

SONIC EFFECTS OF INDIGENOUS PERCUSSIVE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN CHORAL MUSIC PERFORMANCES: THE CASE OF KINGS CHORAL VOICES OF PORT HARCOURT

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Introduction

Nigerian rhythmic idioms are cumulative products of deep rooted expressions emanating from indigenous accompaniment where the accompanists vigorously embellish the harmonic melody with percussive musical instrument. Like a full western orchestra with all the families, most choral pieces are rich in their indigenous percussive rhythms that showcase the thought process of the composer. These pieces carry the weight of feeling of different cultures in Nigeria and their idiomatic expression, with which the instrumental accompaniments and the voices convey the message inherent, creating the beauty of style and purpose. Choral music performance in Nigeria has attained an enviable height and its instrumental accompaniment has contributed in no small way to this growth. Indigenous percussive musical instruments bring out the creative beauty of Nigerian choral performance.

The late pop star Michael Jackson once said in an interview published on the internet that he originates most of the rhythmic patterns in his music from African rhythm. This submission, to some extent explains the breakthrough in musical export Nigerian artistes are presently enjoying today. Chernoff and Merriam in Temperley (2000) discoursed that “rhythm is of paramount importance in African music and a major source of its richness and complexity”. These rhythms are

melodic components produced from improvised idioms acquired from participation in indigenous musical events passed on aurally or by apprenticeship from generation to generation in African society. The scale patterns, singing and instrumentation is done for fun and entertainment not following any musical rules like western music. According to Akpabot (1998) contrary to the fact that African music is played for fun and entertainment, “four part instrumental music exist in Africa, choral singing occurs in consecutive triads, the two tones of a twin gong and wooden drum can be tuned to definite intervals of a second, third and fifth and there is number symbolism”.

African musical instruments are unique and can be identified in several ways including the manner they produce sound, the physical properties of the instrument and the pitch range. Ajewole (2010) in his book listed some musical instruments found in Africa especially the once used in Nigeria as follows:

Rattle ground shakers and container type shakers, Rock gongs, Wooding and tone clappers, Iron and wooden bells, Ground percussion calabash, Iron cymbals, Friction tubes, Scraped bottles, Cracker instrument played like you are damaging it, Stamping sticks-calculating stepping instrument, Stamping tubes- A pot cover with water, Upright drum, Hour glass drum, Fiction drum, Tuned drum, Flute, panpipes, Reed pipe, Horn, Trumpet, Zither, Lute, Harp and Lyre. (p.7)

These instruments when played express the rich sonic rhythmic tone that is, “the ordered flow of music through time” (Kamien, 1994), corroborated by Ekwueme (2008) as “an ordered flow of movement in music through time. It is also the division of musical phrases and sentences into regular metrical portion, and which also represents the pulsation of music”, in the idioms played in sympathy to direct a dance step or melodic phrase from singers as they show case their cultural values because “music over the ages has proved to be one of the indispensable arts cultivated by man for the growth, nurture and transfer of his institution and value to future generation” (Vidal, 2000) to support this assertion, Omojola (2000) opined that music serves as cultural identity of the people. The field of percussion has seen remarkable growth in the areas of performance and composition over the past several decades. Some Nigerian composers like Fela

Sowande, Akin Euba, Laz Ekwueme and Dan Agu have shown an increased interest in utilizing percussion as significant components in their compositions. This is demonstrated in the expanded use of percussion instruments in both solo and ensemble literature. Nigerian Art music composers have used extensively these styles in their different compositions to show and represent sonic effects in indigenous musical orchestration. Each composer brings to bear, their most influential achievements in percussion writing, with respect to timbre and rhythmic employment. They utilize percussion as an integral component of the structure and style of each work. The musical pieces of Nigerian choral composers are “to exhibit a reliance on, and experimentation with, scoring of percussion and orchestration of timbres, rhythmic events and densities as a foundation for their overall style” (Euba 1989). For each composer, these pieces also demonstrate the most prevalent rhythmic and timbre characteristics in their compositional output within each genre. You can find these styles even in the compositions for school groups. These include compositions written specifically for younger ensembles utilizing fewer percussionists and instruments, and pieces relying heavily on pre-existing musical styles such as African, jazz, blues, ragtime, military march, fanfare and chorale styles. A careful observation and scrutiny of the compositions of Nigerian chorale composers will show deliberate efforts to construct as one continuous cycle, with contrasting movements. Euba (1989) posits that

The sonic effects of indigenous percussive musical instruments on choral music are viewed as having and producing an unlimited array of colours and timbres, capable of an unlimited range of emotional impact. Many researchers agree that percussion ensemble is as equal in potential to an orchestra or wind ensemble. The large number of percussion instruments provides an extensive palette of colours and timbre effects. The combination of the piano and perhaps the harp, typically melodic instruments, are employed for rhythmic treatments to blend with the traditional percussion instruments.

This blend creates an aesthetic musical marriage and balance. By varying the instrumentation, rhythm, and contour, Choral composers of Nigerian descent achieve a sense of diversity and direction while also providing continuity. Consequently, most African composers utilize these instruments as indispensable

elements in rhythmic and motif development; contributing to variety and cohesiveness of sections, movements in an entire choral work. Juxtaposed rhythms add to the complexity of most composers' percussion ensembles with simultaneous simple and compound rhythmic divisions. These contrasting rhythms create added musical fusion between instruments and choir. According to Ballantine, (1999) "One of the trademarks of any composer is how his or her music is scored and orchestrated. The ability of composers to incorporate unique aspects of their works, make their writing distinctive". The intent of this study is to explore the scoring practices (functions of instruments and combinations) and orchestration techniques (rhythmic and density relationships) of Nigeria choral music composers, focusing on how and to what extent percussion is employed in their Choral ensembles.

Most composers in Nigeria expand the percussion instrumentation in choral compositions, employing also the use of the piano, treating this instrument as a member of the percussion family. Most pianists have developed the art of making the piano SPEAK. Within their compositions, composers exploit and expand the percussion section, creating compositions that have come to be regarded as significant contributions to the choral repertoire. While displaying common characteristics and similar procedures, each Nigerian composer's music possesses unique aspects of scoring and orchestration. The particular employment of these shared traits, together with certain aspects, clearly creates and defines each composer's distinctive style and the originality of our indigenous works.

Choral Music in Port Harcourt

The concept of identity is an important one when considering the social atmosphere in choral music in the city of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. After August 2005, the desire for a new choral group sprang out from some members of the existing Royal Male Choir. This breakaway faction desired to make their music more indigenous in style and presentation. They have been influenced by the performance of the Soweto Singers from South Africa who came for a musical expedition in Port Harcourt with a scintillating performance rendered with the aid of African percussive instruments that brought colour and better interpretation to their performance. There was a general expectation that music must appeal to the

aesthetic and cultural values of a multi-cultural city like Port Harcourt Hence, the Kings Choral Voices recognized the importance of integrating Western European and traditional African musical styles. The Kings choral Voices is able to strike the right chord within any stylistically-integrated composition, delicate balance between tradition and originality, conformity and diversity. The balance between the society and the individual within integrated musical styles is what Nketia, (1984) describes as the challenge of tradition versus originality. The challenge lies in how to “respond to and express creative inclinations and remain at the same time true to the norms of a musical culture.” In other words, it is a blend of perspective and intent for the African compositional style. He further opined that “If an integrated composition is approached with the perspective of authenticity, there is an intention to sustain a cultural and/or musical tradition, whereas originality may be compromised”. The African percussive instruments create a style within the musical adventure of the Kings Choral Voices in such a way that they have been recognized in the city of Port Harcourt as the cultural ambassadors of indigenous music. Their performances display the rich cultural and traditional values of the various ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta and beyond. They make concerted efforts in seeing that when they perform music from a particular ethnic group in Rivers State, they employ the use of people from that area to correct the dialectical challenges, clean out the interpretational flaws and also benefit from the expertise of master musicians on the slit and wooden drums, gongs, rattles and pot drums to express and define the cultural implications of the composition. This practice has helped the Kings Choral Voices of Port Harcourt in no small way to establish themselves as the choir to beat in the Capital of Rivers State. Their beautiful costumes and regal looks contribute immensely in projecting them on stage.

Organization of Instrumental Ensemble Accompaniment for Choral Performance

African traditional instruments are used to accompany voice performances. In south-south Nigeria, choral performance is given a unique sonic flavour when accompanied with indigenous percussive instruments. One group used in studying the organization of instrumental ensemble for choral performance is “The Kings Choral voices” Port Harcourt Rivers state south-south Nigeria. Ajewole (2010) extensively classified the organization of instrumental ensemble into two

categories. The Kings choral Voices of Port Harcourt uses' the second category of instrumental combination that comprise of indigenous musical instruments capable to produce sound only of definite pitches such as clappers, sticks, drums, rattles, wood-block, slit-drum, calabash, pot drum and bell. These instruments used the choral group fall under the idiophone and membranophone family of the classification of African musical instruments.

Basically, each instrument has its function in the ensemble just as the voices are placed in different parts to produce harmonic sonic experience. In the drums section, there are drums of different sizes which include high pitch, low pitch and medium pitch drums to produce a set of varying sonority where one drum is used as the master while others support the ensemble as accompaniment. The stick clappers, bells, rattles and wood-block serves as metronome to keep time, the pot drum's function is like the bass voice part that provides depth while the slit-drum is also used as a lead instrument together with the master drum. Though some choral groups combine melodic and percussive instrument in their ensemble such as xylophones and indigenous flute the Kings Choral Voices of Port Harcourt maintains the use of instruments of indefinite pitches.

Nigerian Choral Music in Community Context

Knowledge of traditional Nigerian music within its social context and an understanding of its compositional structure are essential for discerning the methods and motivations for musical integration in Nigerian choral music. Noteworthy here is to explore Nigerian choral music within different ceremonies, as a means of preserving communal history and within leisure activities. Cultural isolation or integration, distinct languages, and varied spiritual beliefs account for much of the diversity in Nigerian musical traditions. However, within Africa, one finds societies whose musical cultures form a network of related traditions that overlap in certain aspects of style, practice, or usage, and share common features of internal pattern, basic procedure and contextual similarities. Therefore, despite some differences in development, Nigerian musical traditions maintain a similarity of function and structure. Ethnomusicologist Nketia summarizes these similarities best when he states that "the most important characteristic of [African] musical traditions is the diversity of expression it accommodates, a diversity arising from different applications of common procedures and usages."

Music is one of the most prevalent social activities of the African people. This is almost exclusively due to the interrelationship between music-making and everyday human activities. In this way, the purpose of Nigerian choral music is not necessarily to produce agreeable sounds, but to translate every day, communal experience into living sound. The Nigerian musical environment recognizes, as its main objective, the depiction of life, nature and the supernatural; therefore, an aesthetic criterion, such as beauty of tone, is often quite arbitrary. Perhaps the most important characteristic of African music is the fact that it is common property. This is especially true of African song as Nzewi (2003) opines that:

Vocal music is considered the essence of African musical art. In addition, the primary motive of African instrumental music is to replicate spoken or sung language. The fact that singing is not a specialized endeavour suggests that any individual who has the desire to sing is urged to do so.

While instrumental performance requires familiarity with traditional techniques typically imparted to a select few, singing is encouraged for all members of an African community. Therefore, the communal ownership of African song is paramount; no one is restricted from singing because it may not be aesthetically beautiful. The infusion of vocal music into everyday activities, coupled with the participation of entire communities, further validates its social significance. Putting it more succinctly Agodoh (2005) asserts that "The foundation of African music-making is the community" Nigerian musical performances are often organized social events associated with collective activities. This includes occasions when members of the community come together for the performance of a ceremony, to exercise social or political control through protest music, for the presentation and preservation of communal history, and for leisure. Music made in such a communal context provides opportunities for sharing in a creative and collective experience while simultaneously expressing group sentiment. The role of the percussive musical instruments in the Nigerian choral music is huge and different communities have used these instruments in expressing their deep rooted thoughts and reflection.

Sustaining Percussion Playing Skills

The playing of percussion musical instruments is transmitted by observing and participating in the act of playing from generation to generation. (Euba, 1977:1; Omibiyi,1979:75; Vidal, 1986:276) all agree to the fact that playing skills of indigenous musical instruments get better as the interested learner takes part in the actual performance where observations are made and put to practice. Sowande, (1965) argued that by extension, every cultural group as a homogenous entity contributes to the heterogeneity of music in Nigeria while Nketia, (1974) believes that there is a self-contained system in Nigerian society. In Nembe Bassambiri Bayelsa State south-south Nigeria, it was observed that the present group of young people does not have the basic skills to play certain founder mental drum idioms. This is because most active young people in the community are no longer interested to follow laid down cultural practice or even participates in indigenous activities where they will observe and learn these percussion skills due to the advent of modern civilization. Rather than learning from the events first hand many prefer to record and watch at the comfort of their homes. Some go as far as using artificial indigenous beats from the electronic keyboard. The unwillingness of these young people will certainly hamper the development and transfer of these percussion playing skills.

Conclusion

The feeling that comes with the rhythm produced by the percussive instruments during choral singing is monumental. Depending on the occasion, it leaves you with dancing steps that propels the 'Africaness' in you. Music within the Nigerian community may be performed for entertainment, for the ancestral message it conveys, for the outlet that it provides for social interaction, or for the sharing of community sentiment. It may be performed as a tribute to an individual or as an offering to a god. Whatever the function African and indeed Nigerian choral music is a communal activity, one that emphasizes artistic ability in conjunction with social, political, and religious values.

Performance is a life skill available to each and every member of the community from birth until death. The corporate approach to music-making in Nigerian communities not only ensures the participation of all members, but combines ideology, efficiency, identity, and festivity with the performance of music.

This is not possible without the strong participation of the percussive instruments that gives constant and steady rhythmic navigation. The different roles these various instruments play in the percussive orchestra, gives credence to the originality of the composition and also showcases the rich cultural heritage of our people. The ability of the instrumentalists to making these instruments observe some musical dynamics at the same time with the choir singing strengthens the sonic effects of these instruments on choral performances.

It is imperative that training and conscious retraining is of traditional musical instrumentalist be considered as a priority to make the up their game because champions are not just made but they emerge from continues effort to exercise, study their craft by all legitimate means possible to attain greatness. A choral group that does not spend time rehearsing and gathering or composing new repertoires will remand like a dwarf and local champion in choral performance. The normal way of learning by observing and apprenticeship is definitely not enough to attain mastery of the instrument.

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