

## SOME ISSUES IN ART MUSIC COMPOSITION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Musical Composition—spontaneous or systematically calculated—remains the basis for analyzing, theorizing and conceptualizing the African Musical Arts within a given cultural space. Tutelage, orientation, economy and culture inevitably influence the craft of composers who create music. Apart from the composer's personality, intuition and training, he is obligated to meet up with consumer's taste, his prestige as a composer and community standards as part of influences in his compositional thoughts. This paper seeks to point out various issues in art musical composition in Nigeria in post-colonial Nigeria. The role of the academic composer and his/her music surveyed. Survey method was used to carry out this research.

### Introduction

Africa is a world of music of its own. The variety of music churned out daily is proof of her creative genius which is celebrated the world over. Musical Composition, just like every other aspect of our African lives has been influenced greatly by interactions with people from other continents. Several scholars have agreed that current African art music bears identity of both African and European music. African music is so costly a heritage to be lost. Virtually all the continents of the world have been influenced by it. Europe and American musical history is incomplete without the assertion of African musical influences.

### What can we refer truly to as an African musical experience?

What is African music? Consider playing *kpum kpum kpu ogene* an African children's game on the European flute before a group of whites seated patiently. They applaud ostensibly after the recital, waiting for a second piece, perhaps a violin rendition of *nzogbu nsogbu enyi mba enyi*, a protest song. Yes, it is African musical sound, gotten from Africa. But that's the only qualification it gets. When we say a piece of music is African, what do we mean? Is the term African music limited to sound alone? Nzewi (2007) has advocated (probably because of issues as this) that it be called musical art. (p.49) Nwankpa (2015) describes African musical art as being 'rooted in African indigenous knowledge system and practice.' (p.9) Africans engage in total art where music is not extricated from dance, costume, and other aspects of art. A negation of this fact defeats what Africans would originally regard as African musical arts. To the African, musical art is beyond sound, in the sense that the sound becomes naked and incomplete without other artistic forms accompanying it. Musical sound becomes like the oil in a soup. It laces up other ingredients but cannot by itself alone form the soup. Several scholars have emphasized that there

are aesthetic disparities in African and Euro-American musical expression. Art composers in Nigeria have been faced with a task of creating a music that engages the mind of the Africans beyond the fancy of musical sound. Having been trained in European rules and compositional techniques, many of them are bent on paying eye-service to their erstwhile colonial masters. The hunger to create music that indicate status (whatever such status may imply) has blinded their eyes to the fact that they are like doctors who only prescribe drugs based on the ailment of the patient; and not merely to show how much one has imbibed in medical school. The quest to appear 'more educated' and enlightened—a disposition that grew from contacts with Europeans—has been the bane of art composition. The writer here isn't against applying whatever one has learnt in composition classes in school, but rather, it should be a means to an end and not an end in itself especially if one is talking about African music. The goal should be to compose 'African music'. How can one write a hymn or anthem set to African text and call it African music? It is just the text that is African. African music cannot be extricated from its culture. There should and must be a cultural undertone, an African reason for composing.

**The place given to African indigenous musical instruments in African art composition.** Lesser compositions have been made for African musical instruments. In fact, in tertiary institutions where music is taught, more of Western instruments are used for 'applied music' than African musical instrument. The fact that composers compose more for the former sends a signal to performers on what is in vogue and more valued apart from the fact that the institutions silently prefer Western Instruments in this regard. Also, development of Nigerian indigenous musical instruments has been slow. After the era of Echezona's *ogenephone* and *bottlophone*, development of indigenous musical instruments of Africa has been laid to sleep. Who composes for xylophone or *ogene* ensemble? How many art composers dares to compose for talking drum in the academic circle? In fact, there's a composition titled *Talking drums* by Uzoigwe. Yes, it has rich musicological appraisal but it was written for the piano. Why piano for the job of talking drum? Can piano elicit the capacity of the talking drum more or is it just a mere attempt at creating variety in African musical space? While the writer isn't condemning the attempt to make piano produce African sound—which is a laudable experiment—the lesser attention this might have brought to African musical instruments remains a point of concern. Which is more important to attend to, the dying interest in indigenous musical instruments and its performance within the academia or the efforts to transfer African sounds to Western media?

What is the place of African Art music in the selection of pieces for ensemble, applied or the final year performance project in Nigeria? An in-depth observation here will expose us to some possible / critical issues or danger toward the position / future of African Art music in Nigeria. For instance, in the total of selected ten (10) pieces, some final year students would select and perform six / seven western art music composition in their final year project performance and only but two/three pieces from African Art music composed by the Africans would be selected. No wonder the call and sensitization for Africa-base research has been of interest to most renowned African scholars

presently. The questions are not limited, what is the percentage of music students that major on African musical instrument during his or her undergraduate days? If at all, must it be insignificant. Most Nigerian music graduates major / specialize on one orchestral musical instrument for examination purposes while in university. Now, can't we have a major student on *Igba, Dundun, Agogo / Ogene, Ekwe, Udu*, etc., Another issue is why aren't Nigerian Art music composers do more composition on the various African musical instruments to enable students have access to various pieces for their examination. Recently, only but few Nigerian composers composed for piano using African idioms. What about typical African musical instruments? Piano wasn't invented by African and it's never an African nor Nigerian musical instrument. No doubt, African Art music composers and Nigerian musicologist in general, as a matter of necessity are expected to do more Art compositional work on various African musical instrument, at least, few once who major on African musical instrument could have materials to be accessed for examination / entertainment purposes.

### **African music—music as mere sound or a cultural experience?**

African art music within the domains of musicologists remains an experimental experience. The atonal music of Uzoigwe, Onyeji's drummistic piano and Nsukka vocal style all remain academic works more fit basically for academic discourses, analyses, arguments and composer-status assertion than African musical arts with the full implication of it. The writer believes that when the African music is separated from the cultural background and performance ambience that characterizes it, it becomes dead (as the 'death' of a virus outside its host). One or both of them is essential in asserting what differentiates African music from what it is not. Ofuani (2014:165) posited that *Oga* (maidens' musical-game) is essentially based on the varying characteristic rhythmic motifs of the maidens' musical game - where rhythmic patterns generate from hand-clapping, foot stamping and body stamping (are applied) (sic.). Hence, from the foregoing, it is obvious that rhythm is the fundamental creative standard or backbone of Onyeji's *African-vocalism* and *drummistic-piano* styles/genres and through the same, his works are identified.' If it were to be played before an Igbo audience, how will they know it's an *oga* music if not told. Just like Haydn's *Surprise symphony* is only a surprise because the composer titled it so. It seems it is a European idea to impose a concept upon music imprisoned behind bars, lines and spaces, especially instrumental works. African music, in the face of globalization and cultural plurality should not lose what makes it African. While some of these experiments are fanciful, logical and appear as magnificent ideas, the role of the composer needs to be assessed. Is the art composer trying to please just himself, meet up with the standards of the European concert music culture or provide entertainment, enlightenment or education to the audience? Does Nigerian audience require a new/special kind of education that qualifies them to rightly contemplate, assimilate and enjoy their own music? The answer to the question determines which side of aesthetic value—foreign or Nigerian—the person answering is willing to stand. As for African music, when the aesthetic value is extricated, the music falls straight to the ground, helpless. The influences of African music in America give us ideas of its potency, possibilities and prospects. Audience participation, repetition and improvisation (as seen in jazz) gives us an idea. Idolor (in Omibiyi-Obidike (Ed.) 2001:147) asserted that, 'today,

it is difficult to categorically assert (apart from the nationality of the composer and the text of the composition where applicable) whether some works of Nigerian art music composers are actually African.' Agawu (2003:xiv) describes African music as 'those numerous repertoires of song and instrumental music that originate in specific African communities, are performed regularly as part of play, ritual, and worship, and circulate mostly orally/aurally, within and across language, ethnic, and cultural boundaries.' This gives us an idea of what to expect when one is talking about African music. Mokwunyei (in Omibiyi-Obidike (ed.) 2001:131) claimed that,

there have been arguments by scholars that new forms of music involving sight and hearing like the Yoruba folk operas have been more successful with African audiences than listening music. The reason deduced by Euba is that African tradition music is characterized by a very strong visual element—masks, costumes, dance, mime and dramatic movements.'

While it is difficult to fully revive many Nigerian cultural festivals that 'house' numerous music, the advice of Mokwunyei to make effort to perform Nigerian art music under identifiable African performance context and construct remains invaluable.

### **The training of the composer—a hindrance or help?**

Also, exposure of many lecturers to African music is also depressingly low. Omibiyi-Obidike (2001) asserted that, 'many African musician-composers and performers-were trained abroad and in consequence, they wholeheartedly embrace Western musical idioms which they applied in their compositions.' (p.152) What many of them have been exposed to have been more of celebrated works of Handel, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven etc. who remains models and very few care about the traditional professional musician (with his creative genius) whose music— though celebrated only in the inner villages—embodies the African creative force that could serve as enlightenment, mental renewal and baptism into the African musical art world. Could this be also the reason why there are more compositions for the European flute and clarinet in departments of music than there is for Oja, an Igbo notched flute? Could this be part of the reason why most voice students are guided more to sing the *bel canto* style and other European styles? Is there no African way of singing or is it not worth studying, documenting and evolving? This forms part of the reason for the kind of compositions we get when students are asked to compose African pieces. They simply want to sound African and nothing more. They pick up a folk tune or a folk-like tune and subjugate it to European compositional process as best as they could. Euba (1970:87) along this line said he believes, 'that it is possible to create a kind of African symphony in which the notion of "symphony" is construed to mean no more than an intellectual work of great depth and dimensions in order for such a work to be truly African. However, it must use the stylistic and instrumental materials of African music or at least a preponderance of them.' Beyond the issues of harmonic structures, ensemble organization structures and African thematic development should also be put in place. To avoid having a so-called African music where African musical resources are merely puppets in driving the European art music tradition. Omibiyi-Obidike (1992:38) once complained that, 'Although they (referring to African composers) make use of traditional themes by incorporating African rhythmic and melodic structures, texts, traditional songs in both vocal and orchestral works and

combine Western and traditional African instruments, their compositions are still completely embedded in the Western classical tradition.'(sic.) This results in what Euba (1970:87) refers to as, 'variant of the Western musical idiom)

### **The mind behind the music of the composer**

Music Students are more exposed and acquainted with Western musical analytical styles than African. When they listen to music, many of them are inclined more to look out for dominant sevenths, fugal treatments, ostinatos etc. which are the marks of 'refined music' for them. In fact, they will want to show that there's a difference between someone who went to school to study music and someone who didn't by forcing those concepts into African music; a practice that have earned them low patronage and prestige only amongst the initiated. One has to sound foreign to sound educated. Musical composition has to sound like that of the master, Mozart for it to be celebrated in the Art music world. Thus, what we have mostly in Nigerian or African Art music is the ability to craftly (and craftily) represent African musical materials within a sound space where European music is meant to reign. Thus, 'contemporary African art music has not made an impact on its local audience. Although the foreign audience is positively disposed towards it, the local audience is totally negative and unreceptive (Omibiyi-Obidike, 1992:93). Who is competent enough to judge if Bach is more sophisticated and more of a musical genius than an African village drummer? Omibiyi-Obidike (2001:153) opined that, 'there have been a general consensus on the use of African musical resources in educating the African child particularly the music specialist. It is when he is well versed in the use and knowledge of these resources that he can make their judicious use as source materials in his compositions.' One then will be forced to ask, 'In what ways can African art music gain the appreciation, acceptability and patronage by Africans just the same way in which European art music has gained high recognition and acceptability in Europe and beyond? The answer remains a return to our African musical resources, idioms, instruments and creative-parlance upon which it is built. Omibiyi-Obidike (2001:156) opined that, 'apart from collection and documentation of African musical materials there is need for organized research on the theory of African music, it's structure, organization of sounds, form and techniques of performance in order to evolve a common language which is not ethnically based and could be appropriately utilized in the new African art music.' While this is going on already, it is warned that the effort should be void of paying 'eye-service' or 'self-destructing service to the Europeans in a bid to earn their approval or gain some international attention.

Could this be part of the reason why most music graduates end up as teachers in secondary schools? Why are many of them not performers? Is it that the Art music they have imbibed over the years cannot be a source of survival for some of them? Who amongst them makes a living by continuing to compose/perform the cantatas, oratorios, opera, symphonies etc., which was part of their project defenses and practical examinations while they were in school?

Even some of the compositions created by several composers who claimed to have derived them from a ethnomusicological research are merely an attempt to sound African. What

then is the music of Africa? Can African music be totally separated from Western music knowing fully well that formal Western Education commenced from with the advent of the Church. In fact, the ability to document and note most African songs on paper came from the knowledge of western music. Can African music be totally decolonized?

### Conclusion

This paper surveyed the various issues in Nigerian art music composition in tandem with our struggle to establish, preserve and propagate African musical creativity and culture. Several issues such as education, perception, exposure and bias of the composer constitute part of the hindrances to such goal. Obviously, we need to write and perform African art music that imbues true African essence and also communicate fully the experience of true African music.

### Recommendations

Composition specialist in Nigeria should be encourage to compose more work on various African musical instruments to enable students have access to more existing African musical instrument pieces.

It is recommended that art forms such as operas be given a prime position in African musical creativity space. In such case, Onyeji's *oga* can be given an expression accompanied with theatrical display to paint the musical game in question more aesthetically (in the African sense). Mokwunyei (in Omibiyi-Obidike, 2001 (Ed) has recommended that, 'now is the time to identify with and affirm the validity of traditional African culture in its own terms. We can start by cooperating with our literary counterparts in the theatre who have reached an advanced stage in this struggle, but need the specializations of the Art Music composer for the realization of a more complete text.'

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