

AN APPRAISAL OF VOICE STUDIES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a review of the teaching and learning of voice as instrument of study in Nigerian Universities. Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka is the location of the study while relevant data were drawn from Departments of Music in South Eastern Nigeria for a balanced view. The teaching methods, form, scope, outcomes, attitudes, quality of teaching and learning skills were considered. The study employed a combination of Qualitative and Quantitative research methods. It was discovered from the study that most teachers of voice are not voice specialists and therefore do not handle voice pedagogy in the appropriate manner. The music curricula in the Departments do not clearly state how voice teaching should be handled. Based on the research findings it was recommended that voice specialists be given the responsibility of teaching voice as is the case with other instruments. It was proposed that the curriculum be reviewed to reflect aspects of voice to be learnt at different points/levels in the learning programme. In our opinion, in the absence of voice specialists, voice lecturers should undergo special training in vocal teaching for effective teaching and learning of voice to take place.

Background/Framework

Departments of Music in Nigerian Institutions (See Idolor 2005:138-140 for a fairly comprehensive list of higher institutions that offer Music and their dates of establishment) provide bi-cultural programmes, featuring studies in Western and African Music on equal footing. A constant on the study programmes in these institutions is voice as an option of instrument of study (excluding Ibadan of course). The implication is that for over forty years the teaching and learning of voice have been on the programmes of various Departments of Music in Nigerian Universities and Colleges.

As in other instruments, training in voice in these institutions aim at equipping students for its use, management, development, teaching and performance as professional musicians. It also aims to enable or empower such students to face challenges of Vocal Music and Voice performance in various global competitive situations.

A close observation of the outcome of voice studies in Departments of Music in Nigeria however, reveals a worrisome situation – in fact, a glaring anomaly. The issues range from who teaches, what is taught and the methods of teaching voice in these Departments to misconceptions about voice as a serious instrument of study. It is quite easy to observe that voice studies in Nigeria have failed to make any substantial impact on music education and music performance in Nigeria. The result being that about 98% of graduates of music who majored in voice cannot perform a song in a concert or present independent concerts on voice. Such a situation is a clear anomaly. While many graduates of Music majored in voice, it would be instructive to discover why many of such people are not heard and do not perform after graduation. Little or no serious art music performances are given by such graduates, raising the question on how voice students are prepared for the challenges of the profession on graduation in their student days.

The objective of the study therefore, is to investigate the factors that contribute to perceived lack of professionalism among graduates of voice, with a view to finding solutions. This study investigates the teaching and learning methods adopted by lecturers, their requisite training and skills in voice as well as attitude to the teaching of the instrument in the Departments. Also investigated are the attitude of students and the outcome of voice studies.

Although teaching and learning of other aspects of music impact directly and indirectly on the teaching and learning of voice in Nigerian Universities, the study focuses on voice studies in the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, drawing relevant examples where necessary from the other Universities in Southern Nigeria – Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, University of Uyo, Uyo, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and Delta State University, Abraka. It was observed that the teaching methods adopted in the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka is reflected in the rest of the Departments in Nigeria with little variations owing to the fact that many of the staff that teach in the various Departments are products of University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The writers employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in this study enabling direct discussions and distribution of questionnaires to teachers and learners. Many years of personal experiences as teachers in the location of this study formed the background on which the study was based.

Objective of Voice Studies

The voice, as an instrument for sound production by human beings through the mouth, can either produce speech or song by means of the vocal cords. Being a delicate instrument, it cannot be replaced or repaired if seriously damaged. It produces sound by means of the vocal cords in conjunction with other organs in the human body. These organs function as:

- (a) **Amplifiers:** The organ responsible for the amplification of sound is known as the organ of resonance. These are the holes in the skull and chest. According to Ekwueme (1993),

The sound produced at the vibration of the vocal cords has to be “amplified” before it is sent out to the listener. This amplification is done within the body by the organs of resonance. These are simply the spaces within the chest and head which act as air chambers or “echo chambers” to amplify the sounds produced. (p. 61)

Wigmore (2002) also states that:

Allied to the notion of singing on the breath is that of the correct place of resonance: a sound not sustained by the breath cannot take the proper advantage of the resonating capacities of the head and the resonance chamber of the thorax. (p. 79)

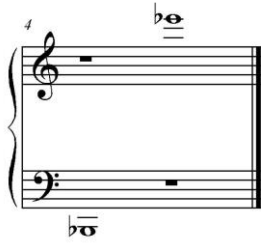
- (b) **Means of Articulation:** Proper articulation is achieved by the combined use of the tongue, the lips, the palate, the teeth and the lower jaw. These organs help in the articulation of words in order to convey the message of the song to the listening audience.
- (c) **Means for Enhancement:** These organs enhance the sound produced. For example, the lungs, the abdominal walls, the diaphragm etc. function together with other organs to produce quality sound.

The human voice, unlike other musical instruments is under the influence and control of the singer. According to Lo-Bamijoko (2001: 74) “...(1) the voice is completely under the influence of the singer, other instruments are not. (2) The voice reflects the emotional and psychological state of the singer, other instrument do not”. Thus, the psychological state of a singer can have the most profound effect on the quality of sound produced.

There is the possibility of training or developing the human voice to produce different sound qualities. Through the process of intensive and skillful training, the human voice can be prepared to produce a wide range of sounds in different tessitura. The voice is indeed a versatile instrument given to humans naturally. The human voice can expressively and reflectively produce music in various human languages and cultures if adequately trained. Voice training, therefore, refers to the study of the methods and activities of teaching voice. It refers to ways and approaches to teaching and learning of voice as an instrument of study in music education. Voice training sums up the skillful and creative processes for training the human voice for professional performance and utilization. Such training recommends, among others, expert handling by specialists in voice and professional voice performers while carefully excluding non-professionals to avoid inadvertent damage to the delicate parts of the voice. The technical and skill-bound aspects of voice training (Hewit, 1978: 1; Ekwueme, 1993: 54; Ware, 1995: 94) that require careful and methodical approach must, as such, be conducted by experts if maximum results are to be achieved.

Voice as an Instrument

The human voice is capable of producing different pitches, these range from contra B^b to three line E^b on the piano as shown below



The range as a whole cannot be produced by a single voice, hence, the various groupings of the human voice. Female voices are classified into three namely – Soprano, Mezzo Soprano and Contralto. Male voices on the other hand are classified into four. These are – Counter Tenor, Tenor, Baritone and Bass. These voice types are further grouped into subcategories depending on range, tessitura, tone colour and flexibility of the voice.

The Female Voice:

- (a) **Soprano:** The word “soprano” originated from the Latin word “Superius” which means “above” or “over”. In the 15th century when polyphony was the order of the day, the word “Superius” was commonly used to describe the top voice. The word soprano is used in describing the highest singing voice. These include voices of women, girls and sometimes immature male voice.

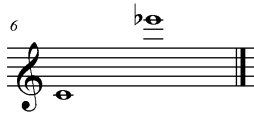
According to Groves Dictionary of Music and Musician (1980), Soprano refers to:

The highest female voice, normally within the range c^1 to a^1 , which may be extended to either end, particularly in solo writing; the word is sometimes also used for a boy’s treble voice (boy soprano) and in the 17th and 18th centuries was used for a CASTRATO with a high range (p. 531).

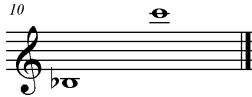
The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musician defines soprano as “the name given to women’s voices of high range and bright quality... The unchanged boy’s voice, having a quality similar to that of a soprano is classed as a “boy soprano” (1975: 2120).

Although, the word Soprano is used to describe high female voice, soprano singers are distinguished accorded to quality, range and dexterity. As such the soprano voice is classified as follows:

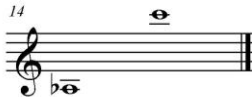
- (i) **Coloratura Soprano:** The coloratura is the highest singing soprano voice. It is very light and flexible and capable of taking low and very high pitches comfortably in the soprano range. The highest portion of the range of the coloratura soprano sounds like a flute in tone colour. Ware (1995:51) refers to this as the “flute/whistle register”. He says “the flute or whistle register is the high range extension of the female voice above the pitch C^6 (6th C from the bottom of the keyboard), often well-focused, penetrating and “squeaky” or whistle-like”. The range of a coloratura lies between middle C and three line E^b as shown below



- (ii) **Lyric Soprano:** The lyric soprano has a fuller voice which is also flexible but not as flexible as the coloratura. It has a cantabile style when it is in the middle and upper register. The range is shown below:

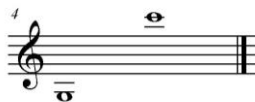


- (iii) **Dramatic Soprano:** The dramatic soprano is the biggest and most powerful of all the high voices. It is darker than the lyric soprano and less agile. It is a soprano voice with marked declamatory ability. The range is:

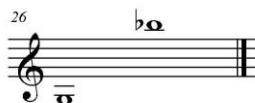


- (b) **Mezzo-Soprano:** The mezzo-soprano is the most common female voice. It lies between the soprano voice and the contralto voice. Hence, the tessitura is higher than the contralto and lower than the soprano. Like the soprano voice, the mezzo-soprano is subdivided into three namely:

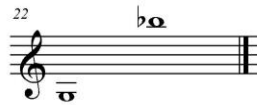
- (i) **Coloratura Mezzo- Soprano:** The coloratura mezzo-soprano is the highest of all the mezzo-soprano voice types. It has the same flexibility of the coloratura soprano but not the same range. The range is between A^3 - A^5 (that is the A below middle C to the A two octaves above A^3). In the upper and lower extremes, some mezzo-sopranos may extend down to the G below middle C (G^3) and as high as “high C (C^6)” – <http://Wapedia.Mobi/en/voice> type. (Accessed 30/11/2009). The range is shown below.



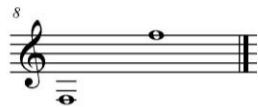
- (ii) **Lyric Mezzo-Soprano:** The lyric mezzo-soprano voice is a little darker in tone colour and not as flexible as the coloratura mezzo-soprano. The range is between G below middle C to two-line B^b as shown below.



- (iii) **Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano:** The Dramatic Mezzo-soprano is darker in quality than all other mezzo-soprano voice types. It also has a very powerful low register. The range is shown below.



- (c) **Contralto:** The contralto voice is the lowest of the female voices. The quality is darker and heavy having a baritoneal character. The contralto voice is subdivided into two categories namely: The Lyric contralto and Dramatic contralto. The range of the contralto voice lies between the F below middle C (F^3) to the second F (F^5) above middle. The range is shown below.



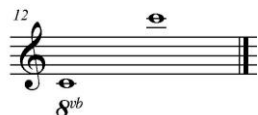
The Male Voices:

- (i) **Counter Tenor:** The counter tenor is the highest male voice with a very powerful head register. Counter tenors usually sing using their false voice or falsetto. This voice type is common among rock singers. The range lies between G^3 to E^5 as shown below.



Other types of counter tenor voice include the Sopranist or male soprano, Hante-contre and Modern castrato. According to Wapedia “Many counter tenor singers perform roles originally written for Castrati in baroque Operas”. (http://Wapedia.mobi/en/voice_type, accessed 30/11/2009).

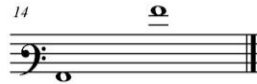
- (ii) **Tenor:** The term tenor refers to the highest male voice within the model register (mobi/en/ voice type – accessed 30/11/2009). The tenor voice is between the counter tenor and baritone. The range lies between C^3 to C^5 as shown below:



Other types of Tenor voice include:

- (1) **Leggiero Tenor:** The leggiero tenor has the highest tessitura of all the tenor subtypes.

- (2) **The Lyric Tenor:** The lyric tenor is similar to the lyric soprano in flexibility. It has the ability of moving from one register to another smoothly without any noticeable breaks or cracks in the voice.
- (3) **Dramatic Tenor:** the Dramatic Tenor is heavier than other tenor subtypes but not as high as the *leggiero* or Lyric tenor. Another type of Dramatic tenor is the *heldentenor* which has greater than normal power and endurance.
- (iii) **Baritone:** The baritone is the most common of the male voices. This voice type is much darker and richer in tone colour than the tenor but less flexible. The range lies between the bass and tenor ranges overlapping both of them. The range is between F^2 to F^4 (2nd F below middle C to the F above middle C) but can be extended at either extremes.



Other categories of the Baritone voice include lyric – Baritone, Belcanto or Coloratura Baritone, Kavalier Baritone, Dramatic baritone, Verdi Baritone, Baritone-noble, and Baritone- Martin. These sub categories were done based on timbre or vocal colour, the weight and dexterity of the voice.

- (iv) **Bass:** The bass voice is the lowest singing voice of all the voices in that it has the lowest tessitura. The bass voice is further grouped into the following categories: Bass Profundo, Bass Buffo or Belcanto Bass, Basso Cantate, Dramatic Bass and Bass Baritone. The range lies between E^2 to E^4 “in the lower and upper extremes of the bass voice, some basses can sing from the C two octaves below middle C (C^2) to the G above middle C (G^4)”. (<http://Wapedia.mobi/en/voice> type assessed 11/30/2009). The range is shown below:



Voice Studies in Nigeria: The Status Quo

Evident from this study is lack of curriculum provisions on voice in the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In the BA programme spanning four years and in the Diploma program spanning three years, there are eight courses on voice studies – two per session for the degree programmes; while the Diploma programme has six courses on voice studies – two per session. For the Degree programme, these are: Mus 161 – Primary Instrument/Voice I up to Mus 462 – Primary Instrument/Voice VII. The contents of the courses are generally the same. According to the curriculum, Mus 161 – Primary Instrument/Voice I has the following as its course content:

Individual lessons on an African Master musical instrument or Western classical instrument or voice with not less than one hour of private practice each day of the week required of the student. (Students are encouraged to provide their instruments of specialization (1991, Degree programme, Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka).

And Mus 162 – Primary Instrument/Voice II which is offered in the second semester of the first year has: “Progressive development of skill on selected African or Western classical instrument or voice”.

The curriculum is mute on how to tackle the subject or what should be taught in a lesson. Reference to Colorado University (<http://www.colorado.edu/music/voice/pedagogy.html>, accessed 20/11/2009) for instance, shows that the undergraduate programme has different topics to be treated in each semester at different levels of study. Voice study is not synonymous with giving exam pieces by teachers of voice to the students which they carry about till examination day. Teaching of topics like physiology and acoustic of the singing voice is crucial. Knowledge of acoustical workings and parameters of voice by students is significant, apart from being able to sing their examination pieces. Such knowledge creates a distinction between ordinary music enthusiasts who sing in church choirs and trained singers at the University. Other topics treated at the Colorado University relevant to voice studies are: breathing, posture, registers, repertoires, vocal health etc.

In the Department of Music of University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Mus 261 – Primary Instrument/Voice III which is taken at the second semester up to 461 – Primary Instrument/Voice VII which is taken at the last semester of the fourth year requires “more progressive individual lessons than the previous ones”. One is tempted to ask – lessons in what? Is it on the technical requirements for voice performance, standard singer’s repertory or stage management? It is difficult to tell as the curriculum did not specify. Guideline for teachers of voice is not provided. Aspects of vocal studies such as technical requirements for voice are not included for the teachers to implement. Because the curriculum is not specific, students are taught from the fancy of the teachers. While some start with the grooming of the voice, before going into teaching of the pieces, some simply give pieces to the students to study regardless of the suitability of that music to the particular voice type. A negligible few start by classifying the voice, grooming and then introducing the students to the technicalities of voice performance.

Without explicit curriculum provisions on tackling voice studies, teachers are left to their own options. The result is lack of uniformity in what is taught, how it is taught and in the learning outcomes. The curriculum needs to be specific.

Reflecting the situation at the Department of Music at Nsukka, little or nothing is in the curriculum on voice at the Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The curriculum merely stipulates daily private practice by students. There is no specification on what or how they are to practice. The teacher of voice is not provided guideline about the topics to be treated at the different levels of study, resulting in variations in the teaching and learning outcomes. The course content is as below:

Progressive individual lessons on voice not less than one hour of private practice each day is required of the student. Emphasis is on hymns and chants as well as on Western classical songs.

However, exam pieces are selected by the Board for each year of study. This gives room for easy assessment unlike what is obtainable at the Department of Music University of Nigeria Nsukka where each lecturer gives different pieces to his/her own voice students. In an interview with a staff of the Department, it was submitted that exam pieces are selected by the Academic Board each session for the different years of study but each teacher can decide on how to go about teaching his/her own students since the curriculum did not state what should be studied at the different levels.

Similarly, in the Department of Music, University of Uyo, the curriculum is silent on what should be taught in a lesson but students are encouraged to do some private practice on their own too. Just like what is obtainable in Awka, exam pieces are selected by the Academic Board every session for the different levels of study. Students meet with their different teachers to practice their exam pieces before the exam. Teachers of voice put their students through their pieces in addition to giving them some vocal exercises which, of course, is not stated in the curriculum but each teacher devices a way to encourage the students by doing what he/she feels is right.

A prevailing situation is that most teachers of voice at these Universities specialize in areas other than voice or voice performance. It appears all lecturers of music engage in teaching and learning of voice raising the question of disregard of areas of specialization and its impact on learners.

Evidence from private discussions and responses from questionnaire show that there is a general misconception among learners that voice study is an easy option or an instrument a lazy student opts for. There is a general belief that serious students take musical instruments other than voice while the reverse is the case for weak students. It is also believed that there is very little or no opportunity for serious career open to voice major students. This calls for double effort to motivate students to opt for voice as an instrument for self and professional expression rather than as a course to fulfill University requirements.

Over the years students of voice have taken to the culture of learning of voice pieces as representing voice studies. This is the result of the teaching methods employed by voice teachers. While many students take voice as their major instrument, many of them have not gained proficiency on the instrument to the point that one would consider them professionally trained for the challenges ahead. For many of such students, singing ends as soon as examinations are over, while some manage to identify with church choirs where they hardly play any significant role as voice major students/graduates. A simple observation shows that the few voice graduates that have made their marks in Nigeria (Joy Nwosu – Lo Bamijoko and Ori Enyi Okoro, among the older generation; Elizabeth Onyeji, Oguchi Egbunine and Patience Oikhelome, among the younger generation) are those that studied outside Nigeria or at least outside the Department of Music before their study programmes in the Universities. There seems to be a situation that students of voice that started their singing

lessons in their various Departments have not been able to excel as professional singers/art music soloists, calling for a re-appraisal of voice studies in Departments of Music of Nigerian Universities to find urgent solutions to the perceived problems. A teaching method that would lead to professionalism by voice graduates is critical if voice studies would make its mark in the future.

Discussion

This study underlined the approach to voice pedagogy as a contributing factor to non-professionalism of voice major graduates of Nigerian Universities. Most teachers of voice do not give regular individual attention to their students. There are, also, no curriculum provisions for teaching voice. Voice teachers have not developed a culture of vocal drills and exercises for students during lessons. The prevalent practice is that students study their voice pieces on their own whether they can handle it or not. Adedeji & Ajewole had earlier stated that “The students are only given vocal pieces or even worse still instructed to look for pieces of their voice categories and left on their own to learn them” (2008:107).

Music students are not properly motivated to develop positive perception of voice studies. Poor students in other instruments are often advised/constrained to opt for voice as an easier option. The reverse is also the case sometimes in which serious voice students are advised to take up “more serious” instruments for study, creating an unfounded impression that the technical demand of voice is nothing compared to those on other instruments.

Many of the teachers of voice in Nigerian higher institutions are not voice specialists. Many of them specialize in other areas other than voice. Worse still they are not good singers. It remains in doubt how such teachers are able to teach the students assigned to them if they are unable to demonstrate the different styles, technique and performance requirements of each song. This highlights the almost faded culture of mentoring among voice teachers. Lack of expert skills among teachers of voice impact negatively on learners of voice, as majority of voice students do not have experienced and proficient teachers as mentors. Adedeji & Ajewole recommend that “The issue of specialization among Nigerian musicologists and music educators be addressed urgently. The National Universities commission should discourage a situation where non-specialists teach courses that require specialists” (2008: 112).

Very little time is allotted to applied music on the time table, making it difficult if not impossible to attend to all the voice students individually. The result is that students are taught for the purposes of examination not for skill acquisition. It is a common practice for voice teachers not to give lecture notes to students during lessons.

In all, the study shows that most of the teachers of voice are not voice specialists and often times do not give the required individual attention to their students. Most voice teachers are not voice performers themselves and the students do not have active mentoring. Over the years the learning of voice pieces have been taken to represent voice studies making it difficult for students to comprehend what vocal apparatus really is.

New Direction

Voice pedagogy entails much more than learning of exam pieces. Teachers and students must understand that in addition to the technical requirements for voice performance, posture, breathing, breath-control, enunciation, etc. should be taught so as to produce good musicians. Student performers need necessarily know that a performance begins immediately they enter the exam hall or room, as the case may be, and ends when they leave the hall. Different aspects of voice production, singing conventions and vocal structure and component should be taught to students. Aspects of interpretation and style should be well known to enable students meet the challenges upon graduation. Favaro ((2000) rightly states that:

As music education attempts to meet the needs of students in the 21st century, it has become more evident that traditional programmes must be expanded to include aspects of learning that will more adequately prepare students for new career opportunities. (p. 67)

It is very important that students are made to discountenance misconceptions about voice as an instrument. They need to understand that singing could be pursued as a career. Learners must know that voice is a serious instrument of study as any other musical instrument.

Music curriculum need to be reviewed to reflect topics on aspects of voice studies that are very important for effective voice performance. For example, the students of voice should know about the voice mechanism, physiology and anatomy of the voice as well as how to care for the voice, standard singers' repertory, stage management etc.

The curriculum may thus start by structuring and integrating the various topics on voice that need to be studied. Provision must be made by Departments of Music to engage skilled voice specialists to handle students of voice. Where this is not possible, voice specialists may be invited to run master classes or workshops for teachers and learners of voice.

Based on the findings from this study, the following are recommended:

1. A review of Music curriculum to reflect aspects of voice to be learnt is crucial.
2. The responsibility of handling voice students should be in the hands of voice specialists as is the case with other instruments.
3. Other lecturers teaching voice should undergo some form of specialists training in vocal pedagogy in order for effective teaching and learning to take place.
4. Adequate literature on voice studies, vocal apparatus, and vocal technique, e.t.c should be acquired for teachers and learners.
5. Students should be encouraged to develop positive attitude to voice studies.

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