

COLONIAL LEGACY OF FUNCTIONAL ART MUSIC IN NIGERIA: ITS INFLUENCE ON COMPOSITIONAL PREFERENCES OF MUSIC STUDENTS (The Nsukka example)

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Abstract

The consistency in the preference for choral music composition among composition students in Nigerian universities against instrumental music composition motivated this enquiry with the objective to ascertain the possible cause and solution. The dearth, if not near extinction of instrumental works in Nigerian is quite problematic. A significant reversal of the trend is perforce to this study. An overview of compositional output in the country within and outside the university system linked the compositional preferences to the colonial legacy of what we describe as the notion of "functional art music". A twenty-year period of teaching and supervision of composition in the department of music formed the backdrop for this study, during which consistency in the preference for vocal music compositions by students in their project works against instrumental music was noted. An output analysis of compositions from other institutions was directly and indirectly done through colleagues who provided evidence that supports the conclusion in this study. A historical background of art music in Nigeria is presented, constructing a bridge from there to the present music scene that clarifies the compositional preferences of students in music departments in the 21st century. It also highlights and clarifies the stifling of instrumental compositions as well as lack of diversity in creativity and output in the country for the benefit of learners and student composers. Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka is used as the focus study location owing to its strategic position as the first indigenous department, producing the highest number of manpower in art music composition and teachers for the country. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed in data gathering.

Keywords: Functional art, composition, preferences, missionary, choral, colonial

Introduction and background

Persistent preference for vocal music compositions by student-composers as well as the dearth of instrumental works in Nigeria, within and outside departments of music owing

to such preference, constrained this enquiry to ascertain the root cause of such preference. Having been engaged in the teaching of composition in the University of Nigeria for more than fifteen years, and in music education respectively, it was possible to note the worrisome development in which instrumental music composition is isolated by student-composers under the guise of choice/preference, relevance/functionality, and performability. A cursory glance at the composition projects within the libraries of departments of music in Nigeria show very high number of vocal (preferably choral) compositions which do not present evidence of balanced exposure to creative possibilities in music by the students. Such situation raises many questions such as why the students prefer vocal compositions in their project work, whether they have no requisite training in instrumental music composition, etc. It was also significant to trace the lead to such preference as well as bring to the fore the possible effect of the dearth of instrumental compositions and the imbalance such dearth portends in the creative output of Nigeria composers. In other to address these issues it was significant to go back to history and trace the possibility of dominant formative influences as well as pioneering effects on art music composition, performance and education reflecting on the students' preferences.

A historical perspective on art music in Nigeria

Most African countries south of the Sahara share similar political history marked by Western colonization, education, religion and social influences. The West established European music education in Africa. This coerced new mode of musical expression, documentation and communication (see Herbst, Rudolph and Onyeji, 2003: 142-178; Agawu, 2003: 8-22). In the schools and churches, Africans acquired some level of musical training in piano and organ playing, classical singing and choral directing. "It was in this religious Western-oriented educative milieu that the African art composers emerged to compose sacred and secular choral works based on the Western hymn and/or madrigal. Music teaching in schools was rooted in choral singing and teacher training emphasised choral work" (Ibid: 146).

More specifically, "the history of art music in Nigeria dates back to the first half of nineteenth century, when Christian missionaries set their feet on Nigerian soil. The Anglican came in 1842, the Methodist in 1845 and the Baptist in 1850." (Adegbite 2001:78) Following on the heels of the missionaries is the British colonial government. According to Idolor (2001:136),

By 1958, Ukeje,(1979) records that the first day school established by the C.M.S. missionaries in Onitsha and post-primary schools like Baptist Teachers College, Ogbomosho, Wesley College, Ibadan and Zik Grammar School, Sapele founded in 1897, 1905 and 1943 respectively had music literally taught in their programme of studies.

"Music literacy (then) (solfa notation in particular) became expedient for the Missionary as well as the Colonial educational objectives and content. It served for producing church choirs and recreational school music (Nzewi 1999:4)."

The overriding influence and dominance of school and church choral music compositions and performances is noticeable in the history of art music development in Nigeria as in other countries in Africa.

The earliest forms of literary musical expressions in Nigeria are those choral music compositions and performances in church choirs for church services and school choral competitions and performances. Functionality or utilitarian value attached to the choral music as well as availability of performers and listeners have since then been argued as the significant reason for the proliferation of choral music in Nigeria. This scenario is replicated in many African countries where Western cultures exist. Andoh (2009/2010: 124) affirms that “the bulk of Ghanaian art compositions are choral”. According to him, “the history of the introduction of certain types of European music to Ghana, especially choral music, is closely tied with the history of the Christian mission” (Ibid). “The churches raised choirs and singing bands out of which arose choirmasters and organists who were themselves creative composers” (Andoh, 2008: 1). “Many of the composers of the early Ghanaian era, from about 1890s to 1950s, began to compose in the style of the Western idioms they were familiar with, with the bulk of their output being made up of choral works” (Andoh, 2007: 163).

The platform provided by the Christian missionary and school activities in Nigeria enabled the construction of an unending bridge from the choral music “nursery” of the missionary era to the present times. The church, choir, recreational musical outlook and background of musical compositions targeted at immediate consumers during the missionary era gave a functional undertone to art music composition. To appreciate the argument advanced here, it would be necessary to frame what we call “functional art music compositions”.

Framing functional art music composition

Functionality, as applied to music, describes the value placed on musical product beyond the music itself as an artistic expression. Except in the descriptions of harmonic processes in tonal music in which functionality applies to chords, and the general sound/tonal structures in Western diatonic music, the notion of functionality in music has been exclusively applied to the description of music of African and some non-Western musical cultures such as the Aborigines of Australia, the Red Indians in American and some Latin American music. Nketia (1982: 21-34), Akpabot (1986: 1), Coplan (1980: 49-73), and, indeed, most writers and researchers on African music have described it as a functional art tied to the social and religious lives of the people. According to Akpabot, “one of the chief characteristics of African traditional music is its association with social and ritual ceremonies” (Ibid). As such “the arts, [music in particular] are employed and implicated in the life rites, work, religion, ceremonies, games and festivals, the mechanisms of social order and in social activities’ (Oehrle and Emeka, 2003: 41). Functionality in music seeks to identify and define the ends to which music is put starting from its conception to its composition and consumption.

Functionality in a musical tradition is its attachment to, definition of, marking of and signifying of other social considerations that gave rise to the composition and performance of the music.

Though contestable on the basis that Western art music is also a social art, bringing people together for the appreciation of music and life, proponents of Western art music would have people believe it's a non-functional art. The question is how would one describe a church hymn or a Mass written for Catholic liturgy if it does not lead to the ends of spiritual growth of worshipers? Western art music could be described as functional when one considers the creative intentions. To argue therefore that a church anthem is functional art music of the church is stating the obvious. Church music falls under the category of functional art when valued as works that have spiritual and social growth as their creative intentions.

Functional art music in Nigeria

It does appear that the art music tradition bequeathed to Africa and Nigeria in particular is essentially functional. Though valued in Nigeria, being in consonance with the musical foundation of the people, the puzzle however is why the progress of art music development in the country seems to have stagnated and become choral oriented. Composition of instrumental works seems almost extinct or disappearing.

A large number of trained musicians and composers are products of church choirs, or choral music enthusiasts and church organists. Many of the composers operate from the platform of church choral music while some attempt operatic works still from the choral music perspective. According to Ekwueme, "Contemporary musical practice in Africa, in spite of acculturation and incorporation of features resulting from various forces of external influence, has tended to maintain the same predominance of group and vocal activity" (2001: 16). The choral influence is also noticeable in the few attempts by these composers to write solo art songs as observed by one of Nigeria's foremost soloists. According to her "most solo songs by Nigerian composers...have always presented limitations for singers because the writers themselves are still quite limited in their expressive techniques for solo voice having written always for choruses" (Nwosu-Lobamijoko, 2001:71). The limitation raised by Nwosu-Lobamijoko is quite significant in understanding the lack of creative development of Nigerian solo art songs on the one part but also illuminates the reasons why instrumental works have been isolated by composers and music students in Nigeria. Quite predominantly therefore, one finds "choral setting of biblical verses, psalms or Christian stories, native airs belonging to a choral genre that resulted from composers' attempting to fuse elements of Nigerian traditional music with Western choral idiom" (Herbst, Rudolph and Onyeji, 2003: 151-2).

The need to satisfy the church and the choirs, the need to be relevant to the immediate society (the church inclusive), the need for immediate performance of composed works

and the general orientation and formative influences have altogether been advanced to direct the preference for vocal music compositions. The value of a composition as a product for church consumption, the obligation to compose for the church, the sheer desire to provide social commentaries on happenings in the country, the assumed greater appreciation by the public and, indeed, the misconception that vocal music composition is easier are some reasons student-composers have advanced for their preference. It is summed up that the functional art music heritage, a legacy of colonization in Nigeria, that laid emphasis on vocal music for church and school use has driven the preferences of student-composers in Nigeria.

Curriculum provisions

Music studies in Nigeria provide bi-cultural programme in which students learn music from Western and African cultures on equal footing enabling a graduate "to take his place alongside music graduates from other part of the world" (Ekwueme, 2004: 155). More specifically "all students are expected to be proficient in performance on at least one instrument or in solo singing, (Ibid: 156). With the level platform for the study, composition and performance of both vocal and instrumental works, it becomes quite worrisome that the preference of student-composers lies consistently on vocal music. With the obvious and robust enjoyment of instrumental works in Nigerian traditional music, the feverish pitch with which such music is performed as well as the proficiency and high-level skills of instrumental music players in Nigeria, it is quite problematic that student-composers coming from such cultural background would preferentially compose vocal works.

Evidence from the department of music, university of Nigeria, Nsukka

A statistics of the available students' projects in the Department of Music was taken. Table 1 below shows the number and preferences of student-composers in their composition projects in the holding of the department as far back as 1979. It is evident from the statistics below that there is a general leaning toward vocal music composition. Table 1. List of available students' composition projects in the department of music library at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka showing their preferences.

S/N	Name of Student	Year of composition	Type of composition
1	Onwuka Ugochukwu	1979	Vocal
2	Joel Akubuokwuoma	1979	Vocal
3	Fueshiangha Michael Forchu	1982	Vocal
4	Ekpa, Aniedi Edet	1984	Vocal
5	Uquah Samuel Edoho	1984	Instrumental
6	Udegbe, Esmond-Ralph T.	1984	Instrumental
7	Uwheru, Amos Eriurhoro	1985	Vocal
8	Opara, Theophilus A.	1986	Vocal
9	Odediran Adjai .O.	1984	Instrumental
10	Nwosu Uzoma	1988	Vocal
11	Idowu J. Odewale	1988	Vocal
12	Babajide Bayo	1988	Vocal
13	Aminu, Yekinni Philip	1988	Vocal
14	Onwuchekwa Chigbu P.	1990	Vocal
15	Obong, Ime Tom	1990	Instrumental
16	Onyeji, Christian	1990	Instrumental
17	Alade Olabode Adebayo	1990	Vocal
18	Esimagbele, Godwin E	1991	Vocal
19	Loko, Olugbenga	1991	Instrumental
20	Festus, Ife Olisaeke	1991	Vocal
21	Chinedu Michael Chukwudi	1991	Vocal
22	Nwosu Gary Augustine Onwurah	1991	Instrumental
23	Aminu, Yekinni Philip	1992	Vocal
24	Bassey Etukudoh Udoh	1992	Instrumental
25	Ojobor Wilfred Mascaras	1992	Vocal
26	Olujimi Babatunde Olunfunso	1992	Vocal
27	Adelani, Akuchukwu S.	1992	Instrumental
28	Anya, Bertha Ifeyinwa	1992	Vocal
29	Bassey, Ernest R.	1992	Vocal
30	Echezona Gloria O.	1992	Vocal
31	Okoro, Benjamin D.	1992	Vocal
32	Nnam, Jude Chika	1993	Vocal
33	Yekini I. Adeniyi	1993	Vocal
34	Kumuyi/Adesoji H.	1994	Vocal
35	Ofsun, Mana Koranteng	1995	Vocal
36	Akubuiroh Juliana Ijeoma	1995	Vocal
37	Ikeogwu Michael	1995	Vocal
38	Ogunbona, Ohubayo Simeon	1995	Vocal

39	Akanle, Oyewole Isaac	1995	Vocal
40	Eyeniyan Godwin Utieyin E.	1996	Instrumental
41	Nwamara/Alva-Ikoku O.	1998	Vocal
42	Ubaka, Johnbull Mathew	1988	Vocal
43	Akai Malachi Pius U.	1998	Instrumental
44	Authority, Olunole Albert Uzodimma	2001	Vocal
45	Udor, Isaac Essie	2002	Instrumental
46	Omoyele Orioye Emmanuel	2003	Instrumental
47	Sylvanus Emaeyak Peter	2004	Instrumental
48	Omodiale Godwin Usiabulu	2004	Vocal
49	Ofuani Sunday	2005	Vocal
50	Ewulu, John Izuchukwu	2005	Vocal
51	Akpakpan, Johnson James	2005	Instrumental
52	Ohwofasa, Justina Enoch	2006	Instrumental
53	Olisaeke, Festus Ife	2006	Instrumental
54	Adelabu Emmanuel Tosin	2006	Vocal
55	Ofosu, Osborne	2006	Vocal
56	Ofosu, Joana	2006	Vocal
57	Agbo, Benedict	2009	Vocal
58	Ugwu, Blessing Onyinyechi	2007	Vocal
59	Ikumapayi A. Abayomi	2007	Vocal
60	Aghware Hosea Ogheneruemu	2007	Vocal
61	Ugwuja, Edmund Paul	2007	Vocal
62	Adebowale, Z. Ademor. N.	2008	Vocal
63	Nwankwo, Jude .O.	2008	Vocal
64	Akan, Joseph Abiodun	2008	Vocal
65	Odo, Vitus Okonkwo	2010	Vocal
66	Ojo, Shade Emmanuel	2010	Instrumental
67	Adeyemi Abidemi Adebayo	2010	Instrumental
68	Jayeola, Folorunso David	2010	Instrumental
69	Ahiaba, Goodness	2010	Vocal
70	Nnam, Jude	2010	Vocal
71	Oguntade, Kayode	In Progress	Vocal
72	Sam-Adikiapiri, Prisca	In Progress	Vocal
73	Anukam, Franklin	In Progress	Vocal
74	Adelabu, Emmanuel Tosin	In progress	Vocal

Out of the available 74 composition projects, 20 are instrumental works from which at least five resulted through persuasion from their supervisors including one of the writers.

The total number of instrumental compositions is less than 28% of the total compositions. This gives an unbalanced preference for vocal music composition.

Various reasons were presented by student-composers which all revolve around the need for the composition of church music arising from their formative period and need for church music as highly valued. A fair numbers (26%) of the respondents also added the preference for choral music by audiences arising from the import of textual messages. Difficulty in handling instrumental composition judged to be too abstract was expressed. Two of such responses from student-staff members are given below.

1. My first encounter with a musical ensemble was with my primary school choir. My interest in choral music led to my joining many choral groups in Lagos including the Laz Ekwueme Chorale. With this background, I developed interest in composing choral music. I also prefer to compose for the voice because I began my music career as a singer. (Nwankwo, Jude, 1st August 2011).

2. The reason behind my preference to compose predominantly vocal music is simply born out of need and purpose. I function as a church musician and here in Nigeria most of our performances in the church are thematic oriented in terms of worship. The words are often necessary (Rev. Fr. Ben Agbo, 3rd August 2011).

These responses evidence the points being made and reflect the general situation in the country as already argued.

Discussions

It may seem improbable that the dominance and preference for vocal music compositions could be linked to the colonial music practice in Nigeria or that music output could be linked to functionalism of art music in churches and schools. It was significantly noted that much of the current educational, creative and performance activities in music are comfortably situated on the foundations and platforms established in the colonial time. Many composers still grapple with the effects of their formative years which generally rely on Western norms. In this also is the continuous hegemony of the church in Nigeria where most musical works are performed or targeted. To this end, very little amount of creative works are composed for the sheer celebrations of creativity in sound. This, very well, is in consonance with the African philosophy of creativity in which music generally addresses other ends than music itself. Functionalism is deeply rooted in African arts creativity. Text being a strong parameter for realising the socio-philosophical gains of the arts, particularly in music, is considered very significant in creative works in music. As such, composers place higher value on music for the human voice. To some degree also, instrumental works operate from the principles of vocal music, being sometimes direct "translations" of vocal works for the instruments or incorporating text-based instrumental patterns. Identifying the primacy of text in indigenous music in Nigeria, Ekwueme was unequivocal in affirming that "words are of primary importance in Igbo music making" (2004: 17). As such text is a pervading phenomenon in music making among most Nigerian societies, reflecting in art music compositions.

The church, being the ubiquitous context for the performance of art music in Nigeria, attracts almost all the composers and performers. The direct consequence is the near extinction of instrumental music, its composition and performance. While not arguing against the need to “stress the importance of permitting and encouraging students, in consultation with their lecturers, to develop their own purposes and goals within their fields of study” (Oehrle and Emeka , 2003: 47), it seems such student-determined choice in composition is working against the very same foundation it is intended to build upon, recommending some form of lecturers’ enforcement to reverse the trend. The current situation presents the ugly impression of lack of proper exposure of composition students to instrumental music composition. The connecting bridge between the colonial music practices and the contemporary Nigerian art music scene has continued to elongate, almost unnoticed, determining the preferences made by student-composers. Whether the trend would be easily reversed is rather a mute point, going by the devotion attached to their creative preference by the composers.

Recommendations

Existing theories and expert prescriptions make it almost impossible for anyone to pontificate on the compositional preferences of student-composers, given the overwhelming suggestions that creativity is best left to the discretion of the creative personality to ensure the fledging of the creative endowment unique to each person. Be that as it may, the current tilted preference for vocal music composition recommends an exclusive action to ensure instrumental music composition in Nigeria does not run to extinction. The current situation recommends a lecturer-prescribed choice for students to not only counter the existing notions about instrumental cum vocal music composition but to also get them to practically engage in such compositions to balance the equation in some ways. It is the recommendation of the writers that composition lecturers and supervisors be actively involved in the selection of composition projects by students and, where necessary, have the students compose at least one instrumental and one choral work for their graduation. It is also critical for the lecturers to engage the students in motivational sessions to clarify the importance of composing in instrumental genres. Institutions offering music should introduce instrumental ensembles and motivate students to compose for them.

Conclusion

The foregoing brings us face to face with the challenge of keeping the status quo and running the risk of instrumental music extinction in order to allow the student-composers determine and develop along their individual interests and preferences. To change the status quo requires deliberate measure to “enforce” preference-shift. This is tacitly recommended as it would require deliberate enforcement by teachers of composition. The study linked the prevalence of the vocal compositions to the choral music legacy of the colonial music era that have been perpetuated by the church. On the whole however, it

would require concerted and deliberate efforts of all music composers, patrons and lovers to have more of instrumental compositions in Nigeria from Nigerian composers.

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