THE EMOTIVE POWER OF MUSIC

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Introduction

One thought provoked by the theme of this Conference is that, whatever the state of a country, however recessed or depressed its economy may be, its citizens always possess music as a resource: they can always listen to music, most of them will use their voices to sing it, and some of them are able to use some other instrument to perform it. Under oppressive political regimes men and women find consolation in music and the hope of recovering freedom. We lovers of music would argue that the ability to enjoy music is an essential part of being human, and we pity those who are said to be 'tone-deaf', unable to respond to it. Perhaps there are more of them in the Western world than in Africa; it is doubtful whether in Nigeria there is anyone who is not affected by music.

Often in Africa also there is a compulsion to dance to music, and often it is not only the very young and the not-so-young but even the decidedly old who do so. The compulsion may be in response to music that was not intended by the composer or by long musical tradition to be danced to. Thus a few years ago I attended an English studies conference in Imo State, and as often happens in Nigeria today it became a social as well as an academic event. During a long interval, a special choir sang some numbers, including the 'Hallelujah' chorus from Handel's oratorio *Messiah*, which was composed in 1741 and of all pieces of classical music is probably the one best known in Nigeria. Soon everyone was on their feet dancing joyfully to it, with torsos and arms and legs moving in line with its fairly fast 4-4 rhythm. It is not certain that Handel would have approved; but, just like any other artiste, he cannot from the grave decide the fate of his works.

It cannot be denied that responsiveness to music, along with language, religious beliefs, and technical inventiveness, is a higher attribute of the human race, distinguishing the human race from animals; and the performance of music

features in the early records of the development of every human society of which we possess any records. There are numerous references to it in the Bible. Psalm 92 begins:

> *It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to make music to your name,*
> *O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your truth*
> *in the watches of the night, on the ten-stringed lyre and the lute,*
> *with the murmuring sound of the harp*.

This is one instance where we cannot be sure whether the music is referred to is purely instrumental (here with the instrumentalist plucking the lyre or the lute or the harp), or whether the instrumental music accompanies human voices and words. Among the numerous references in the New Testament to the singing of hymns is the Epistle to the Ephesians 5:19, which reads: 'Sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs among yourselves, singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts'. Here, conversely, we cannot be certain that the voices singing words were accompanied by instruments. But instruments were an important element of the musical culture of ancient Greece and Rome as of ancient Israel, and it is likely that early Christian communities used them, as worshipping Christians in all parts of the world use them today.

Questions of Musical Ontology

The relationship between 'pure' music (i.e. wordless, purely instrumental music) and 'impure' music (i.e. instrumental music accompanying words) is one of the theoretical issues that have interested contemporary philosophers of music, as shown by Kania (2017). It is connected to the important question of the emotive power of music, its expressiveness: does this lie in the words, or in the music itself, or in both together? In Africa the question should interest us because, while we are very familiar with so-called impure music – e.g. church hymns and choruses, but also the various forms of popular music – we are also exposed to so-called pure music, especially on festive occasions in a traditional setting, when music is performed on flutes, percussion instruments, etc. to accompany dancers. (In this case, arguably, the music is not pure, because it accompanies dance.)

Another question debated by those interested in musical 'ontology' (i.e. concerning the question 'What is music?') is the difference between a musical work and performances of it: given that every performance of a work is different in some way from every other performance, in what sense can the work itself be said

to exist at all? In the Western classical tradition at least, it can be said to exist in written form as a 'score', with pitches, rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, etc. indicated in 'staff notation', or sometimes (for the guidance of performers not familiar with this) in 'sol-fa'. Even so, the question arises: What counts as an 'authentic' performance of the work? Is it authentic if the composer wanted it performed by a full orchestra, but instead a version is created for a pianist playing it solo? Or is it authentic if the middle C on a piano keyboard is faulty, so that whenever that note is meant to occur in a piece being played it is not heard? Or if, when a composer marks a passage 'allegro' one performer makes it almost as fast as 'presto', and another makes it almost as slow as 'andante', are the two performances equally authentic? Do such questions really matter if the listeners enjoy what they hear? Today, especially with 'remixing' having become normal practice, many people do not even consider authenticity to be an issue; to them, listener enjoyment is all that matters.

Popular Music – Music and Politics

Some of the questions raised above will in fact seem to be of interest only to philosophers; but the question of the relationship between sounds and words (or lyrics) deserves to be explored further. For one reason, so much of the music listened to around the world today is 'popular music' and consists of words sung against an instrumental background. Secondly, many devotees of popular music have for a long while subscribed, at least implicitly, to various forms of socialist or Left-wing ideology. Socialists regard music as having an important role to play in encouraging the masses to resist capitalist, 'bourgeois' exploitation. In this view, the lyrics are assumed to be far more important than the sounds, even though when a song becomes highly popular it is often because the sounds and the lyrics are well-matched. The vocalist may use subversive language to attack injustice and so arouse the listeners to righteous indignation, a well-known Nigerian example being Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, 'Fela', who transformed the Nigerian musical scene from the early 1970s onwards. It is doubtful whether the structures of Nigerian society were themselves transformed as a result, although security operatives did go to destroy Fela's 'Shrine'.

In contrast, 'pure' music has often been regarded with suspicion by socialists. Thus Lenin, the disciple of Marx who headed the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, enjoyed listening to Beethoven's piano music, but he regarded such music

as dangerous because it had a soothing and softening effect, inhibiting action and diminishing revolutionary ardour. Today, left-wingers tend to deride classical music as elitist, claiming that listening to it is a pastime for the bourgeoisie who finance the concert-hall and opera-house performances and CD companies that sustain it. Yet it is noteworthy that while the Soviet Union lasted, from 1917 to 1991, pre-revolutionary art-forms, such as the ballets of the composer Tchaikovsky and the novels of Tolstoy, which are pervaded with aristocratic values, remained immensely popular with the public, and the regime did not ban them. They helped to keep alive the idea that there existed some alternative to the totalitarianism ushered in by the Revolution. The regime did compel composers such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich to write some definitely 'socialist' works, but these are not much remembered today.

Marxists themselves are themselves by no means uniformly opposed to traditional art-forms or to classical music. Theodor Adorno is one example of a philosopher who attacked the very same popular music that Left-wingers tended to champion (Fagan 2003). Music that he had in mind included the big-band jazz of the 1930s and 1940s and popular American vocalists such as Bing Crosby, and he criticized music of the latter type in particular as being simplistic and repetitive. He argued that it lulled listeners into a deceptive sense of well-being, and as a result of commercialization served to reinforce the structures of capitalism instead of challenging them. Adorno would probably have applied the same argument to highlife, the music that marked the adaptation of the big-band genre to West Africa and 'reigned' in Nigeria in the 1950s and -60s before the arrival on the scene of Fela. In Adorno's view, if music were to have a challenging impact it needed to be 'difficult', even 'inaccessible'. He would therefore have liked to encourage engagement with modern classical music, especially that written in the 1920s and 1930s by, among others, Stravinsky, Bartok, and Schoenberg, which often sounds harsh and unmelodious, even to devotees of classical music written before that time; but his advocacy fell on (almost literally) deaf ears. In contrast, some of the Western rock music of the past fifty years (i.e. during the period since Adorno's death in 1969) is easy to listen to but also sounds harsh and aggressive, and so may be considered to issue challenges to authority and to discourage complacency about political and social injustice. British punk rock of the 1970s in fact did so explicitly. However, many observers point out that, like pop music in general, such music serves the interest of a thriving 'music industry' that has made

a number of people (promoters and financiers as well as vocalists and instrumentalists) very rich. It would be hard to prove that Western 'rock', any more than Kuti's music in Nigeria, has played a part in reducing inequality, within one country or between one part of the world and another. A key element of the outlook of its followers may be 'liberation', but this has usually meant liberation from traditional moral constraints, especially in the area of sexuality.

Observers in the Western world writing from a socially conservative point of view are naturally also highly critical of Western pop music and its baleful effects on contemporary Western youth. The British philosopher Roger Scruton (2015) says:

> *I don't think we should underestimate the tyranny exerted over the human brain by pop. The constant repetition of musical platitudes….. leads to addiction. It also has a dampening effect on conversation. I suspect that the increasing inarticulateness of the young… has something to do with the fact that their ears are constantly stuffed with cotton wool. Round and round in their heads go the chord progressions, the empty lyrics and the impoverished fragments of tune, and boom goes the brain box at the start of every bar.*

One of the so-called artistes lambasted by Scruton is Lady Gaga. He points out that, for most of one of the songs that she renders she stays on just one note. It is worth adding that the lyrics of most pop, which Scruton calls 'empty', make no reference to the Creator. This is surely because today young people in the West, perhaps unlike young Nigerians, do not have room in their consciousness for Him.

Musical Sounds and Emotion

Let us now concentrate our attention on the music itself, the sounds (including rests or pauses, when by definition there is no sound). Important questions arise here which are again of interest to philosophers, although this time they concern listeners directly and personally. What really is the impact of music upon a listener? Why does the listener listen to it? What emotions does the listener experience? In the view of certain contemporary thinkers, music is expressive, and it expresses emotion. This may seem paradoxical, because one might think that it is only the listener who could experience emotions: music is an object, and objects cannot feel things. Many theorists have stressed the connection between man's

capacity for music-making and the sounds of nature, such as those produced by lower animals such as birds. These sounds may make us happy, especially when we hear them early in the morning; but the scientific evidence suggests that it is not because the birds feel happy that they produce these sounds.

The contemporary philosophers Peter Kivy and Stephen Davies (discussed in Kania 2017) overcome the paradox with the idea of 'appearance emotionalism'. Applied to music, this holds that music can convey emotions even though it is an 'unfeeling' object because its structures contain certain characteristics that resemble emotional expression, and a listener responds to these with equivalent emotions. One of such 'structural features' is melody, and its accompanying harmonies; others are tempo, mode or tonality, volume, and rhythm. Each of them is a variable, with different forms corresponding to different emotions. Thus a fast tempo corresponds to happiness, but also to anger; a slow tempo corresponds to sadness, or solemnity, but also to serenity. High volume is suggestive of power and of intensity of emotion – whether joy or anger; low volume suggests gentleness and peace. There may seem to be contradictions here: would not one listener feel that a certain piece of music expresses anger because it is very fast, while another feels that it expresses happiness for the same reason? The answer lies in a consideration of the total expressiveness, which is the product of several features. Moreover, the overall expressiveness seems to be determined fundamentally by mode (or tonality or key). This is an 'either-or' feature, major or minor: a major mode (or tonality or key) expresses such positive emotions as happiness or serenity or hope; a minor tonality, melancholy, uncertainty, disturbance. It is then easy to say that a combination of a minor key and a fast tempo expresses anger, while a combination of a major key and a fast tempo expresses delight (with the tempo reinforcing the key). If music is set to words, the composer of the music obviously needs to choose the appropriate tonality.

An example of inappropriateness concerns the choice of a tune once made for the singing of the response in what, in the 'Liturgy of the Word' section of the Catholic Mass, is called the Responsorial Psalm. Here a cantor sings the verses and he/she and the people sing a response to each verse, which he/she then and there teaches them. On the occasion in question, during the Easter season, the words of the response were 'The stone which the builders rejected/Has become the cornerstone'. Now the emotion conveyed and evoked by the words is surely

one of overall hope and joy (looking to 'the cornerstone', i.e. Christ the Risen Lord); regrettably, however, the cantor used a tune in a minor key, shown in sola-fa as follows (with la as tonic):

mi – la – ti – do – re – mi – fa – fa
mi – mi – re – do – ti – la

(or, in staff notation in the key of A minor, as: E-A-B-C-D-E-F-F/E-E-D-C-A)

He/She would have done better to choose the corresponding A major tune, shown in sol-fa as follows (with do as tonic):

sol – do – re – mi – fa – sol – la – la
sol – sol – fa – mi – re – do

I feel sure that Sir Jude Nnam, would agree. For those who do not know of him, he is a leading Nigerian composer of Igbo Catholic music, in which simple tonality and melodies and traditional rhythms and instruments are blended in a joyous, vigorous mix, as in 'Onye kel'uwa jaya mma' ('Praise the Creator').

Classical Music – Some Basic Facts

Musical theory has largely concentrated on the Western classical tradition. This does not have a large following in Nigeria, although it is performed in some places. Thus for several decades the Apostolic Faith Church in Lagos has been famous for its orchestral concerts on a Sunday. Many of the metric hymns sung by Nigerian Catholics, Anglicans and other Protestants were brought to Nigeria by expatriate missionaries, and derive from the classical tradition.

For those who did not grow up with this tradition, patience is undoubtedly required to listen to and appreciate much of its music. A few basic facts about it are worth mentioning. Classical music is first of all extremely varied. Since it has been in existence for at least 600 years, its history is divided into periods, and the kind of music produced in one period is unlike that produced in another. Thus a keyboard concerto written by J.S.Bach of the Baroque period sounds rather different from one written by Mozart sixty or so years later during the Classical period ('classical' here being used in a narrow sense to refer to the music written

by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, among others), and very different from one written by Brahms in the Romantic period. Then classical music is remarkable for the variety of the instruments used, in addition to the human voice. From the eighteenth century to the twentieth the one most favoured both by most composers and the listening public was the piano, but great quantities of music have also been written for strings (especially the violin), woodwind, brass, and percussion, or for such instruments in combination with others. Then classical music has a great variety of types of composition; and opera, which can be defined as a sung drama normally performed in the theatre, is a major sub-type. Some prolific composers have written for several of these types: thus Mozart wrote forty-one symphonies, twenty-six piano concertos, concertos for the violin, flute, horn, clarinet, oboe and bassoon, twenty-three string quartets, six string quintets, twenty piano sonatas, several settings of the Mass, at least ten operas, and many other works.

Structurally, these types range from the apparently simple to the decidedly complex. The symphony, which comes in the latter category and often lasts for more than half-an-hour, usually has four different movements, which vary in tempo, and each has a structure of its own. In the first movement, two contrasting melodies or 'subjects' are played in turn, after which comes a 'development' section where these interact and undergo 'modulation' in different keys, and finally comes the 'recapitulation' in which the subjects are heard in their original form but with further variations. One of the most famous of all symphonies is Beethoven's Fifth, in C minor. It opens with a four-note figure based on the fifth and third notes of the minor triad on the tonic (i.e. mi-mi-do), and this figure recurs in an astonishing variety of different forms, including major keys, throughout the movement and in the rest of the symphony.

Classical music is also differentiated along national lines. A remarkably large number of composers come from the two main German-speaking countries (Germany and Austria), but a large number too come from Italy, France and Russia, and some from Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Spain and the United States. England or Britain was for a long while unproductive, but the picture changed after 1900. One composer worth mentioning here is the prolific Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who was born in 1875 in London and

died there in 1912, and was the son of a Sierra Leonean father and an English mother.

Classical Music – Meaning and Emotion

All of this information might seem to be mere information if the possible meaning of the music and its power over the listener are ignored. In fact, classical music has much meaning and great power to affect the listener emotionally, and it is with this kind of music chiefly in mind that the theorists referred to above developed their ideas about music's expressivity. First, where meaning is concerned, classical music contains many conventional symbols, associated with nature or the social world, and represented by different instruments: thus trumpets often stand for festivity; drums for solemnity (as at a funeral); the cello, deep feeling; the oboe, rural peace; the piccolo, merriment. Such symbols are naturally useful to a composer writing any work in which music accompanies words, especially dramatic works such as an oratorio or an opera. Sometimes symbols are expressed by the structure rather than by instruments, for example by phrasing: thus Haydn's String Quartet Opus 76 No 4 is called the 'Sunrise' Quartet, because a rising figure in its opening bars suggests the quiet early-morning rising of the sun. Sometimes experts commenting on the music venture to express in words what the meaning might be, and sometimes the composer himself does so: Beethoven said of the four-note figure mentioned above that marks the beginning of the Fifth Symphony: 'Thus Fate knocks at the door'.

Perhaps more importantly, however, when one listens to wordless, 'pure' music, the music seems to have real meaning even though the meaning is elusive and hard to define; and this must be one reason why many listeners do not tire of listening again and again to a work, tantalized by the possibility of finding the meaning embodied in it, ultimately in its structural features. In the same way one may wish to go on and on gazing at the face of a beloved friend, without coming to any final 'closure'.

Some experts are suspicious of any talk suggestive of music's appeal to the emotions, and try to discuss it only in structural terms; but again and again the language of the emotions seems unavoidable. One writer says of Schubert's Ninth Symphony: 'The music is simply enjoying itself.. [It] is loved for its invigorating winds and its freedom from care' (McNaught in Hall 1950). Another writer uses this

variety of words to describe different passages in Dvorak's Cello Concerto: 'ominous', 'high-spirited', 'grandiose', 'triumphant', 'vivacious', 'idyllic', 'passionate', 'dreamy' (Roberston in Hall 1950).

The early Christian era philosopher St Augustine said in his treatise *De Musica* that music affects the soul, and can influence moral behaviour. Of certain music in particular it seems necessary to say that it is 'transcendent' – it transports the listener 'beyond' ordinary human experience and so beyond the usual emotions, to a realm that is both real and indefinable, though there are words that readily come to mind to talk about it: 'spacious', 'glorious', 'majestic'; 'awesome'; 'light', 'peace', 'love'. The listening experience then becomes akin to religious experience; and it should be no surprise that some of the greatest composers were devout Christians, notably Johann Sebastian Bach, Joseph Hadyn, and Anton Bruckner.

Bach, who lived from 1685 to 1750 and surpasses them in the quantity, the range and the expressiveness of his work, was profoundly religious, profoundly aware of the reality of God. Significantly, perhaps, he can be called ecumenical – for while in his denominational affiliation he was a Lutheran, he wrote some of his works for Catholic patrons, and one of his finest is his Mass in B minor. Another is the St Matthew Passion, which in music and words tells the story of Christ's suffering and death, and is both deeply devotional and highly dramatic. His works for organ are collectively another great testimony to his faith. Of numerous possible examples, one I would recommend for purposes of 'illustration' is a short piece, one of a series of 'Keyboard Exercises', entitled 'Wir glauben all'an einen Gott ' ('We believe in one God').

Postscript - Some Personal Anecdotes

Perhaps most devotees of music have love for a particular genre, and have a natural desire to share their love of it with their fellow human beings. In this public place in Nigeria, I will not hide the fact that, all my life I have been in thrall to classical music, both purely instrumental and vocal. I can truthfully say that for many years music of this type has been so important to my well-being that if I do not listen to some form of it during the course of one day, my soul seems to suffer during that day. I am happy to say that I also respond with pleasure to certain other genres including traditional jazz and Nigerian music.

At an early age I was immersed in the musical life of my local church, but the moment in my musical education that features first in my memory is that at the age of seven I heard a short piece called 'En bateau' by the French composer Debussy, the leading representative of the 'Impressionist' school. I loved the melody that runs languidly through it, giving the impression of someone drifting in a boat ('En bateau' means 'in a boat'). In those days, in 1948, to listen intentionally to such music required playing a '78 rpm' – seventy-eight revolutions-per-minute – gramophone record, which came in the form of a plastic disc and played for just five minutes each side. Technology had to improve, as it later did, before larger-scale works such as sonatas, concertos, symphonies, and operas could be listened to. Now it is possible to view as well as listen to a complete opera or ballet on a DVD.

I am happy also to share with readers of this paper the fact that, although I have never taught music, I have tried to share my love of it with many students I have known in Nigeria since first coming to the country in 1963. After an initial period of finding it repellent, one of them, Uchenna by name, began to be fascinated. In the 1970s he went to Britain, where he studied GCE 'A' level music, learned to play the clarinet, and taught his wife and their children to play various instruments as well. He and I once played the beautiful slow movement from Mozart's Clarinet Concerto as a duet, he on the clarinet, I on the piano. Eventually he and his children formed themselves into a quartet which gave concerts in church halls and other places around London. His son was an accomplished pianist, and at the age of seventeen became a licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music and could add the letters 'LRAM' to his name. I have reason to feel proud.

This paper has said many things. About music there are many things to say. It seems important, in conclusion, to bring out and emphasize one thing in particular: music with its emotive power can nourish the human soul. The soul therefore has a duty to herself to seek, find and value the music that can best serve this high purpose.

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