

Choir: the Custodian of the Sacred Music Composer's Effective Work

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Abstract

Music composition is an art. Sacred music composition is an act of creating a religious music that is used for worship. Its acceptability and general appreciation depends on the emotional impact it makes on the listeners. This can be majorly achieved, based on the capability of the composer to get well organized and trained singers that can effectively interpret the work. The interpretation and good performance of the work depends on the choristers' vocal ability. A well groomed choir that has the skill to interpret and sing effectively makes the composer acceptable by the public, but a well composed music in very poor or weak choristers may mar the composer's gift. This work is on the need to have a well-organized choir to complement and expose the composer's gift in the art. We shall look into the services of both the composer and the choir, to know how each compliments another. The sustainability of the choir as singers is discussed. Observations, interactions with skilled sacred music composers and directors, practice and longtime experience, are the methodology employed. It concludes by recommending that more attention should be paid in sustaining standard choirs in our respective churches for effective performance.

Introduction

It is observed from every record that music constitutes an essential part of secular life and religious worship. It is by implication, the indispensable instrument for a high level of communication in all circles of life. In the height of this, common things of everyday, God gave man speech in a common way, For the deeper things men think or feel. God gave poets words to reveal but for the heights and depths no words can reach. God gave man music, the souls own speech''. These are the words of Mitchell, in Onwuka (2015;148).

This shows that music is essential part of human existing process. To this end, music creation is made by man and its relations to him. "Music deals with emotions and consequently affects not only individuals but even groups and sub – groups of people differently" (Okafor, 2004). Okafor goes on to say that music is a system of expression which uses sound, rhythm and tune, (pg 147). The effect of music to the society is very important feature, and this is the very reason for its existence. Music is therefore written by composers to achieve such emotional end, both in the secular, traditional and religious compositions. There are some music that are written to make the listeners cry, laugh, dance, meditate or even sleep. The composer bears any of these in mind before going to write. Also there are some kinds of music, these include, traditional, secular, sacred popular, etc. This work concentrates more on the sacred music.

Sacred music

Music is generally regarded as the heartbeat of human life. Sacred music is the heartbeat of church worship. Music has latent power in creating inestimable and immeasurable changes in the life of the listener. It has much role to play in Christian worship than every other activity that may be taken place in the same worship. This shows the importance of sacred music composition. Okonkwo, in Agu (2006) affirms that sacred music and religion are "inseparable friends that go hand to hand" (pg.156-157). She goes on to state that Christianity is a religion that entwines music with religion as its principle mode of worship. Such music is called sacred or church music. It is a music composition that creates different atmosphere in worship, which include; solemnity, exuberance, joyful and thanksgiving atmosphere such well composed and well rendered music breaks the bond between the rich and the poor.

There are three major class of music. On tem Okafor asserts, “among the three classes of music, namely; tradiditional, classical and popular music compositions, sacred music is found among the classics,” (pg.4). The sacred music is comprising: cantata, oratorio, a mass, litany, motet, plainsong. Others include, anthems, lyrics, et cetra. These sacred compositions give clear thought of individual Christian life and emotions. There are many faithful that go to church or fellowships, just for the ministration through sacred music rendition, which gives them reflection and thought provoking. This is why most Christian fellowships, church services always have time allotted to renditions or anthems. Any gathering of such that goes without sacred music rendition is taken as incomplete, or equal to none-held.

Sacred music composition

Johnson (2017) quotes Isaac and martins, defining music composition generally, as, “act of putting musical notes together, to create an original work of music”.(pg. 6). Ude (2007), also defines music composition as,” combining of various structural elements of music, songs, harmony, melody, rhythm to form logical form to produce vocal or instrumental piece”(pg. 34). Above definitions show that music composition is an act or practice of creating a song or music. This is achieved by combining melody, harmony, rhythm, forms, vocal contents to form what will be pleasing and appealing to human ear and emotions. Sacred music composition is creating such music notation as a sheet music score which carries gospel message from the scriptures or religious inspiration of the composer. The music compliments the gospel preached by the preacher. Sacred music has a much to accomplish in church mission and evangelism. It has been, and remains it integral part of church vision and mission. As a result, the primary aim and objective of sacred music composition is to transmit the information about the person of Christ, His salvivic work on the cross and the message of maranatha. This remains its line of existence, avoiding any deviation from its religious and spiritual point.

Composer

Music composition is an art. Akpakpan, in Agu (ed. 2006) defines music composition as an art of combining various elements of music; pitch, melody harmony, tone, color, dynamics and forms, in logical order, to produce vocal, or instrumental, or a combination of both”(pg. 219). This is where the practical musicianship of a composer is tasted. The composer is saddled with the challenges of transforming his inspiration, which is passing the gospel message to his audience, through music. A sacred music composer is a complimentary factor to the gospel message always rendered by the preachers. The world of a composer is occupied by these thoughts. His music composition is appreciated, based on his ability to scale through the challenges of; what to write, how it can be written to make it acknowledged as standard work, with its techniques, styles and forms and the choral group that can effectively perform it.

Onwuka (2007), agrees with this and says, “the composer bears in mind audience for which the music is to be composed”(pg.3). Onwuekwe, in Onyiuke (2007) quotes Hurd saying, If there is anything unusual about the composer, it is not to be found in his looks or the way he behaves,... it is only his cast of mind that is unusual. The composer is a man who exposes himself in terms of music.(pg. 28).

Onwuekwe, hence, opines that music composition is seen by the composer as the art of writing down original music that has not be heard, sung or performed. (pg. 29). Also, the composer bears in mind to write a music that will develop and sustain listeners’ consciousness in spiritual reawakening. The composition on the score sheet brings the composer’s creation of expression and other music dynamics that can be enjoined in the performance of the work. The world of a composer is surrounded by thoughts, meditations, observation and research. This is to enable him create music and not copying or reframing what others have done. Golden encyclopedia of music, defines music composer as “someone who puts together sounds on a logical and meaningful way”(pg.115). This is achieved through natural creativity and it makes the composer a peculiar personality. Most of the sacred music

FIGURE 1-11
Maurice Ravel working at the piano ca. 1925. Ravel habitually composed at the piano, even when writing music for full orchestra.



composers always consult the scriptures for inspiration. Also they go on spiritual meditation. So the composer must be on imagination/inspiration and techniques; imagination/inspiration, as for him to get the vision of what he wants to write, technique, so that he can transform his vision into the reality of his musical symbols. A composer is therefore, respected for his inborn ability to create music. His end product is now expected, hence, the service of a choir.

Choir:



Choir or choral group is the custodian of the progress or prospect in the whole labour of music writing by the composer. Choir is defined as, “organized group of singers who perform together, especially in the church, typically combining smaller group of singers who sing different parts of different pitches (Encarta dictionary,; 2009, pg. 146). Onwuka, (2015) quotes Scholes saying, “choir is chorus but smaller in size” He goes on to say that we have different types of choir. They are;

- School choir
- College choir
- Church choir
- Traditional choir
- State choir
- National choir

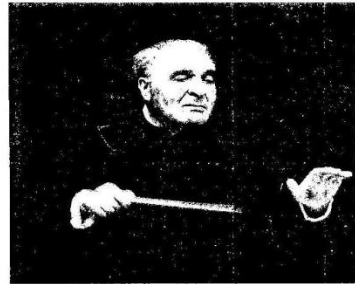
Also we have children choir, all male choir, all female choir, mixed voice choir. The church choir, which is also a typical sacred choir, is also a mixed-voice choir. Church choir is made up of the four standard part voices, namely;

- Soprano
- Alto
- Tenor
- Bass

Choir, as group of singers, complement the compositional ambition of the composer. Such choir is made up of individual committed singers who have flair for singing and praising God. There are professional singers who can form choir, also there are other amateur singers may improve by training. Every sacred music composer seeks the services of such choirs to get the works performed. In some quarters, these groups of singers are regarded as choral group or voice performers. Webster (2006) presents performance as “the execution of an action” (pg. 1356). The action here is the composition done by the composer, while the execution is the choir performance. It is in this performance that the practical interpretation of the composer's work is done and observed. Such vocal presentation interprets what the composer intends to get heard. It is the choir that shows what the composition holds, both in its contour and content.

Choir efficiency

There are some factors that are necessary to be discussed about the efficiency of choir, to make sure that the efforts of the composer is never sent to the mud. Such issues will help to see the composer having confidence on the choir without skeptical mind. We shall discuss them here briefly as follows;



Conductor

The conductor is number one person in every organized choir. He is the captain of the ship. The conductor guides every organized choir in interpretation of the composer's works. Olisaeke, in Oguno (ed.)(2014) speaks about the conductor," the composer is in a greater extent, at the mercy of the choir conductor, to interpret every bar as he planned it"(pg. 100).

The conductor, who is called choir master in some areas, is the one that helps other choristers to bring out their vocal talent in interpreting and sing well the composition. Sometimes the conductor organizes the music far better than the composer has written it. It is a fact that not all composers can direct or teach their compositions as some of them are not choir conductors. Hence, the gifted conductor is the one that will make the composers work what it will be. Whatever the choir presents in tn public is assumed what the composer has written, therefore, the conductor has a great role to play in every composition.

The conductor carries out a pre-study work on the composition and masters it before bringing it out to the chorister for rehearsal. Lloyd says, 'the conductor must drill his performers in rehearsal so that all the sounds become perfectly balanced (pg. 119). This shows that a good conductor makes a good composition interpretation, but a weak conductor destroys the pains taken work of a composer. In all indication, the level of musicianship in any choir conductor shows how efficient his services will be to the sacred music composer, especially in terms of interpreting the composers works.

Choir membership/recruitment

Choir efficiency in interpreting the composer's works equally depends on the persons that build the membership of the choir, as recruited by the choirmaster or management. During recruitment exercise, the choirmaster bears in mind the choir standard parts, which are;

- Soprano
- Alto
- Tenor
- Bass

It is the availability of these persons that will determine the standard choir that is to be formed. On this onwuka (2004) says,

“the balanced proportion of choir should largely depend on the size of the groups and the individual output of the choir members. It is therefore a great task for the choirmaster (conductor) to assess each member's output critically and to prune down the group to an effective desirable size” (pg.7).

The conductor uses his wealth of experience to decide on the level of people he will choose, to help him have a formidable team that will give effective service. Idamoyibo, in Onyiuke ed.(2007) Says, “a simple composition may receive very high ovation if well performed, but a complex work, poorly performed may be shunted and resented by the audience” (pg.114). The ability to get good choir depends on the persons with vocal dexterity, who are recruited by the conductor.

Age

Also age is very important to be considered, both in membership and recruitment. It is obvious that singing saps energy and has a lot to do with breath control. Some individuals at the age of forty upwards may be finding it difficult to reach to some upper pitches or even be able to articulate some words musically. Hence the conductor needs to device how he may be stepping down such singers with the impediment as such and how he may be filling the gap through recruitment exercise.

Onwuka (ibid) enumerates some requirements for choir membership/recruitments. They include;

Choice

Training

Skillful instruction

Productive contribution

These are briefly summarized as follows;

Choice: the chorister must have interest in singing and performance, especially, as a gift. His/her voice must be tested to know which part of voice to fall in and even if the voice can fit in at all.

Training: the chorister must be available for trainings. They must be trained both in voice performance and other choir areas of discipline. On this Ekwueme (1993) says, choir discipline can be categorized into music and non-musical. Whereas musical involves, tone production, intonation, accuracy of rhythm, tempo and dynamics. Non-musical deals with regularity of attendance, punctuality to choir engagements, comportment, concentration and uniformity while learning or performing selected songs or tunes.(pg.145).

Skillful instruction: there is much need for the chorister to be handled by a skilful, talented well seasoned choir conductor. Such is found in the bible about a man called Chenaniah (11 chronicles 15;22). The trainer must be conversant with music interpretations, extra musical organizing patterns and arrangement.

Productive contribution: A productive chorister always strives to learn up the skill. They should be obedient to the leaders for good production of the service. A good singer should always be well comported, both in training and performance, since the reverse will affect performance of the composition. A prospective chorister must always be prepared for training, formal and informal.

Choristers' incentives: Choir management is mainly to sustain the services of the choristers. The management should be mindful of the following, as it concerns the choristers;

Choristers' well-being: both psychological, health, financial and social well fare.

Handling; the chorister needs to be handled well, in love, tolerance and clear cut friendly approach always.

Education; There is much need to encourage a contemporary chorister improve on his/her academic level, to remain relevant to the vocation and its social challenges. The composer should also bear the standard of his choir in mind, as it concerns the level of their performance, while writing any sacred music for them. He should consider the ability of the choristers to sing certain pitches, chromatic notes and other colorations before such embellishments are added. Also the ability of the conductor in interpreting the work should be put in consideration. Idamoyibo (ibid) opines, “in compositional practice, one must imagine his performer(s) more than his audience. He is more likely to fail than succeed if he considers the pleasure of his audience more than the ability available to performers” (pg.114).

Choir practical training for effective performance

For effective performance and handling of the composer's works, the individuals making up the choir need serious and practical training. Most outstanding is the vocal and audition training. This is where the singers will be trained on how to sing, handle pronunciation, breath control, dynamics and practical shaping of mouth. Training starts from placing the individuals on comfortable voice parts. This will be done after the people must have been gathered, either through advertisement or any other available means. Onwuka (2004) posits, "persons with zeal, will and wherewithal, will be gathered. The organizers or initiators should ensure that the potential singers abound and are sensitized through advertisement, individualized campaign, or could be put on hand bills or posters"(pg. 1).

Placement of individual parts will help to fix singers at their appropriate parts. During this exercise the organizer will be acquainted with the standard choir he is having or about to have. Also he will have idea of the standard of sacred music composition they will be able to handle. It should be noted that the level of choirmaster's musicianship determines the standard or grade of choir he will float and the grade of composer's work they can take. A composer may be a highly gifted one, but the composition may be floired be non-choir. Hence a total failure and disappointment. Effective practical choir training brings effective performance.

Some factors that determine practical effectiveness in singers potentiality include; individual singer's consistency in singing, constant training, natural or acquired behavior, openness to learn new things or skills in singing, discipline and comportsment it is penitent to note that there some persons who may have mere interest in singing, they have no good voice. Some of them may improve through constant training. But there are some that cannot fit in at all. Those ones can be pushed to instruments/accompaniments. The gifted ones still need to be guided and directed by both the conductor and composer.

Aural training

This is another aspect in training a standard choir. Listening skill is very important sacred music singing. a good singer is one who is good in listening and comprehending. A potential singer must be undergoing aural and audition training, to be able to hear, understand and interpret aright what he/she heard and expected to do. Oguno (2019) affirms, "a lot depends on the state of mind of the aural training student(singer). A good musician is a good listener"(pg.12).the habit of listening to similar sacred songs and compositions, learning to make some level of analysis on it-identifying ones voice part in every music listened to, ability to identify music key, ability to pick keyboard or organ play, will all help a great deal. It is very necessary to be engaging potential singers on listening class under such training the singers will be guided on the compositional style or technique of the composer of the sared music sample at hand. Also cds can be played to train the singers on the ability to identify different voice parts, counterpoints, entry points of voices and parts, identify the music contour of other choirs to compare with theirs. Also exercises on breath control, body movements, timing, rhythmic movements, music tempo and other music dynamics and principles in singing, will be taken.

Conclusion

No sacred music composer can boast of how wonderful he is in music writing if there is no well-organized choir to compliment this effort, by giving it a befitting performance. It is how any music is interpreted and performed by the choir that gives the work its credit or rejection. As "no Nile, no Egypt", so it is on the relationship between the sacred music composer and the choir. Hence, every sacred music composer must ensure that here should be a formidable team of choristers that will be able to handle his work when ready. Choirs should be well regarded and handled with much care and concern, to make them be ever ready to give out their best in performance. The ingenuity in a sacred music composer is noticed in the choir performance of his works. It is the ability of the singers that can motivate the composer in finding new grounds of rhythmic complexity, floridity, range, texture, melodic crafting embellishment, counterpoint and other visioning and advanced dynamical techniques in sacred music compositions.

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