The Polar Music Prize for 2002 is being awarded to the South African singer, Miriam Makeba. Miriam Makeba embodied the concept of world music long before the term even existed on the musical map. In the 1960s, her expressive voice drew attention to the musical riches of the African continent. At the same time, she helped in raising awareness of the horrors of the South African apartheid regime in the outside world. It was the same conviction and passion that got the whole world dancing to Pata Pata, that also caused her words to ignite when she testified to the brutal crimes against humanity committed in the homeland that banned her music and forced her to live in exile for 32 years.

What truly makes Miriam Makeba a global artist is not the fact that she has so successfully sung her songs in a number of both African and European languages. Nor is it the rich diversity of the numerous different rhythms and harmonies she uses in her colourful musical expression.

It is by conveying the inherent strengths and positive, uplifting messages found in a true love of music that Miriam Makeba has played an active role in the struggle against injustice and oppression. Her greatness can perhaps be best summed up in her own words, “I don’t sing about politics. I sing the truth.”

The presence of Miriam Makeba on the global music scene lights candles in the darkness and brings the hope of a better world.

Compiled by Claes Olson