

FORM IN NIGERIAN ART MUSIC: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Form is an important aspect of any musical composition that tells the composer where to go and how to get there. The plan of a building is an outline drawing of a building or structure, showing the position and size of the various parts in relation to each other. A building plan is to a house what form is to music. The form of any particular music helps the composer to stay focused in the course of the composition since he is prevented from unnecessary rigmarole. In fact, form serves as a guide to any musical composition. Just as a house without a building plan is bound to have a problem so also is music without a form. The importance of form to musical composition cannot be overemphasized. When the elements of music are organized into a musical composition, the overall design of the entire composition is called its form. An understanding of the concept of form helps in no small way in music appreciation. In other words form directs or organizes the music. The paper looked at some Contemporary Art musicians in Nigeria highlighting the forms they used in their various musical compositions.

INTRODUCTION

Planning is a very important aspect of any endeavour in life. Without adequate planning one is bound to make mistakes that could be easily avoided with proper planning. Form is an important aspect of any musical composition. It gives the composer the over-all plan of the music; it gives the composer the direction of his music and how to get there. It prevents him from unnecessary deviation from where he is going. In the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music, Kennedy (2004: 261) defines form as “the structure and design of a composition.” He also emphasized the fact that it is important to understand the principles of form and the mastery of the application of those principles. In general, however, despite continuous experimentation, the musical form so far devised can be classified into about six categories all of them exploiting the idea of contrast and variety both in the domain of content in terms of thematic material and that of key in terms of modulations. Randel in Onwuekwe (2008) defines form as:

The shape of a musical composition as defined by all of its pitches, rhythms, dynamics and timbres. In this sense, there can be no distinction between musical form and specifically musical content, since to change even a single pitch or rhythm that might be regarded as part of the content of a composition necessarily also changes the shape of that composition, even if only in detail. (p. 167)

Emphasizing the importance of form in any musical composition, Schumann in Otto (1982: 95) says: “Only when the form is quite clear to you will the spirit become clear to you”. In his own opinion on form, Ferris (1995) writes:

Form in art is based upon the principles of repetition and contrast. Repetition lends unity, symmetry, and balance to a composition, contrast provides variety. Listening to a composition, one ideally memorizes certain sounds in order to differentiate between the repetition of material and the introduction of new musical ideas. These signposts remind us where we have been and imply what lies ahead, helping to establish our musical beatings. (p. 66)

Stressing the above point, Schoenberg in Machlis and Forney (1999: 23) observes that: “The principal function of form is to advance our understanding. It is the organization of a piece that helps the listener to keep the idea in mind, to follow its development, its growth, its elaboration.” Upholding the above view, Machlis and Forney (1999) explain that in all the arts, a balance is required between symmetry and asymmetry, activity and repose. Nature too has embodied this balance in the forms of plant and animal life and in what is perhaps the supreme achievement – the human form. In music, form gives us the impression of conscious choice and rational arrangement. In other words, it is a work’s structure or shape, the way the element of a composition have been combined or balanced, to make it understandable to the listener.

Nigerian art musicians employ one form or the other in their musical compositions. Writing on Nigerian art musicians Omojola (1995) opines:

Although it was through the church that the concept of music as a contemplative art received widespread popularity in Nigeria, it was left to the effort of formally trained composers and musicologists to forge new idioms and styles in their works to develop a modern tradition of Nigerian art music. (p. 39)

A popular adage says ‘no condition is permanent’ but change has defied this adage. This has been expressed by Omojola (1995) when he emphasized the fact that the emergence of new musical idioms in Nigeria should not be seen as a novel phenomenon as change has either through internal processes or the influence of a foreign culture always affected Nigerian Music. Music is an important aspect of a people’s culture and since culture is dynamic, it can be assumed that Nigerian traditional music as we know it today is different from what it was several hundred years ago.

Other aspects of culture like houses, food, clothing and even language cannot undergo changes while music stands aloof. The culture of a people is strongly expressed in their music. It is not possible or rather it will look absurd for a cultural *Igba Enyi* male dancing group in Igbo culture to put on French Suits during their performances, nor is it natural for Yoruba *dun dun* drummers to put on English suits during performance. The language, the costume, the beliefs, the norms and values of a people are all expressed in their music.

Forms used in Music Compositions:

Generally, there are about five to six forms used for musical compositions. The form a composer applies in his composition depends on the message he wishes to put across to his audience. These forms include: Binary forms, ternary forms, strophic forms, through composed forms and rondo forms. The call and response and call and refrain forms which are characteristic features of some African music are also among the forms adopted by some Nigeria art musicians in their musical compositions.

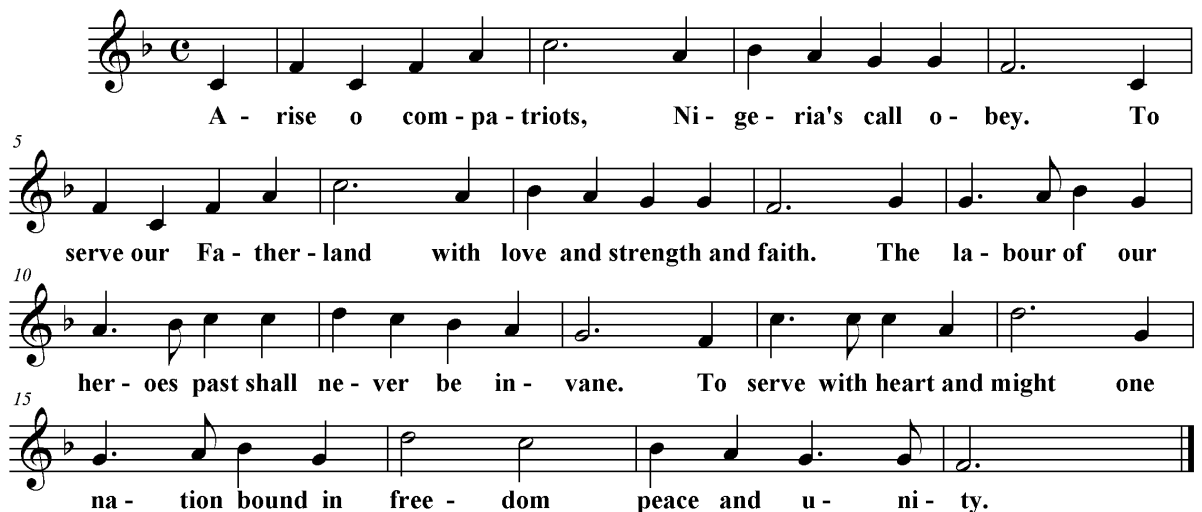
Binary Form:

A movement in binary form consists of two parts, (AB) each usually repeated. The two sections are clearly related, but differ in such important respects as key, mood, texture, tempo, thematic materials, or dynamic level. The effect is sometimes that of question and answer. One section may be longer than the other, each may have several subsections, and often each section is repeated. Sometimes, the first section generally modulates from the tonic to a related key, ordinarily the dominant of the tonic is major, and the relative major if the tonic is minor. In short binary movements there is often no modulation, the first part merely ending with a half cadence. The second part reverses this motion, progressing back to the tonic either directly or through one or more additional keys.

A closer look at the Nigerian National Anthem below reveals that the A section starts from the beginning of the music to the dotted minim note in bar 4. The repeated A section starts from the crotchet note (middle C) in bar 4 to the dotted minim note (F tonic) in bar 8. The second section starts on the crotchet note G in bar 8 and ends on the last bar of the music thus the form is AA+B, the second section being longer by just 2 bars of music.

Nigerian National Anthem

Ben Odiase



A - rise o com - pa - triots, Ni - ge - ria's call o - bey. To
5 serve our Fa - ther - land with love and strength and faith. The la - bour of our
10 her - oes past shall ne - ver be in - vane. To serve with heart and might one
15 na - tion bound in free - dom peace and u - ni - ty.

(2) Ternary Form:

Another important form used for music composition is the ternary form. This is symbolized by the letters ABA, or AABA. It consists of a statement (A), a departure from it (B), and its

return (A). The degree to which the second section contrasts with the first may be mild or extreme. The return of the original material may be literal (ABA) or modified (ABA¹). Each section may contain subsections, and various repetition schemes of sections and subsections are used. The ternary differs from the binary form in that B is in complete contrast to A, although in some way relevant.

In his views on ternary form Randel (2001) points out the fact that:

Movements in ternary form consist of three parts, the first and third identical or closely related, the second contrasting to a greater or lesser degree. The form may therefore be symbolized ABA. Both A parts end in the tonic key, usually after a central modulation to a related key or keys. The B part generally begins in a related key and cadences in the same or another related key before the reentry of the A part. (p. 96)

Explaining further, he says that in contrast to binary form, ternary form is closed in structure, the two A parts, and often the B part, are complete within themselves, not interdependent or complementary like the parts of a binary movement. It should be noted that the return of the A part in ternary form is often indicated by placing a *da capo* or *dal segno* marking at the end of the B part rather than writing it out in full. Summarizing the general shape of the ternary form, Otto (1982) says:

We can call it a musical sandwich, consisting of a first section starting in the tonic and ending either in the tonic or a related key, an episode (the filling) which is contrasted with both the first and third section which is either the exact or slightly varied repetition of the first, starting and ending in the tonic. Sometimes, a coda is added (p. 100).

(3) Strophic Form:

A song consisting of two or more verses, each sung to the same music is strophic in form. In strophic form, the same melody is repeated with every stanza, or strophe, of the poem-hymns, carols, and many folk and popular songs are strophic. Although the form permits no real closeness between words and music, it sets up a general atmosphere that accommodates itself equally well to all the stanzas. The first may tell of a lover's expectancy, the second of his joy at seeing his beloved, the third of her father's harshness in separating them, and the fourth of her sad death, all sung to the same tune (Machlis and Forney 1999, p. 77).

(4) Through Composed:

A through – composed piece presents new music throughout, with no repetition of themes. The form is often used by song composers who wish to emphasize the text of a composition. There is no prescribed number of phrases in a through-composed song, so the form is represented as A B C D E. In the analysis of form, capital letters generally represent large sections of a piece, and lower case letters represent phrases or smaller sections. Since the emphasis is on the text, the length of the music depends on the length of the text and the extent of the message the composer wants to put across to his/her audience.

(5) Rondo Form:

In his opinion on rondo as a musical form Ferris (1995) states:

The rondo form may be used for any movement of a multi movement work but often seems particularly appropriate for the last movement. A rondo, derived from an early French instrumental piece, the *rondeau* is usually fast in tempo and merry in mood, rendering it ideal to bring a large work to a happy close (p. 226).

He went on to explain the fact that though generally represented by the letters A B A C A, a rondo contains any number of sections or “episodes,” which alternate with the material of the opening section A. Like the sonata-allegro, the rondo is a versatile form that may be handled in many ways. The episodes interspersed between A sections may be the same as each other (A B A B A), or different (A B A C A). The composer may also choose to include other material not part of the basic rondo form. Although the rondo is often easy to recognize because of the recurrence of A and the bustling mood characteristic of the form, it may nevertheless be quite complex in the hands of a sophisticated composer.

The plan of the rondo therefore looks like the following.

- A¹ = Theme in the tonic
- B = First episode in another key
- A² = Theme in tonic
- C = Second episode in another key
- A³ = Theme in tonic, frequently leading to a coda

These sections are smoothly joined together when necessary by little linking or bridge passages. The rondo form because of its strong resemblance to the ternary principle (ABA) is sometimes described as an extended ternary form. However the episodes could extend to D in which case we have A B A C A D A depending on the style of the composer.

(6) Call and Response

Call and response form of musical rendition is found in many parts of Africa and the world in general. This to a great extent involves the principle of repetition and contrast. Upholding the above view Machlis and Forney (1999) write:

Whatever the length or style of a composition, it will show the principles of repetition and contrast, of unity and variety. One formal practice linked to repetition that can be found throughout much of the world is call and response, or responsorial music. Heard in many African, Native American and African-American musics, this style of performance is based on a social structure that recognizes a singing leader who is imitated by a chorus of followers. (p. 27)

Writing on the call and response style of music rendition, Ekwueme (2001) says:

It is an acknowledged fact that traditional African music is largely antiphonal, with a leader or *ripieno* announcing an antecedent to which a (larger) chorus responds. Two major types of what is generally called the Call and Response antiphony have been differentiated: (a) *Call and Response proper* – in which an antecedent musical phrase

is repeated by the larger group; and (b) Call and refrain – in which a regularly recurring refrain is the response by the larger group. (p. 19)

The works of three contemporary art musicians in Nigeria are here presented to highlight the forms they employ in their musical compositions. These contemporary composers include Dan C. C. Agu, Laz Ekwueme and Bode Omojola. Their works are titled *N’ihi na taa n’ obodo Devid* (For today in the Land of David), *Elimeli* (Festive Ball) and *Baba Olorun Wa* (Heavenly Father Our Creator) respectively.

(a) *N’ihi na taa n’ obodo Devid* (For today in the Land of David). The music is of the Christmas festival. In this composition Agu (1998) adopted the call and response form of musical rendition. After the traditional ensemble prelude, the tenor call comes in announcing *N’ihi na taa n’ obodo Devid k’ amuru nye unu onye Nzoputa* (For today in the land of David, to you a Saviour is born). There follows a form of dialogue between tenor and alto soli which continues until the instrumental interlude comes in bringing in the voices again.

(b) *Elimeli* (Festive Ball). *Elimeli* is a festive music calling on people to come and join the dancing ball. It was composed by Laz Ekwueme in 1980. In fact, it is an Igbo glee song which starts with a solo call, bringing in the chorus. The solo first appears with *Obulu n’ anyi g’eye, Obulu n’ anyi g’ana*, (Come and join the dancing ball) the drummers respond with the popular *bum budum, budu dum!* The chorus comes in after every verse with varied dynamics and urges on participants to hurry lest their food gets cold (*kwado, eye, mee osiso elimeli anyi ajusia oyi*). In verse two of the music, the solo voice says *I bute n’ anyi g’eli, I pata n’ anyi ga-anu* (For the banquet, spread the food, let the liquor well berewed). This continues until the climax on the fifth verse where the participants are urged to “Clap with us a loud tattoo, stamp the feet in rhythm too.” (Ekwueme 2001, p. 30)

(c) *Baba Olorun Wa* (Heavenly Father, Our Creator). Omojola (2003) compiled three of his compositions in a work titled *Three Yoruba Sacred Choral Works* one of which was *Baba Olorun Wa* (Heavenly Father, Our Creator). The first stanza of the work runs thus:

*Baba Olorun Eleda wa
Oun lo da wa, Baba Olodumare
Oun lo dawa ni awaran ara Re
Aye at’orun ise Oluwa ni
Adamu, Efa, won je awon obi i wa
Awon I’Olorun koko da, Baba nla a wa
Nipa see won l’ esu fi wa si aye
Ise Olorun ni awa omo eniyan*

English Translation

Heavenly Father, our Creator
Our Lord God, who created us in His own image
Heaven and earth are God’s own creation

He created Adam and Eve:
Our ancestors through whom Satan came

In his work in key E flat major the composer started with a short instrumental prelude by the piano. The solo voice comes in shortly after and continues until the chorus enters in full in bar 46. The form adopted here appears to be that of solo and chorus.

Summary and Conclusion

From the discussions above it is obvious that form is a *sine qua non* in any musical composition. Even if the life history of an individual is set to music in form of a dirge for the deceased or an eulogy in praise of the living, the through-composed form is most likely to be adopted since the life history of the one concerned is sung from the beginning to the end. However a composer may choose to use the strophic form where the chorus comes in from time to time.

All the forms discussed above are used by the composers of ancient and modern times in one way or the other. The form adopted depends on the ingenuity of the composer and the message he wants to put across. Even when the same form is being used for musical compositions by different composers, no two musical compositions are alike. Each composer sets his music based on his own life experiences and the audience for whom the music is being composed.

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