In Monthati's words: "The piano works against the running semiquavers to create a syncopated layer of stunting chords. The push pull feels like running out of breath or patience, and I thought that this would rhythmically encompass the internal frustration he may have been experiencing." Monthati adds: "allow the discomfort of this very unclear sense of time, to bring out emotions of confusion and unsettlement. Storytelling is about so much more than the written word."

3

Baleka Bob

Monthati Masebe

Madiba, Dlomo, Yem-Yem. The *Uhadi* is an indigenous instrument played by the Xhosa people who form part of the Nguni natives. It is a bowed instrument with two fundamental tones and a wide spectrum of overtones and sub-frequencies. The music is often in odd time signatures that are quite common to southern african inner pulse. If we did a quick exercise of counting 1,2,3,4 in a manner that is equidistant we would feel a 4/4 time signature pulse. Let's say for a moment that instead we made 1 and 2 equidistant but made 3 lean onto 4 which then collapsed into 1 again; this would give us One, Two, Three-eya-Fou-rOne, Two, Three-eya-Fou-rOune. This would also put the main pulse of the upbeat before the one and not the actual one (similar to swing perhaps). This also puts one in a felt $\frac{7}{8}$ rather than a an equidistant pulse of 7. Many African rhythms find an inner pulse that is comfortable in so-called odd time signatures. Tritones are also often harmonized with ease in our songs and dance. What seems slightly uncomfortable to one ear is home to another and I wanted performers to gain the opportunity to interrogate that for themselves. To ask themselves "how do we

respond to the unknown and feelings of discomfort?” Do we judge and assume lesser of the things we aren’t well vested in, do we assert dominance by infuriating alternative knowledge systems? Do we appreciate the sparks of curiosity and feel inclined to learn more from each other? When I wrote this in and explained the inner pulse through a South African lense, I gave people from another part of the world the opportunity to encapsulate our culture. On a deeper level this also showed Nelson Mandela in a different light, we saw the environment of his inner child: The son of a Chief, a warrior and someone who took deep pride in their culture. It takes great wisdom to fight for the power of peace and negotiation over the power of dominance and control. That wisdom is embedded in many of our native cultural practices. In a time when all the suppressed rage can poison our potential to be loving and kind, Mandela fought for forgiveness. Some may argue that this was done too soon or too pretentiously, and all those opinions are valid. I made this intention to ignite the conversations, instead of dictating the narrative path.

Madiba, Dlomo, Yem-Yem 3

Monthati

♩ = 76
pizz.

Viola

6 arco

Vla.

Bombs, Books and Guitars “In this piece we reimagine the viola as a guitar, then as a book and lastly as a tremor. Making petrol bombs became a normalized tool for many black South African guerilla soldiers. If all you had was a room with a guitar and nobody to speak to...How many languages would you create to express how you truly feel?”

Bombs, Books and guitars

Monthathi Masebe

Largo

pizz.

Viola

4

Vla.

7

Vla.

The image shows the first three staves of a musical score for Viola. The first staff is labeled 'Viola' and has a tempo marking 'Largo' and a performance instruction 'pizz.'. It begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 7/4. The second staff is labeled 'Vla.' and has a measure rest of 4. The third staff is also labeled 'Vla.' and has a measure rest of 7. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Color me welcome uses the viola to honour Walter Sisulu's life in a racially segregated South Africa. Using 7/4 as the rather unsettling time signature this piece feels disjointed and painful. Playing on the other side of the bridge adds to this feeling, along with the sound of the bow hair brushing on the back of the viola. A feeling of hopelessness pervades at times, emphasized by the use of *sul ponticello*.

Color me welcome

Monthathi Masebe

$\text{♩} = 90$
cantabile

Viola

mf

2

Vla.

4

arco, behind bridge

molto rit.

10

fading joy,
subtle morendo

sul pont. (seagulls)

make a crackling sound by brushing bow hair on the back of the viola

The image shows a page of musical notation for the piece 'Color me welcome'. It features three staves for Viola. The first staff is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 90, 'cantabile', and a dynamic of 'mf'. The second staff has a measure rest of 2. The third staff has a measure rest of 4, followed by the instruction 'arco, behind bridge' and 'molto rit.'. At the bottom, there are further performance instructions: 'make a crackling sound by brushing bow hair on the back of the viola' (with a measure rest of 10), 'fading joy, subtle morendo', and 'sul pont. (seagulls)'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Afritecture (Lionel Bernstein) “Space is just as political as the people who use it...In this piece, try to hear this repeating melody line as a marker for the repetitions of atrocity in many spaces. We can’t keep evolving with our feet stuck to the ground. The blowing wind creates illusions of movement”

The image shows a page of a musical score titled "Afritecture" by Lionel Bernstein, with the number "3" in the top right corner. The composer's name, "Monthati Masebe", is written in the top right. The score is for Viola and Violin. The first staff is labeled "Viola" and shows a repeating melody line in 6/8 time, marked with "V" above the notes. The second staff is labeled "Vla." and shows a similar melody line, also marked with "V". The third staff is labeled "Vla." and shows a more complex melody line, also marked with "V". The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Ahmed Kathrada had peace seeking at the forefront of his career. Long after the Rivonia trial and his arrest he formed a foundation that raises funds to help humanitarian causes. Him and Nelson Mandela were right next to each other in cells at Robben Island and Kathy had a lot of stories to share about a more light-hearted Nelson. In South Africa we are quite dance heavy. collective steps and dance moves have kept us going throughout all forms of oppressive movements. I wanted to bring out the sense of camaraderie and unity by including dance steps in the piece **Kathy**. The stomping of feet originated from *amahubo* which are war cries by Nguni cultures in southern Africa. The time signature is in 6/8 but the steps insinuate a 4/4 feel, this is also common to South African Traditional dancing. Like I mentioned in my previous texts, it was crucial for me to teleport the performers into a South African lense in more ways than the obvious (dresscode, ululating) and so introducing steps and asking performers to move around while playing really brought a sense of Azania (what we one hope to call South Africa).

Kathy

♩ = 100

ST

Viola

8

ST

Viola

14

ST

Viola

Backroom Boy (Andrew Mlangeni). “Many leaders saw the image of a better life being one in the suburbs. Legends like Andrew remind us that we need to decolonise our aspirations so that we strive to bettering ourselves in our own image.” Characterised by unexpectedly intricate and uneven rhythms, fragmented melodic lines and a distinctive *col legno* and *pizzicato* passage with a brittle and repetitive rhythmic motif.

Backroom Boy

Monthati Masebe

Adagio

Viola

4

fix bowing

7

10

Unlearning to heal the wounds (Elias Motsoaledi) “Freed our bodies but not our minds. The guns may be put down, but the words are not unwritten, neither is the behaviour unlearned.” Monthati’s notes to the performer: “use the opening bars to produce wind impersonations using whichever technique most fitting, and with any desired pitch...The spoken words are pitched to march prosody. So use the pitch variance as a guide to place the tones when reciting the words. Try to think of the words as vocal percussions.”

Unlearning to heal the wounds

Monthati Masebe

♩ = 96

sul tasto

Viola

3

duts du duts_ kats du du du

4

duts du duts_ kats du du de du du du duts du duts_ kats du du du

The future

The Suite offers many cultural nuances that shape the diversity of the trialists, the diversity of narratives and understandings of South African history even by ourselves. It also sheds light on the millennial lense that moves away from post-colonial thought into decolonial engagements with society. Unlike many of the generations that came before mine, we grew up on digital technology. Phones, the internet, satellite television and global communication were not groundbreaking to us. It was part of our lives. This also means that the ability to source information outside of main institutions was easily accessible to some. We went from fighting for our voice to be heard above others to our voices extending each other's contextual discussions. I went from assuming that the genre 'classical music' only referred to one part of the world to seeing a wider palette of influence and engagement on the classical era. We too were composing in the 1800s, we too were innovating in the 1600s and many more places that never made the school syllabi had valid and important histories which can add to the cannon in a way that doesn't try to fight for dominance. I truly appreciate how the performers embraced the works and influenced their understanding of identity, belonging, solidarity, choice, freedom and space. Granting a black queer woman the opportunity to comment and reflect on society in a field that didn't give such a platform to people like me 50 years ago, highlights the growth and progression that is ever present- even if it still feels slow.

Monthati Masebe

I am in awe of Monthati's ability to write music and understanding of the viola. It is my plan to record these pieces soon – watch this space! It was an incredible journey opening each new work as it arrived and bringing the music to life with my students one-by-one. Thank you Monthati for your honesty and ability to describe emotion and history through your music.

Louise Lansdown