

THE COMPOSER AND THE PERFORMER IN THE AFRICAN MUSIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

There is a clear distinction between the roles of the composer and that of the performer in Western music interpretation as against the practices in African music. In the Western music, the composer most of the time creates music for different media even when he cannot manipulate any of the instruments of the media, thereby leaving the interpretation to the performer. This practice is equally responsible for the situation whereby a composer may not have the opportunity of listening to or hearing his music performed in his lifetime. Is this practice obtainable in African music and to what extent is it practiced? Who does it better in the interpretation of African music - the composer or the performer? These questions and more are considered in this paper and the answers realized are utilized in proffering solutions to understanding and enhancing relationships between the composer and the performer in African music where the composer is not the performer.

Introduction

Performance is a term used in music to denote the exposition of a musical composition for general consumption after several days of rigorous practices. Appreciation of any performance is usually aesthetically motivated. Therefore, before a performance is undertaken, strenuous efforts are made in bringing lots of factors to bear on its preparations. With this in mind, it is usually difficult to

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tell who is at best to interpret music between the composer and the performer especially with the knowledge of the fact that the creator of the music is the composer. This analogy is made in the context of African music performances especially as many authorities already have different theoretical views concerning performances in African music.

In the Western music tradition, the roles of the composer and the performer are not contested even when sometimes the composer acts as the performer. Performance is the link between the composer and the audience. Examples abound in music history books about composers who never listened to some of their music in their lifetime. This is because there were no interpreters to perform the music, as performers were few then. Nettl had observed that "in a literate musical culture, music is usually written down, and a piece conceived by a composer need never be performed at all during his lifetime, it can be discovered centuries later by a scholar and resurrect it (Nettl 1973:3-4). Through performance what the composer has intended should be heard is brought to life and the medium of communication is through the performing musicians. Glennon (1980:117-118) had observed: "A composer may apply himself to an orchestral work for a year, perhaps several years, but it will remain unheard and unknown until an orchestra performs it in the concert hall or in the recording studio... Even then, the composer is to a great extent at the mercy of the conductor to interpret every bar as he planned it, and the musicians' ability to carry out faithfully the conductor's instructions."

In music performance, the helmsman behind the production is usually the conductor. Talking about the role of the conductor in music production, Glennon continued to observe that "a musician who possesses no more than adequate skill as a performer may succeed as a conductor because of his knowledge, his personality, and the magnetism necessary for inspiring his players (or choristers) to give reality to this direction (p. 113)."

Earlier in the history of music especially in the baroque and classical periods, composers were usually the performers as many of them were virtuosos of some sorts and most of their compositions were realized out of the on-the-spot improvisations. That is why a large chunk of the original manuscripts of their compositions were notated with figured bass indications. Where music was notated for other performers' especially orchestral music, the number of performers then was minimal. However, with improvement and production of new instruments and with music developing into complexity, the number of players gradually increased, giving performers (led by conductors) much task to perform in its interpretation. The composer then began to battle with keeping pace with creation of new materials to meet the demands of the rising number of performers, thereby reducing his (the composer's) involvement in interpreting his music. The audience at the time helped in no small measure in their preferences.

Audiences of the classical era differed from those of our time in one important respect. Their attention was directed mainly to the hearing of new works by living composers; whereas our public shies away from contemporary music but flocks to hear the standard repertoire reinterpreted by one virtuoso or another. The star of the classical scene was the creator of the music. The spotlight in our scene belongs, as far as the big public is concerned, to the performer (Machlis 1955:216-217).

Performance in music over the time was facilitated by the resurgence of one whose primary aim was to direct the performance, called - the conductor in the nineteenth century as against the earlier practices where the first violinist, the pianist or the composer beat the time to keep the rhythm together. Encarta 2009 observed that "In the 19th century conducting gradually became a full-time virtuoso profession. This was partly the result of efforts by the composer-conductors to

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achieve higher standards of performance; but it was also an outgrowth of the new aesthetic ideals of 19th century romanticism, which elevated music to a higher position in the arts than it had held before".

In consideration of the above facts, it can be stated that whereas the composer wielded much authority and was deeply involved in the performance of his compositions in the earlier stage of music history, his position in that regard began to wane in the contemporary periods, leaving the interpretation to the performers to bring out the intentions of the composer. The Western composer is happy with this trend as the interpreters who are professionals seem to do it better than the composer would have done, given the need and interest of the composer to turn out more volume of works. What is the situation in African music? Are there standard standby professional performers readily equipped with what it takes to interpret and perform any form of African music composition? Will the creator or composer of African music be satisfied with the interpretation the performer gives his compositions? What of the barriers to appropriate interpretation, if any? To be able to consider these questions, it is expedient at this point to look at certain factors as they apply to African music.

Performance in African Music

Performance in a general perspective has to do with practical exhibition of a work of art applying various techniques including body gestures, manipulation of assisting aids with purpose of satisfying the aesthetic needs of the audience or listeners. In performance the intention of the composer is interpreted. Whereas in most performances, the ideas which may or may not have been preconceived and written down are interpreted by the producer through the actors, in music the composer is the brain power behind the creativity while the conductor supervises the production or performance. Merriam-

Webster (2006:1356) sees performance as "the execution of an action, something accomplished; the action of representing a character in a play, a public presentation or exhibition", while Hornby (2000:864) defines it as "the act of performing a play, concert or some other form of entertainment".

In Africa, performance of music may not be viewed in the same manner as obtained in the Western world. While both satisfy the same purposes, the modalities differ in many respects. While in most European nations, music composition and its performance is individualized, in many African societies, it is a communal activity. Suffice to say that in the Western world, a composer may write, say a piano sonata and then presents it himself or gives a performer to present without involving another person. Even in the case of a composition involving the orchestra, selected professionals in the various instruments are assembled, and with numerous rehearsals perform the music without the composer's input. But many African music situations are marked by spontaneous performances as occasion warrants involving almost everybody present. Nketia (1974:21) had observed that

In traditional African societies, music making is generally organized as a social event. Public performances therefore, take place on social occasion - that is, on occasions when members of a group or community come together for the enjoyment of leisure, for recreational activities, or for the performance of a rite, ceremony, festival or any kind of collective activity, such as building bridges, clearing paths, going on a search party, or putting out fires - activities that in industrialized societies, might be assigned to specialized agencies.

In African music the composer is directly subsumed in every performance such that in most cases he may not easily be singled out as the composer. Music participation being open to every member of a

community is responsible for competence in different aspects of music making by individuals gifted in these aspects including playing of certain musical instruments and in dancing. "Competence in aspects of musical arts performance is a life skill that is available to every member of a society right from birth. This ensures that everybody has free access to the benefits of active participation (Nzewi 2003:18)."

The place or venue of performance also has its significant contribution to music interpretation in both cultures. While recital halls and theatre houses provide convenient loci for the Western audience, Okafor and Ng'andu (2003:180) observed that "The home, the village square, the shrine etc, traditionally provided the theatre for the recital or re-enactment of spoken or musical tales." It should also be noted that African music is dominated by more of choral music with instrumental accompaniment than instrumental music alone. These different forms of choral/instrumental music however involve large number of participants thereby making its performance all-involving. Agu (1999) has outlined these forms to include Call and Response, Call and Refrain, Solo and Chorused Refrain and Mixed Structural forms.

The Composer and the Performer in African Music

We have already observed the position of a performer in music interpretation. However, it may still be necessary to add here that the performer brings out the intentions of the music creator or the composer and tries to interpret every detail as written down. In doing so, he may sometimes add his own feelings in the interpretation either knowingly or not, after all he is a human being with his own feelings. In music composition that involves many performers there is always someone that directs the performance - the conductor. Like said earlier, he is the helmsman behind every music performance. The composer on the other hand is the one who writes the music. He articulates the musical sounds on paper applying every necessary

rudiments and elements of music theory in order to make some musical sense. Lexically, the word 'to compose' is derived from the Latin word 'componere', meaning 'to put together'. It is the organization and structuring of preconceived or intuitively generated musical ideas into an acceptable form that satisfies human musical aesthetic needs. Ukpong (2006:98) observes that "the composer organizes a preconceived musical cell into a highly structured logically creative network of ideas to evolve a gamut of musical work. It may be "oral composition" or "written composition" that follows some conventional techniques and styles". Nzewi (1997:26) in his creative theory has outlined four stations of creative logic to include creative philosophy, creative intention, creative rationalization and creative fulfillment as traditional artistic vision of creative logic. These four levels of creativity are involved in music composition. Hurd in Onwuekwe (2006:231) had observed that one method of composing is that composers work in different ways, entirely according to temperament. Some like to improvise at the piano, jotting down ideas as they go. Some like to work out their ideas on paper, going over them again and again until they reach a satisfactory shape. Some prefer to do all the works from memory only picking up a pen to write down the finished piece. And some, perhaps, the majority combine all three approaches. However, no matter the process adopted by a composer, composition of music involves a lot of self attachment that needs no distraction.

Before going further on this discourse it is pertinent to observe that there are two groups to be considered (1) preliterate and (2) literate African groups and composer-performance situations. Preliterate groups include African musical practices in a pure unadulterated setting while literate group involves those musical practices that have been polluted or affected by alien cultures.

In the preliterate African setting, music composition takes a different approach, which is still practiced today in many remote African societies and carried to the cities by neo-Africanists. It is an oral tradition which is part and parcel of African musical culture, and

may continue to subsist any other alien practices. Composition of music in this milieu is mostly spontaneously generated within the performance arena. On the part of the instrumental accompaniments, the leading instrumentalist communicates with one another imitating the spoken language of the songs. Suffice it to say that every phrase of the song is delineated in speech surrogate by the leading instruments of the ensemble, sometimes in call and response pattern. By speech surrogate is meant the ability of an African instrument that is not wholly conceived as melodic instrument or with limited tones, to replicate or imitate certain tonal levels of the spoken language as used in songs, by application of special techniques by an expert player. Drum is an example of such instruments capable of this feat. Akpabot (1998:24) had observed that "The hourglass drum, flute and xylophone have been identified as instruments which are sometimes constructed to function as speech surrogates". In this case the master instrumentalist, by his creative extemporization serves the dual function of the chief composer and the performer. This is because his extemporization can be seen as a new creative device that gives the collective composition a unique character.

Music in a real African traditional society also takes the form of composer-performer involvement setting. In this situation when a particular group gathers to make music, it is all-involving. Naturally there is always a leader, but he doesn't have the monopoly of providing the songs. Within the group, individuals create songs out of the event-situation and everybody is entitled to be part of this creativity. This is in line with the belief of Herbst et al (2003:143) that

all beings with a modicum of musicality and an iota of imagination have the ability to be musically creative, that is, to conjure up a simple musical structure which could be a melody, with or without words, or a rhythm phrase. Composing music is within reach of the creative spirit residing within each one of us and should not be the exclusive privilege of the few. There is great joy in producing a fresh ordering of sound, and it is often the unfettered mind that has the freedom to create music of great worth and beauty

When a song is composed by someone in the group it will undergo restructuring and modification by many inputs and addition of instrumental accompaniments which may provide a major deviation as it was from the initiator until it reaches a form that will be acceptable to the group. Strumpf et al (2003:119) are of the view that "for most African children, music surrounds their lives in perhaps a more total and significant way." Continuing, they further observed that "In African music making there is seldom a non-participating audience. The expectation that all should participate in music making at cultural events is learned very quickly". In line with the above position, the same authors had observed that "members of the performing groups often compose with a 'give-and-take' approach governing the whole process and therefore a single individual is not credited as the sole creator of the work (p. 121). This has been the practice and is also responsible for the generally accepted opinion that folk music is not credited to a particular composer. Even when a single person composed a music, the fact that it was not written down with the appendage of the composer's name, but rather passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition and perhaps mutilated in the course of its transmission is enough to deprive the owner of any claim to its creativity. The point of argument here is that in most typical African traditional/folk music, there is usually no known composer.

What this portends to performance is that except where a group appoints someone as a leader based on his musical pedigree evident in his degree of participation and obvious musical talents, no one claims superiority of direction on account of his ownership of the music, rather everyone contributes his own idea in bringing the performance to an acceptable level.

On the other hands, in the literate or modern African music situation, there has been a tremendous change from what was the practice. The ability of someone to commit his creativity to paper through acquired knowledge of notation system has enabled the

society to recognize composers as known individuals. Herbst et al (2003:146) observed that

Written composition within Africa by African composers is by definition a result of the process of acculturation provoked by colonialism. While written composition has been a driving force for Western art music since the establishment of the staff notation system in 1600, there has been a noticeable move towards the development of written music composition in Africa that was introduced by the Christian missionaries in the form of hymns.

In this new milieu, there is the composer and there is the performer.

Who does it Better?

Unlike in the Western practice where a composer writes and piles up his compositions without bothering much about its performance, African composer believes that music should be kept alive through performance. He writes music and ensures its performance either by direct participation or by encouraging performers through supervision, provision of logistics and other enablement. As a matter of fact, he does not feel comfortable not hearing his music. This is one of the reasons for the event-situation that is characteristic of African music. In every music composed, there is a purpose for its creation. Contrary to the old practice of spontaneity associated with music creativity in Africa, the modern composer sits down and articulates his music after he has been consulted and given the theme to do so. As he writes, he thinks of the performer/s or the ensemble that would be used to interpret the music. Knowledge of the performers and their ability enables him to know the degree of technicality to adopt in writing the music and the level of difficulty/simplicity to be applied.

In the argument concerning who interprets musical composition better between the composer and the performer, one may easily jump

to the conclusion that since the composer is the creator of the music, he is in a better position to give proper interpretation to it. It should be borne in mind that a performer is trained for performance, to interpret music as written. It has been earlier observed that a performer applies his personal feeling in the course of interpretation, in addition to the composer's feelings that are already written down, thereby incorporating two ideals. This is expected to produce better results than one person's idea written and interpreted. This is the principle on which African music is predicated in the preliterate society which still subsist every other alien musical practices. But are there professionally trained performers in African music today? If there are, what level of support do they receive? Shall we therefore go back to uphold the composer-performer relationship as obtained in the true unadulterated music setting of the preliterate Africa? Nzewi was right when he observed that "professional composers and performers who make a living from their art are yet to emerge on the modern African literary music scene because there are as yet no professional institutions and no governmental, public, private or commercial agencies... to support full-time African classical composers and performers (Nzewi 2007:106)".

Well, the above observation by Nzewi is a hamstrung to the general growth of music education in Africa but the point of argument is that in a true African music situation, there is no clear distinction between the composer and the performer. The composer is part and parcel of performance. Even in this present literate African society where composers write down their music with acceptable music notations, yet performances of such music without the composer's involvement is a practice that would take time to wane. With notation, music can now be performed even after the composer's death, but still, interpretation of such music is at the discretion of the person interpreting. It is not arguable the fact that there are certain musical and nonmusical nuances that are not easily notated, and when certain uncommon signs are used by a composer, its interpretation are usually

difficult, and may be given to various mutilations in the attempt to decipher them. When we talk of music in Africa, it does not end with choral and instrumental music but also involves dance music. Even though scholars like Meki Nzewi and others have tried to create and establish certain notations for dance steps and instruments of indefinite pitches, yet we are aware that those theories and hypotheses are not yet fathomable, practicable, accepted and widespread. This therefore poses problem to interpretation of such music without direct supervision of the composer or someone he had taught the interpretation.

Conclusion

We have seen that in African music the performer is not quite removed from the composer. The composer is intimately involved in the production of his works. Where he is not the active performer, he supervises the entire production. We have also seen that in a typical African setting, the composer accepts criticism and welcomes suggestions from the participating performers as interpretation and performance is all-involving. This helps in giving the composition a thorough treatment that makes it easily acceptable to the society, but shall we continue that way in this modern society characterized by professionalism and division of labour? We need a change - to train professional performers of African music. This paper also highlights the fact that music composition is kept alive by performance, for without performance there is no music. Music is dead without performance. To an African, music composed and piled up waiting for a scavenger to resurrect it one day is not his idea of making or creating music.

It is really pathetic that African mode of music performance has been eroded by Western civilization through globalization, but we cannot lose all. A stitch in time saves nine. And more still, technological advancement is equally having its toll on music

composition and performance since someone can now sit in his bedroom or office compose and produce music that would have taken hundreds of people to do. Nzewi et al (2007:106) had observed that "The modern recording and editing technology is beginning to encourage technological composition and performance in which the human performer with modern training becomes increasingly redundant and unemployable".

Having considered the above observation, this paper deems it fit to suggest that this technological breakthrough in music should be churned by those who mean well for the growth of music in Africa. The inherent joy of participation in music performance and production cannot be overemphasized. Compare yourself as a composer who sits in your room/office and with the aid of one of the music software produce your music, with the same music learnt by various instrumentalists and presented in a concert hall. Imagine the joy and exhilaration that would greet such performance in a concert hall even when the computer would have given you more refined sound quality. Such an atmosphere cannot be compromised. Have you imagined that a skilled violin player would interpret your music better than the computer, because his soul and feeling would be translated into his playing technique thereby injecting life into it much more than the computer that obeys some commands and gives you a straight-jacket soul-less output. In the same manner, a skilled notched flute, xylophone or skin drum player would equally interpret any music if given enough training and exposition. There is therefore the need to encourage and train music performers to acquire enough skills of interpreting African music instead of exerting unnecessary resources in developing music software that would generate African musical sounds.

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