

## MUSIC AND THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY

**Key words:** Music, Beauty.

**Poser:** Can music making constrain the search for beauty and can the search for beauty constrain music making?

### INTRODUCTION

Working definitions of the key words would be perforce to the understanding of the discourse. For this purpose therefore, we take some definitions of music and beauty as would be relevant to this paper.

#### Music

Music is defined as 'an art of organised sounds' by Jean Ferris (1995:23). This definition presents music as the product of intentionally structured sounds and, *I add*, for certain human purposes. The merits of this definition lie in the fact that it sees music purely as organised sounds. This implicates that all human cultures with discerning musical minds/ability have their own music based on their acceptable sound choices and ordering. John Blacking's definition is that music is "sound that is organised into socially acceptable patterns" (1973:25). Blacking's definition puts music in the context of socially and humanly acceptable norms. Nevertheless, music, to him is organized sound, which must have structural features and general content that are acceptable, at least, in a given socio-cultural context.

Iperere tells us that Music is-"according to the New Grolier Webster International Dictionary - the art of organising or arranging sounds into meaningful patterns usually involving pitch, rhythm and, sometimes, harmony".

Also, that "Harvard World Encyclopaedia on, its part, defines music as the expression of feelings and ideas in organized sounds" (2002:46).

From the above definitions, music is unanimously accepted as organized sounds having aesthetic and social values. It is, at once, accepted as human art providing some utilitarian functions.

Music is generally of two kinds: vocal and instrumental. These in turn come in different forms, types and styles that may be broadly put under classical, popular and traditional music. Music artistes generally



known as musicians are either composers or performers (vocal and instrumental).

### **Beauty**

Cambridge International Dictionary of English defines beauty as "the quality of being pleasing, especially to look at, or someone or something that gives great pleasure" (1996:110). The definition informs us of the power of man to make aesthetic judgment and choices in given contexts and on specific objects/subjects. It also points to the power of one to enjoy and appreciate aesthetic values and qualities inherent in things, people and places. Beauty, we can sum up, describes the state of aesthetic satisfaction or pleasure derived at a specific point in time from a source.

However, beauty goes beyond mere appreciation of physical objects, sceneries, persons etc to embrace such things as good morals, laudable/noble acts or behavioural patterns, good social relations as well as such things that relax the heart and mind and give some sense of fulfillment. Beauty embraces all such things we can say are good to human life and conscience. It also includes all such things that make us exclaim and or exclaim: Wonderful! Fantastic! Great! Wow! Etc. All things that incline to perfection are beautiful in their own right.

Following the discussions so far, we can arrive at a conclusion that the ultimate aim of music being the satisfaction of the aesthetic needs of man, strives to provide beauty to man by means of organized sounds. So far as the composers and performers of music aim at satisfying and bringing joy and relaxation to their listeners, we can say that music itself searches for beauty. We can also conclude that so long as any given piece of music satisfies the aesthetic needs of a given person or group of persons it provides beauty to them. In this wise we say that music making constrains the search for beauty. Also, the search for beauty could be pursued by means of music. In the sections that follow we shall discuss some ways in which music is, aesthetically, applied in human endeavours in order to exploit its beauty.

### **Music in Human Activities**

In this section we shall discuss selected applications of music to various human activities for the sole purpose of achieving beauty and more importantly, as a result of the immeasurable roles music performs in carrying out such activities. For this purpose we shall take five examples briefly.



### **Music in Religious Activities**

"Music and religion are two great friends that go hand in hand. In the traditional concept of religion, music is a great force in invoking the gods... Even in Christian worship rites and Moslem practices, music plays a dominant role". (Ipere:200250). One would not imagine a true religious worship devoid of music, as it is music that establishes the mood congruent for spiritual upliftment as well as heartfelt devotion to God. "Worship finds its most respectful and satisfying mode of address in music". (Nzewi1980: 11) Quite often, music begins a typical worship session and ends it. While music enables or creates the environment for reverence, thanksgiving, prayers, penitence and supplication, it at the same time fulfils worshippers aesthetic needs and expectations as they, quite often, make value judgments on the musical presentations during service sessions. It is not new that people are attracted to different worship gatherings because of the musical presentations of the religious groups. This has, in some cases, constrained some religious groups, churches and denominations to change/modify their modes of worship with respect to music in order to be "current". Our concern is not to probe musical activities of various religious groups but to establish and acknowledge the unique role music plays in the achievement of a religious intention. Music is an integral part of religious activities. In fact, it is the fastest connection with God and as we know, it is the only "profession" in heaven. Being a prominent part of the sequences of denominational liturgies, we can conclude that religious/worship sessions or proceedings could be "dry", dull, and uninteresting without music.

### **Music in Broadcasting**

Radio and television broadcasting have and will continue to draw from music as a potent means of reaching the populace-young and old. Being a ubiquitous art, broadcasters have always targeted the aesthetic interests of listeners in music as a means of conveying their messages/commercials. Musical interludes ranging from traditionally derived types to imported ones have been strategically employed to draw listeners to radio or T.V. stations. Here lies the power of Frequency Modulation (FM) stations.

Would radio and T.V. broadcasting be complete without music? While one expects music presenters to answer the question, it is clear that millions of people that tune to various stations for their aesthetic satisfaction in music will certainly say NO! Here again we find music very



essential in the day-to-day activities of broadcasters. Lawrence Emeka, a veteran broadcaster and one-time Director of Radio Nigeria Enugu, tells us that "music was one of the first Nigerian programmes produced in 1935" (1987:5) when radio broadcasting started in Nigeria. He further tells us that

forty-eight years ago [from 1987] the first Nigerian programmes were fed to Nigerian listeners in this country. The authorities who were in-charge of broadcasting and the administration of the country- the British Colonial officers- recognized that in order to communicate with the Nigerian people they had to use some ways and processes with which they were familiar. Nigerian music made its first entry into radio at this time. (Ibid: 7)

Since the first entry of music in broadcasting as a familiar pedestal on which the Nigerian masses could be reached, broadcasters have mined the potency and uniqueness of music in human and public relations as well as mass mobilization.

Closely allied to broadcasting is the role of music in human communication. From autochthonous times to the contemporary modern technological age, music has been uniquely employed as ubiquitous mass communicator. The popular town crier of the recent past carried out his assignment by means of music or with music as an assistant. Urban and rural economic life has witnessed tremendous employment and exploration/exploitation of music as a commercial tool for marketing of various materials including music itself. These range from full-blown jingles to vocal or instrumental sketches that advertise or draw the attention of potential or suspected buyers/customers. The employment of music for the communication of political, social and economic messages/information is still in vogue, and has proved very effective at various levels. Quite often messages are weaved into the aesthetic structures of music as a means of drawing the target subject to pay attention.

### **Music in Human Entertainment Cum Social Activities**

Music is about the most subtle and refined way of human entertainment. Often appealing to the human senses of feeling and hearing (aural perception), it has found its way to the hearts and consciousness of young and old, aristocrats and peasants alike. The rhythmic and melodic allures of music have cushioned the effects of devastating emotional and social problems. For instance, in good and bad times the Igbo employ music



to relax the mind. The beauty of various kinds of music has attracted people from all walks of life to utilize them as background but intensive/active element of office work and manual labour, as soothing massage to sleep, as catharsis to enduring and creative output, as accompaniment on trips to distant lands, as palliative therapy to emotional and physical injuries and to lull babies to sleep. With entertainment as the primary concern of music, it has been a constant in the "menu" of human social activities. Its power to engender social interaction/cohesion, fellow feeling and collective drive has been eruditely discussed by music scholars and enthusiasts over the ages. Music has been employed as tool for intercultural relations/borrowing, tourism and global peace. As an entertainment art, different genres of music (popular, traditional, classical) have different audiences. The choice of a genre, type or specie of type of music by a person would depend on the aesthetic values or pleasures and utilitarian role of the given music.

### **Music as a Form of Documentation**

Music, particularly songs, has been made use of as historical device. Song texts have been used as primary mode of documentation among non-literate cultures. In contemporary times too song texts have in them happenings and current affairs that otherwise would have been forgotten. To a large extent, music performs the role of audio archive. Elsewhere, the writer observed that

documentation/archiving of historical and collective memories is not limited to, nor found only in traditional settings. In contemporary societies, music serves the same purpose in some instances. Quite often presentations of popular music mirror the society. Past events as well as current affairs in different societies have been found in popular music texts. (Onyeji2004: 25).

Court musicians are known to be chroniclers of histories and genealogies of their communities and kings. Emirs in the northern part of Nigeria still keep musicians that perform this function. The power of music to assist in the recall of memories makes it a preference in many instances as a mode of documentation. Quite often, recall of the structural features of certain music triggers off recall of memories associated with them.

### **Music and General Education of the Young**

The role of music as effective and potent means of educating the young has been recognized over the ages. Because it lends itself to creative



manipulation as well as assists the recall of information put into it, teachers of children have resorted to music as basic tool for their general education. Music has been employed in the teaching of arithmetic, social/general studies, morals, languages etc. Its relationship and use in the teaching of other arts such as dance and drama is well known. At the basic level of education, music is indispensable in times when mere words have failed to convey knowledge. Teaching in nursery and primary schools bears evidence of significant use of music for general education of the young. Again the search for beautiful mode of educating the young has constrained the choice of music.

In the examples above, music is undoubtedly chosen for its aesthetic quality and its ability to satisfy or give pleasure to listeners. The search for beauty as well as beautiful mode of going about these human activities and others not discussed here has resulted in the choice of music.

### **Attributes of Music Necessary for Specific Preferences**

Preferences or choices of particular genres or music types are, primarily, determined and guided by the qualities cum attributes of the music. Such attributes or qualities are structural parts of music that define their beauty and make people derive pleasure from them. Although the primary objective of composers of music is to endear them to people, not all works of musical art are equally appreciated by all the people. Certain creative features of some musical works make us prefer them, love them and accept them as more beautiful than we find in other musical works. In general though, all musical works possess some creative attributes that make for their preferences by different people. These attributes that motivate preferences and choices over others are found in the distinctive features of the musical elements. "A listener is seldom aware of individual elements in a composition, appreciating instead the effects of their artful combination. Recognition of the elements of music, however, enhances the capacity to understand and enjoy music". (Ferris 1985:23) Some musical elements that are very often, creatively, harnessed in a piece of music are as follows.

#### **Melody**

Defined simply as a succession of pitches having logical order and aesthetic value, a melody must be organized and be meaningful in the context of use. Melody appears to be the most prominent and sought for element in music, as people quite often want to have some strings of pitches



to hum. Melody is, most often, the tune in musical works. Its length, nuances and innate features are all dependent on the musical intention of the composer as well as creative needs. Many folk songs of our land have beautiful melodies that have transcended time and cultural boundaries. Melodies are found in popular music, gospel songs and the classics. Some people are attracted to musical works because of the melody or melodies in them. Sometimes they are not able to explain what in the melody endears the music to them but the beautiful feelings or momentary ecstasy they derive from them draws them to the music.

### **Rhythm**

Rhythm is the distribution of sounds of different durations within a given time frame in a piece of music. The rhythm of a given piece of music invariably keeps to the time frame of the regular pulses often shown with time signatures.

Rhythm is the throb of any piece of music, being the pulse or movement that is felt. Quite often, people respond to the rhythm of a piece of music in dance and in other movement forms. Attraction to the rhythm of a piece of music is a natural phenomenon. Sometimes this follows age and gender directions. Young and healthy youths are often comfortable with hot and vibrant rhythms of popular music or pop-derived gospel music, while the older generation is at home with more contemplative and cool rhythm music such as highlife and country music. The females, more often, chose sentimental music for is reserved and cool rhythmic style. In general though, people have considered pieces of music beautiful because of their rhythmic structures.

### **Harmony**

The art and science of note combination as well as the combination of musical sounds is known as harmony. As one of the most technical aspects of music, it is given greater attention in music. As much as possible, the outcome of instrumental combination with respect to timber (tone quality) and sounds depends, to a large extent, on the imaginative application of harmony in a given work by the composer. Composers and musicians strive to reach out to appealing harmonic results in their works as this contributes significantly to the beauty of the work.

Quite often, we are moved to love a particular music because of the harmony and the pleasure we derive from it. The harmonic content of a piece of music may also endear it to the public. Some very good melodies



have, in some cases, been ruined by the harmony used for the music. A good musician therefore strives to achieve very good results in note and instrumental combination for there is the beauty of the music also.

### **Text**

Textual contents of pieces of music are sometimes regarded as beautiful and attractive. All songs have texts that carry some messages. Quite often too, instrumental works have underlying texts that are simulated. These are, sometimes, said to be songs without words. Musical texts come under different themes and present different issues such as love, morals, thanksgiving to God, political issues, social and political protests, national solidarity, current affairs, etc. Selection and appreciation of songs along textual lines may be guided by ones belief, culture, education, exposure, language or other subjective reasons. In general though a larger majority selects songs based on the morality of the texts, as well as how much they touch on the truth about human life. Again the beauty of the text and how pleasing they are draw people to them.

### **Structure and General Interpretation of Music**

"The formal design of a piece of music also contributes to its beauty and value" (Ferris:23) The overall design of a work unique to it is called form or structure. As in architecture, the design of a house could be the source of attraction, admiration and appreciation of the house. Although the design of a piece of music may not be as explicit as that of a house, being an aural fact, it nevertheless contributes immensely to the overall beauty of music. It is not to say however, that many people have not purposefully selected pieces of music based on their formal designs. Composers and musicians have continued to search for designs or structures that best express their musical works.

Also guiding our preferences for music is the general interpretation of works by performers. People are known to have raised their thumbs for particular musical performances in preference to those of others even when the music is the same. Preference of music along the expressive quality of the performance is quite common. This is often the outcome of the peculiar interpretations given to the works that imbue them with beauty. You certainly have your experience of this. The search for ultimate beauty in the works has stimulated special and unique interpretations of music, some already known, by musician.



### Music and Ethics

Ethics concerns itself with what is morally right and what is not. Morality simply touches on those things that conform to acceptable principles and standards in the society. Morality has been grossly affected by time, taste, education and exposure in different countries of the world. Changing "definitions" of morality have affected what could be said to be morally upright and or wrong in the societies today. The societies are rapidly losing clear definition of morality.

Morality has been a very sensitive issue in music. Quite often songs are probed to ensure their conformity to morality. Although one could argue that choice of text of songs does not have to be society-suggested, it is pertinent to note that morality is a universal fact that assists in the shaping of a society, positively or negatively. Therefore, it is perforce that music makers that are not entirely way-ward keep to acceptable moral standards in the choice of lyrics.

Comparatively speaking, the period from twentieth century till date has witnessed excessive abused and break down of morality in music, leading to doubts as to the desire of the musicians to communicate beauty. This is, more often, the case in popular music. Many popular musicians have thrown morality to the wind in their pursuit of money and fame. Any imaginable thing that brings money and fame is exploited. To them, nothing is revered or obscene. They tap the curiosity of the society for those things that were once untouched and regarded as human "high-profile" privacy. It is observable that "earlier pop music text/messages were conservative, without much 'aggressive' overdose of sex and love/sentimental matters...In recent times however, most Euro-American derived pop music have paid undue attention to love and sex in their messages". (Onyeji 2002:23) The popular Channel "O" is one TV station that has trapped most youths with its immoral musical and video clips presentations. The Makosa of Benin Republic is another disaster that has gripped the youths with its erotic dance and music.

The youths have been receptive of the abuse of morality by some musicians. These immoral musical productions are packaged in such a way they seem innocuous and very attractive but they gradually wash away in the younger generation all that is left of morals they learnt as children. The result is premarital sex, abusive tendencies, selfish ways, disrespect to parents, elders and those in authority. Nigerian youths, for instance, now behave and act as unfortunate Euro-Americans. This attitude is reflected in the dress codes, use of slang, carriage, hairstyles, make-up etc, often picked from popular musicians.



Although they may seem unrelated, continued exposure of Nigerian youths to music that do not conform to moral standards is one sure way of moral breakdown in the society. It may be necessary to ask what people gain from listening to music that their lyrics urge or stimulate them to engage in illicit sex or become ruffians. Most regrettably, parents and people thought to be responsible prefer and go for these immoral music types and see nothing in that. These same people turn around to blame the society for the irresponsible ways of their children. It must be realized that music has great powers on the mind and therefore is a strong influence. The music you prefer and listen to regularly shapes your mind and behaviour directly or indirectly. It would then be important for one to chose music that ennobles and adds to ones personal and social dignity.

### **Why and How to Say Yes to a Song**

The need for principled choice and selection of music is significant. Bearing in mind the power of music to influence human attitudes, preferences and behavioural patterns, it is very crucial for one to chose/select music types that do not have potentials to harm or influence him negatively. It would then be necessary to expose your mind to musical types that ennoble and uplift the spirit as well as give moral satisfaction. As we projected before, all that tend toward perfection resonate beauty ultimately. Care must be taken to ensure that one does not gradually erode his moral conscience through constant exposure to music types that suggest/project immoral life style. It behooves us to be able to resist the overpowering and hegemonic influence of some musical imports that destroy more than they build. Remember, they may be alluring, seem innocuous and beautiful, they ultimately destroy.

It is necessary to be able to criticize any piece of music before selecting it. There would be need to take a critical look at the lyrics of any song you want to buy. These days, songs come with the lyrics on the covers of CDs, so it would be easy to know what you are buying before you do so. Even when songs lyrics are not printed on CD covers, it is believed one does not just go and pick music at random in the shops. He/she would have heard such music before selecting them. So, it is possible to know what one buys before their eventual purchase. Some songs also come with video clips of the projections of the owners. For instance Awilo's *Makosa* has video clips made for the marketing of the songs. There it is possible to know the musician's performance intentions with respect to dance, and other expressive perspectives of the music. You will be able to know if the music is suitable for you or not.



It would be important for one to be able to resist peer pressures on choice and selection of music. Quite often youths appreciate music, particularly popular music, because their friends like such music. They are not able to make their own choices and stick to them. They seem to have constant need to "belong" and be judged "current" by their friends. No body wants to be called *Jew guy*.

Find out what you personally need and go for it. Do not play to the gallery. It is not in all cases that what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Do not under-estimate the power of music in your life, so be quite discriminatory to the music you select and listen to. Morality and general acceptable human standards and principles should be the guide.

Refining ones musical tastes to those that are humanly constructive is very significant in our musical consumption. The noticeable craze for wayward and decadent musical styles in our society is not a healthy development. There is urgent need for electronic media to censor what they present on their programmes to spare our children more social and moral destitution that is already the order of the day in our societies. The copyright council and Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria may be requested to critically assess musical imports to the country to ensure they are socially and morally constructive. The *Awilo* trend needs to be stopped to avoid rape cases and other decadent behaviours. The youths must "enroll" into the socio-moral battle to ensure a place for our children in the future. There is urgent need for taste shift to music that projects beauty in all its ramifications.

### **Conclusion**

In this presentation we concerned ourselves with music as the outcome of the search for beauty. In doing this, various applications of music in human life were examined. There is evidence that music is very crucial in all human activities. Attempt was also made to survey current trends in musical selection/consumption and their impact on the society. Some guiding principles were provided for the selection of morally sound music types that give beauty to various people. While this is a preliminary survey that could be developed further, it is the hope of the writer that some or all the issues discussed in this paper will be relevant to the musical choices we make. It is also believed that our search for beauty will constrain us to select those music types that are socially and morally constructive that we can say are truly beautiful.



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