

WRITTEN COMPOSITION IN NIGERIA: A SURVEY

Introduction: Definition and Philosophical Perspectives

Composition in the musical arts is the substance/fact of music. Also, it signifies structuring, re-structuring and unearthing of finished music or part of it. On a broader perspective, composition "means textural construction/re-construction/re-formulation/re-refinement, improvisation or extemporization of music, text or dance" (Onyeji, 2002:31). The all-embracing term composition, which applies to all other creative arts disciplines such as drama, poetry, fine arts and dance, would be used in the discourse that follows to represent the process and product of musical arts creativity.

Two distinct forms of composition exist in the musical arts - oral and written compositions. Oral composition distinguishes those musical compositions that are orally composed, documented and disseminated. These dominate creative outputs in oral traditions as well as those of most non-trained musicians in contemporary societies. Written composition, on the other hand, distinguishes those compositions that are in literary form (written). These are conceived, composed and disseminated in written form. These dominate music traditions in contemporary music education especially, as introduced by Europe. Written compositions are generally known as art composed music. Oral composition lies outside the scope of this presentation. The simple reason is the need to set the study on a verifiable time frame as well as on a specific issue. Nzewi argues that:

Documentation can be pictorial, audio or visual imaging. Modern European civilization started with the pictorial and added the audio; African traditional civilizations have sensibly philosophized visual imaging as an abiding system of documenting its mental-cultural products. There is also the system of context fixing of form and content of serious music types. Modern Africa has failed, at the level of mental-cultural politics, to recognize and sustain these primary systems of documenting as well as propagating knowledge.' (1999:1)

While we note that each culture, including Africa, has some mode of documenting the arts over the ages, we shall not attempt a parallel study of the African forms of pictorial representation of music and the European form since such African resources, as argued by Nzewi, are not available to the writer nor did he present any samples. The primary concern of the discourse is to present a historical survey of written documented composition in Nigeria.

Oral compositions are all such musical formulations that although utilize the creative tools available to the composer at the time of its conception, structuring and production, are not written down in some permanent form that are universally understandable. Such compositions are constantly under threat of disappearance and misinterpretations. Quite often too, such music is localized and is hardly performed outside its locality in its original form. In much of such music, individual as well as community versions of the same music exist. This creates research problems on such music types due to lack of uniformity or sometimes, immediate accessibility.

Written composition in musical arts, on the other hand, is the application of literary tools in the conception, composition and documentation of otherwise orally conceived, documented, and disseminated piece of musical formulation. It is composed music that can be visually observed/studied and appreciated based on the norms and idioms of its expression. Written composition, by implication, includes all such music that is written down in any form over the ages of music history. It also implies that all folk music that has hitherto been orally transmitted acquires the status of written composition once transcribed and documented in written form. This is arguably correct. However, such transcribed folk music will certainly remain orally composed music in transcribed form. This is because the composers did not conceive them as literary art music in which requisite tools for the composition have been deployed. Without negating such "written compositions" our focus will however, be on such composed music types that are conceived, structured and unearthed in written form (art composed music).

The need to write musical compositions down on paper arose

from the understanding that documented material is fixed in its original form such that it would become accessible for current and future use in any form. Such documentation enables its dissemination to wider audiences and culture areas. It de-localizes musical arts and motivates greater appreciation as well as research studies on such music. It also promotes intercultural exchange and understanding of musical arts as well as facilitates underlying socio-cultural interactions. Lack of a permanent system of musical documentation or other historical records in many African cultures in the past makes discussion of historical traditions, including music, guesswork.

Documenting music on paper requires the use of special language, codes, symbols, etc. known as notation. Over the years, documentation of music in Africa has relied heavily on two types of notation, Staff and Tonic solfa. The implication is that any person who has not acquired the language of written music cannot perform, research or teach such music effectively. In the view of Akin Euba,

the introduction of a musical notation into Africa by Christian missionaries has provided African musicians with a creative tool of immense potential. Today many Africans are writing down their works, composed in a new contemplative idiom, and partly influenced by European music (1975:1).

In Nigeria, however, there has been undue and heavy reliance on tonic solfa notation by a large number of music makers (performers and composers). Such composers and performers rely heavily on tonic solfa notation owing to the predominance of choral/church music compositions and performances. However, its rigorous nature involving the use of dashes, dots, colons, semicolons, comas, translation of real sounds to letter sounds without a clear picture of the key of the music makes it quite limiting in certain circumstances. It becomes sometimes impossible to use in the documentation of African traditional music with rhythmic and tonal complexities. The ability to write compositions down is as essential as the art itself to ensure its performance over a wide area.

Historical Perspective of Written Composition in Nigeria

Compared to written composition in the Western world, written composition (art composed music) in Nigeria is yet inchoate. Art composed music has been in Nigeria for a little more than a century and half (1842-2004). However, it has been in existence long enough that music in Nigeria cannot be discussed without reference to it. Adegbite (2001:78) states that "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." Following on the heels of the missionaries is the British colonial government. According to Idolor,

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, 1943 respectively had music literally taught in their programme of studies. (2001:136)

The British colonial system in conjunction with the missionaries introduced music literacy in Nigeria as part of the proselytizing activities of the Christian Missionaries and ceremonial requirements of the government. Initially, music was not a school subject as such but constituted more of an outlet for "toning" down the effect of colonization on the natives as well as enabling the church produce music for Christian worship. It also provided needed cheap musical services from the natives for colonial functions and ceremonies. Although Nigeria benefited from the European musical exposure; it was not originally intended to benefit Nigerian citizens as such. Rather, it was intended to service the colonial government and the Christian Missionaries. This explains why it was not introduced as a serious school subject. It was more a recreational/entertainment subject. "Music literacy (then) (solfia 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).

Music literacy in Nigeria commenced with an unstructured

program of studies. It nevertheless produced fervent enthusiasts who became the pioneers of written music (composition inclusive) in Nigeria. "Robert A. Coker, one of the products of mission schools was said to be the first to study music in Germany as far back as 1871... Forty years later that is, 1911, another Nigeria, T.K.E. Phillips went to Trinity College of Music and returned to Nigeria in 1914. He was the first Nigerian to study music in England" (Adegbite 2001:78). These were later followed by Fela Sowande, T.A. Bankole, W.W.C. Echezona, Olaolu Omideyi, etc. These people and most of the older generation of Nigerian art musicians studied abroad as a result of lack of music programs in Nigeria then. Most of them graduated as composers, organists, singers and pianists as well as ethnomusicologists and music educators.

With the team of Nigerian graduates from overseas as well as the teaming art music enthusiasts, it became expedient to put in place structured art music education. "Serious literary music education started at the tertiary level in the University of Nigeria" (Nzewi 1999:4), at Nsukka town. It started with a set of four pioneer students (Meki Nzewi, Felix Nwuba, Samuel Ojukwu and Michael Okoye) in 1961, under the leadership of Edna Edet, nee Smith, an African American. Since then art music literacy has grown in Nigeria. Seven Nigerian universities, nineteen colleges of education and one polytechnic now have music departments and award various degrees, diplomas and certificates to graduates. Primary and secondary schools (especially in southern Nigeria) now offer music as school subject also.

The introduction of music as a formal course of study in the Nigerian universities necessitated the study of notation for the purposes of writing music. The two main forms of notation (staff and tonic solfa) were introduced for the purposes of teaching, learning, writing and composition of art music. These have been used in Africa as a whole for documenting music, African or Western art, until recently when some African music scholars rationalized different forms of notation for documenting African music.

The advocates of new notations for African music such as Moses Sewadda and Pantaleoni (a tablature system), Pantaleoni and

Ladzekpo (Takada drum notation), Koetting (Time Unit Box System - TUBS), Andrew Tracey (Pulse Notation), Roderick Knight (Tablature for the *Kora*), Meki Nzewi (Esc drum notation), etc. argued the reasons for the use of new notations. While acknowledging these ingenious contributions to the documentation of African music, this writer argues that staff notation is adequate for the notation of African music, folk or art. The argument is hinged on the fact that the elements of African music bordering on pitch, rhythm, scale and tonality, harmony and interpretation are representable with the staff notation. This position corroborates Shelemay's earlier observation that:

For transcription and analysis of oral traditions, twentieth-century African scholars have preferred to use staff notation rather than alternative systems (Kyagambidwa 1955; Nketia 1963; Ekwueme 1975-1976; Agawu 1987, 1990)". (Shelemay 1988:152-160) Nearly all published transcriptions of African vocal music use conventional staff notation. The staff notation has been adapted to African choral music of different traditions. "Scholars often select it because of its ubiquity and easy readability (Ibid: 157).

Also, since the idea of written composition is a Western phenomenon, it provides the infrastructure to link African music elements without having to necessarily resort to new forms of notation.

Most Nigerian composers of written music are choral composers. Very few composers of written music for instruments are found in Nigeria. These few include Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, Akin Euba, Lazarus Ekwueme, Joshua Uzoigwe, Meki Nzewi, Yemi Olaniyan, Christian Onyeji and Bode Omojola. Nigerian composers that have contributed immensely to the development of written music in Nigeria include the following: Rev. T.K.E. Phillips (church anthems); Fela Sowande (symphonic works, organ works and jazz arrangements); Akin Euba (piano pieces he calls "African Pianism", operatic work, intercultural works for ensembles, solo songs for voice and piano); Ayo Bankole (organ works, vocal pieces for voice and piano, secular choral pieces); Wilberforce Echezona (secular choral works, church anthems); Samuel Akpabot (orchestral pieces,

choral works, an operatic work). Lazarus Ekwueme (secular/sacred choral pieces, church anthems, an opera, solo songs); Adam Fiberesima (Operatic works, secular choral pieces); Dayo Dedeke (Yoruba hymn book) and Okechukwu Ndubuisi (piano pieces, secular and sacred choral works, solo songs for voice and piano). Others are Felix Nwuba (secular and sacred choral works and anthems); David Okongwu (sacred choral works and church anthems); Samuel Ojukwu (secular and sacred choral works); Dan Agu (secular and sacred choral works and anthems); Ikoli Harcourt White (sacred choral works); Meki Nzewi (musical theatre works including music-drama, musicals, operas, danced drama, television drama, secular choral pieces, church anthems, works for intercultural ensembles, pieces for voice and drum and drum solos), Joshua Uzoigwe (drummistic piano music, secular solo songs for voice and piano, intercultural works for voice and piano and symphonic works); Christian Onyeji (solo songs for voice and piano, drummistic piano works, secular and sacred choral works, a symphony, quartet, intercultural ensemble works); Bode Omojola (secular choral pieces, operas, solo song for voice and piano); Yemi Olaniyan (secular choral pieces, experimental compositions for Nigerian instruments, works for solo Nigerian instruments).

By the second half of the 20th century, there was a noticeable shift in the creative paradigm for the Nigerian composers of written music from the purely European classical music. There was development of a new art music tradition that incorporates elements of Nigerian traditional music. Most of the younger generations of Nigerian composers started seeking inspirations from traditional music elements and idioms. These composers sought "to explore the creative potentialities which are inherent in their musical traditions and to recombine the various elements in a new order that would not be a departure from but an enhancement of the evolutionary process and continuity of their musical/cultural heritage." (Uzoigwe 1992:10)

The need to be culturally relevant became a driving force for Nigerian composers who sought to incorporate traditional musical elements and idioms. Motivated by the new wave of nationalism

as well as the reawakening of cultural ideals, contemporary Nigerian composers have sought to integrate their musical arts with the various musical traditions of their sub-cultures. Therefore, "building on the pioneering works of Nigerian composers of church music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern Nigerian composers have continued to experiment with new, often syncretic, musical textures in their attempt to be relevant to a local audience." (Omojola 2000:219)

Although the attempt to compose written music with African traditional musical elements has yielded varying degrees of success from different composers, we note the creative efforts of some Nigerian composers whose works are representative of the creative continuum of Nigerian/African traditional music. Notable among them are Akin Euba, Meki Nzewi, Joshua Uzoigwe, Bode Omojola and Christian Onyeji, who developed research-composition as a process of composing modern African art music. These Nigerian composers have gained international recognition as modern composers whose works point to creative continuum of Nigerian traditional art music in modern idioms. Titles of some written compositions and their composers in Nigeria include the following:

Fela Sowande

Ka Mura, 1945

African Suite

African Suite for string Orchestra, 1955.

Folk Symphony for full orchestra, 1960.

Akin Euba

Abiku no.1.

Six Yoruba songs for voice and piano, 1959.

Two Yoruba folk songs for unaccompanied choir, 1959.

Scenes from Traditional Life for piano, 1977.

Ayo Bakole

Ya Orule for piano, 1957.

Nigerian Suite for piano, 1957.

Fun Mi Ni Ibeji I for unaccompanied choir, 1970.

Art songs (for baritone)

Joshua Uzoigwe

Nigerian Dances (for piano)

Sketch for Trombone.

Masquerade (for piano and Iyalu), 1980.

Ritual Procession (for African orchestra), 1981.

Adams Fiberesima

Jaja of Opobo

Opu Jaja (Opera)

Laz Ekwueme

Nigerian Phapsody (for Strings.)

A Night in Bethlelehem (Opera).

Dance for the Black Witches (for quintet.)

Samuel Akpabot

Overture for a Nigerian Ballet (for small orchestra), 1959.

Scenes from Nigeria (for small orchestra), 1961.

Ofalla Festival (for wind orchestra plus 5 African instruments), 1963.

Meki Nzewi

Omoledo (Children's folklore opera), 1983.

Poetic dances (8 movements of dances for chamber orchestra and African instrumental section), 2001.

Irnam, (a quintet), 2002.

Gloria (setting for children's voices and small orchestra), 2002.

Okechukwu Ndubuisi

Nnwa Aramonu (for S.A.T.B.)

The Vengeance of the Lizards, (a folk opera), 1966.

Ajama-Kwara ngwongwo (for S.A.T.B. 1979.)

Rapsody for flute.

Samuel Ojukwu

Nwunye Dinta.

University of Nigeria song (for S.A.T.B.)

Things Fall Apart (musical theme), 1974.

Egwu Atilogwu, 1990.

Christian Onyeji

Ufie (Igbo dance) for piano, 1995.

Afro trombone 1-4, 1995-1996.

Abigbo for orchestra (a symphony), 2002.

Twenty songs (for solo voice and piano), 1993-2000.

Hi Yom, (a quartet), 2003.

Bode Omojola

Ode for a New Morning (for soloist, chorus and piano), 1959.

Omo Mimo (Holy Child) (for S.A.T.B. and piano), 1990.

Kings for Sale (to a libretto by Oin Medubi) (for soloists, chorus, piano and Nigerian instruments), 1994.

Olaolu Omideyi

Ore Ofe Kristi (for S.A.T.B. and organ.)

Nipe Ife Olugbala (for S.A.T.B. and organ.)

William Wilberforce Echezona

Vesicles and Responses

Te Deum.

Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte

Rue Ole Mgbe (for S.A.T.B.)

Chere Oge Ya (for S.A.T.B.)

Theophilus Ekundayo Phillips

Yorub Cantata (for S.A.T.B.)

Magnificant in C in Yoruba.

Ninu Agbola Olorun W.

Dayo Dedeke

Ma gbagbe ile; 1963.

Orin Yoruba, 1974.

Conceptual Framework for Written Composition

Various conceptual factors give rise to the composition of art music in Nigeria. While the attempt is not to probe all factors that remotely motivate written music composition in the Nigerian context, we would present some general and specific creative concepts of composers of written music.

The older generation of art music composers was motivated to compose written music in imitation of western models that were then new. At that time, composing art music was more of creative curiosity and experimentation in the high-class art of the white Masters. One would say the venturesome African composers were then spurred by the desire to be elite and to associate with the

highbrow members of the society. The earlier works of such pioneer composers show evidence of dominant European influence. Art music composition, to these composers, constituted an intellectual exercise in artistic/aesthetic creativity and celebration of the arts for its sake. Expressing learnt European compositional techniques was also a stimulating conceptual factor for written music at that time. The conceptual basis for art music then was purely European classical.

As time went on (within the latter half of 20th century), it became expedient for the later generations of African composers to respond to the yearnings of the local and international musical audiences for art music that has its roots in African traditional music. Nigerian composers quickly exploited the opportunity. This resulted in the attempts by composers to incorporate Nigerian traditional musical elements and the greater application of traditional compositional idioms in their latter works. From then onward the conceptual basis of the works of the composers was the integration of Nigerian and European musical idioms in order to satisfy changing musical tastes. Although the efforts have yielded varying results, the progression of art music since then bears evidence that the younger generation of art music composers in Nigeria have strong desire to develop identifiable art music traditions for the various subcultures, if not Nigeria as a society. Composers have employed African folk tunes, heterophonic procedures, evocation of rhythmic idioms of African music, African-derived call and response pattern, stratified textures, the principle of continuous variations, ostinati technique, and the application of improvisations and extemporizations, among other traditional music creative procedures.

A framework for modern art music composition - Research-Composition - has been developed by Christian Onyeji. "Research-Composition is an approach to composition in which in-depth ethnomusicological research on the indigenous music of a given culture informs the creative and compositional theory of a modern art music composition". (Onyeji 2004; in print) In addition to the above conceptual factors, many of the composers were and are still

spurred to creative ventures in response to religious requirements of their various Christian denominations.

There are also some composers who are remotely motivated to compose for commercial reasons. These composers (mostly teachers/lecturers in higher institutions) are motivated to compose for financial gains. Quite often their works are not aimed at satisfying posterity in the strictest sense but to satisfy the immediate needs of the patrons. Such works are usually for specific occasions such as funeral ceremonies, weddings, birthday celebrations, thanksgiving services, etc.

Conclusion

In the above presentation we note that written composition in Nigeria has a Christian origin. This explains why choral and liturgical written compositions have been predominant in the country. Written composition in Nigeria has, however, developed from the purely European classical types to those that incorporate African creative features and stylistic distinctions in differing degrees. The teaching and the learning of written composition have also been established at the three levels of education in Nigeria. New composers of written compositions have continued to emerge as more people turn to composition.

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