

IMIZWILILI

quartet

black people can't play Mozart. Surely the Japanese have disproved this ridiculous assumption. It's just that music has never been taught in black schools. The fact that nobody is black in our group is a direct result of the system. Hopefully, this will begin to change.

"We have also started transcribing Jazz pieces written by South Africans. One of my colleagues at UDW, Deepak Ram, is one of the world's best North Indian classical flute players. He's writing music for us and we hope other people will also start writing music for our instruments and techniques. We spend hours and hours arranging existing pieces. There's no jamming. Every note for every person is written down. Then, sometimes, it doesn't work and we have to start again. We're doing what nobody has done before, which is very exciting when it goes well — and disappointing when it doesn't!"

Jessica, a skilled arranger and composer, is a sign-writer by trade specialising in murals and decorative art. Moving easily between her different worlds, she has played violin in orchestras and chamber ensembles — and for a time, was guitarist in a punk group called Screaming Foetus.

It was Jessica's association with the group that saw the birth of Imizwilili this year. The other three have been together for the past four years, with different violinists, as the Orpheus Quartet, playing their Western repertoire at weddings, exhibition openings and other social events. To build bridges, they needed four like-minded people willing to spend time developing new music and in agreement that some of their more committed work, like introducing their music to black schools, would be done for free.

"Experimenting as we are, we're putting ourselves on the line all the time," says Jessica. "This means we've got to be close. With our other commitments, the load is heavy so you also need tolerant people who are willing to back each other up."

Jessica also plays in another Durban group, Jamieson Raiders, as does Brendan, a third-year music student at Natal University. "They're doing interesting things with kwela, reggae and straight rock," says Brendan, whose daunting music background began when he

started playing the piano at seven. He was drawn to the viola a little later when he heard his sister practising. At Durban High School, he focussed on acoustic guitar and specifically Dylan, the Beatles and the Stones. He's recorded with Durban group Underground Press, he plays part-time with the Natal Philharmonic Orchestra, he sings in the Napac ad hoc choir and has sung on stage with Celtic Rumours. He also plays 12th and 13th century instruments in a medieval ensemble — and his greatest ambition is to sing rock.

Fiona chose the cello when she was 12 because it was almost as big as she was. "I planned to transfer to the double bass when I grew up, but I never did," she quips, lugging her large instrument out of its case for rehearsal. She's also a Natal University music department graduate, she's music teacher at the Durban's Holy Family Convent and she has played in a rock band and done backing work for vocalists.

"We don't see ourselves as exponents of any one type of music and we're not attempting to impose," says Lara. "We see ourselves as carriers. We're simply trying to break down artificial barriers and perpetrated myths — like "own affairs" means own culture. Apartheid has kept us apart in every way, including culturally. It's created an unnatural and very deadening situation. Our Western classical background is usually reserved for the elite in every country. Classical music is beautiful and important but we want to take it out of its narrow confines and make it everybody's music."

Conversely, apartheid's barriers mean that many whites know nothing about black music. "In the Fifties, a lot of exciting things happened music-wise in this country. But the cultural upsurge was stamped down in the Sixties. For 20 years, there was a musical desert. Now, a wonderful and exciting creative upsurge is taking place. Times of change are always vibrant for a culture. If we take traditional black music to whites who have never really heard it, and play it in a way that they can understand, maybe in enjoying it, they'll come to appreciate the people who created it."

The flute quartet dates back a good 350 years to Baroque times. In adapting workers songs, Imizwilili are tackling choral music, usually sung in four parts. They've found that these transcribe very successfully — soprano to flute, alto to violin, tenor to viola and bass to cello.

The musicians point out that while Western music is traditionally either for entertainment or worship, in black society music and song are part of life. Songs have originated from sadness and happiness, from road work gangs, from pounding corn, from walking long distances and many other aspects of daily life. Hostel choirs sing these songs for recreation. There are freedom songs that originate from the freedom movements. In black cultures, everyone knows these songs and music is an integral part of everyday life. "Singing is a communal activity. It draws people together. Everyone can do it. It costs nothing. It brings identity. Workers songs have usually grown straight out of the community and they get passed around," says Lara.

Louis Armstrong once said that there are only two ways to sum up music. "Either it's good or it's bad. If it's good you don't mess about with it, you just enjoy it." Fortunately, opinions aren't rules — and anyway, rules were made to be broken. Imizwilili are breaking all the rules and in so doing, moving from the past into the future with commitment clad in the sweetest strains. □