

COMMENTS AT THE SAMRO OVERSEAS SCHOLARSHIPS COMPETITION

LINDER AUDITORIUM, JOHANNESBURG, SEPTEMBER 3, 2011.

Mr Thabo Mbeki

Ms Emdon and other leaders of SAMRO,

Distinguished artiste, Sibongile Khumalo,

Competitors, eminent conductor and members of the Johannesburg Philharmonic,

Ladies and gentlemen:

Let me begin by congratulating SAMRO on its 50th anniversary and thank you for the important work you do to look after the valuable intellectual property, and therefore the livelihoods, of so many of our musicians and others in our region and elsewhere in the world.

I am also honoured to convey my best wishes to this evening's competitors for the SAMRO Overseas Scholarships, as well as those who will follow them.

I would like to imagine that many of us present here this evening might recall, even vaguely, the national excitement and high level of expectation the day before the adoption of our Constitution by the Constitutional Assembly on May 8, 1996.

It is said that a Chinese curse says – may you live in interesting times! – such times as when, through the unanimous adoption of our Constitution by all our political formations, and after an extensive consultation with the population, our country brought to its close a centuries-long period of division, bloody conflict and confrontation.

And so it was that as South Africans, and even the witches who practice their craft in the dead of night, went to sleep on May 7, 1996, ready to participate in the well-deserved festivities the following day, others had to pay the price for living in interesting times by spending a sleepless night to prepare speeches which would have to be delivered the following day.

As President Mandela had to address the Constitutional Assembly as President of the Republic, it fell to me to speak on behalf of the ANC.

As I considered what we should say, three particular imperatives struck me.

One of these was that because Constitutions are not adopted everyday, and at most even only once during the lifetime of a generation, we would have to make an effort to deliver an address that would be other than a routine speech.

Secondly, being intimately familiar with the content of the Constitution, and conscious of what it would mean in terms of building the new South Africa, which would contribute to the remaking of the Mother

Continent of Africa, it seemed necessary that we should take advantage of the occasion of the adoption of the Constitution to celebrate Africa and the Africans.

Thirdly, it seemed right that since we would be giving birth to what I described as 'a unique creation of African hands and African minds', we would have to answer the question – who are the Africans!

It was out of these considerations that the address which has come to be known as the "I am an African" speech was born.

I would like to believe that its impact has derived from two of its most important features, these being:

- its celebration of African achievement and therefore its affirmation of Africa and Africans, which made the statement that always something new and positive comes out of Africa; and,
- its repudiation of race, ethnicity, colour and historical origin in defining who is an African, thus to argue for an inclusive African identity that would help to bridge the divides of race, colour and ethnicity which had brought untold suffering to us as South Africans, to our Continent, and to the millions in the African Diaspora.

Many messages we have received on our Continent from other Africans who have read the speech, "I am an African", and others elsewhere in the world, firmly suggest that one of history's great challenges is to confirm the humanity of the African, after a period as long as a millennium when other human beings elsewhere in the world understood and characterised ours as the Dark Continent.

I am especially privileged to thank SAMRO for the initiative it took to commission the musical work whose world première we will hear this evening, which presents for voice and orchestra words written in Cape Town through the night of May 7, 1996, as well as salute in all humility all those responsible for the composition.

As our political leaders of our rainbow nation spoke 15 years ago, on May 8, one after the other they said – I too am an African!

And so have millions of others spoken in similar vein, since then.

It is surely right that as Africans, whose very being is defined by the musical harmonies of the extraordinary instrument that is the human voice, as well as the mbira, the marimba, uhadi, ixilongo and the drum, should together, in music, sing out aloud, and especially during these troubled times for our Continent:

'I am an African.

'I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land...

'This thing that we have done today, in this small corner of a great continent that has contributed so decisively to the evolution of humanity, says that Africa reaffirms that she is continuing her rise from the ashes.

'Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now!

'Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace!

'However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!'

Thank you.