

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE IMPACT OF IGBO CHORAL ART MUSIC ON THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION, PROVINCE OF THE NIGER, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Art music in Igbo land has its origin traced to the experimental works of the early composers of choral music in the then Anglican Diocese on the Niger, around the 1930s. The Igbo choral art music genre has undergone a series of developmental changes to what is now known as Contemporary Art Music. However, this genre of music has gained wide acceptance in the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, Nigeria, since its birth. This paper, therefore, examines the various aspects of choral art music that has made an impact on the Province of Niger. Data were collected through personal communications, observation, active participation as well as a review of relevant literature. The paper concludes that choral Art music has positively impacted the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, Nigeria.

Keywords: Igbo choral music, Art music, Anglican communion, Province of the Niger

Background

Choral Art music in Igbo land was borne out of the burning desire of the early Christian converts to create music that would be expressive of their indigenous musical taste. The intrusion of various European Christian missionary groups in Igbo land from the second half of the nineteenth century brought about a lot of practices that are foreign to Igbo culture. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) which established the Anglican Church in 1857 introduced hymn singing and chanting of Psalms that were accompanied with the reed organ/harmonium. The missionaries established mission schools where the converts received a Western education. The few catechists and school teachers that were trained by the missionaries had the opportunity to learn how to read tonic-solfa and play simple hymn tunes from staff notation on the harmonium (Okonkwo, 2006). Ekwueme (2004) informs that the opportunity the early composers had, to experiment with materials from Igbo musical idiom, to produce music that would appeal more to the Igbo people came through the monthly evangelization carried out by the church in lieu of Evensong. Special seasons of the year in the church's calendar also provided excuses to break free from the strict order of the missionaries, which abhorred indigenous music and musical instruments of the Igbo and branded them as being fetish. He states:

The annual thanksgiving service was one such occasion. Villagers in rural Igbo country, almost all of whom were farmers, brought their crops as offering to God...A traditional Igbo touch was brought to this effect. Baskets of yams, cocoyam, corn, palm produce, and assorted fruits balanced on their heads, the parishioners, especially the women danced up the aisles to the altar where they deposited their offerings. The words of the songs were adaptations taken from the scriptures, but the rhythm and other properties of the songs

were traditionally Igbo in form and content...Here, however, began the gradual synthesis of foreign and folk materials, instead of the initial total exclusion of the traditional Igbo music from Christian worship. (pp. 215 & 216).

"The need, therefore, to indigenize religious music in Igbo Christian worship gave rise to the creation of a new music genre christened 'Native Air' by a few talented Igbo Christians in 1940's" (Agu, 2012, p. 30). However, choral art music in the Province of the Niger, over the years has developed into a near-perfect work of art. It has improved the quality of worship in the Anglican Church. The focus of this paper is on the impact of this genre of music in the Province of the Niger, Anglican Communion.

Moments of Choral Art Music in the Province of the Niger

Art music is a term that refers to a musical tradition implying advanced structural and theoretical considerations and a written musical tradition. African/Nigerian art music is "a genre of music created and developed by African musicians who had training in techniques of western art music" (Adegbite, 2001, p. 77). African/Nigerian art music involves the combination of Western and African musical materials such as harmonic styles, rhythm, melody, language and Western conventional music notational system. Art music could be vocal, instrumental as well as a combination of both. It could also be sacred or secular. Conversely, contemporary Igbo choral art music, according to Agu (2002, 2012), which came under experimentation from the 1930s, gained prominence in the Anglican Communion of the Niger Diocese in the 1940s. It kept developing until the late twentieth century when it got to a level of near perfection. The music competitions, special lectures and seminars organized by William Wilberforce Echezona were very instrumental to the development of literary choral music in the old Diocese on the Niger. Echezona was made the music director of the Old Niger Diocese after his return from Great Britain in 1950, where he earned his first degree in Music. Also, the establishment of the Department of Music in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1961, quickened the rate of choral art music development and brought it to a high level of sophistication. This, as a result, led to the emergence of Contemporary Choral Art Music, which took care of the flaws found in the early compositions. Acceptably, Igbo choral art music has lived in the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, since its emergence. A careful study of its development reveals two important moments: The early period and the Contemporary period.

The Early Period (1930-1960)

The early works of this period could not be regarded as original because they were already existing folk tunes that had sacred texts fitted to them. The protagonists of Art Music in the Province of the Niger were products of the mission schools. They were educated but not in music, mainly school teachers, church teachers and clerks in colonial government offices. The musical knowledge they had was gotten from mission schools, Teacher Training Colleges and church choirs. Okafor (1976) informs that with the access they had to privately-owned radio sets in the 1930s, and the subsequent arrival of commercial gramophone records, they began experimentation in indigenous church music. Their first compositions were not original; since they extracted the tunes of some of the G.V. Rhumba records, then in vogue as well as popular Igbo folk tunes and fitted Igbo texts (gotten from the translated hymns, canticles and the bible) to them. They also created new texts to fit Western hymn tunes and later wrote original melodies with new texts.

Although the works of the early composers' of choral music had some features characteristic of Igbo traditional music such as rhythm, repetition of short melodic phrases and ambits, cyclic

nature and so forth, the melodies of these songs in most cases did not adhere to the tonal inflexions of the Igbo texts. The length of the songs was also short. The composers of the early period include Dan Ojukwu, Nelson Okoli, Ishmael Nwangene, Julius Ekwueme and William Wilberforce Echezona.

Contemporary Period (1960-the Present)

This period was borne as a result of a professional study of music by Igbo Indigenes. The establishment of the Department of music of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1961 provided a great opportunity for musically talented Igbo people to pursue a career in music. The contemporary composers of Igbo art music in the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, developed the music genre to a very high level of sophistication and near perfection.

The development in the style of music composition in Africa as a whole was brought about by the exposure of the Africans to Western musical concepts, and the systematic study of the music of the Africans. According to Adedeji (2014):

African musicology, broadly defined, encompasses the scientific study of musical expressions in Africa and its diaspora in all its complex manifestation (<http://musicology.ucla.edu>)... Musicology as a field of study in Africa started with the pioneering works of European anthropologists in the nineteenth century... The foundation of what is known as African musicology is laid by Western ethnomusicologists.... It entailed the propounding of initial universal theories and methods. On the other hand and at the same time, African musicologists such as T. K. E. Philips (1920s), FelaSowande (1940s-1970s), Ephraim Amu (1920s-1940s), Nketia (1950s-1970s), Francis Bebey (1960s-1970s), etc. evolved theories that are more culturally relevant to Africa. (pp. 85 & 86)

The story of the Igbo experience in this development saga in art music could not be comprehensive without making mention of William Wilberforce Echezona, a renowned ethnomusicologist, who was the first Igbo man to study music abroad and the first Nigerian to earn a Doctorate degree in Music. Echezona's effort in encouraging composers, organizing seminars, music competitions and his contribution in founding the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, aroused the interest of the then young talented composers to study music professionally at the university level. Two, out of the four pioneer graduates of the Music Department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, were among the leading figures of contemporary art music composition in the Anglican Church, Province of the Niger, Nigeria. They are Sir Sam Ojukwu and Late Felix Nwuba.

With their exposure to Western and African music concepts in the university/tertiary institutions, the composers of this period consciously blend the idioms of the two music cultures in their compositions. They avoid the flaws identified with the works of the early period, write expanded pieces of longer lengths (works that could last for about three to ten minutes) by making use of some of the developmental devices in African music such as internal variation technique, sequence and imitation, antiphony and Western musical forms and techniques like binary, ternary, rondo, fugue, and so on.

Contemporary choral art songs are based on Western classical harmonic techniques. The rhythmic features of these songs are purely African: syncopation, cross-rhythm, mixed rhythm and poly rhythm. They are accompanied by indigenous was mu and some musical instruments,

Western musical instruments like the organ/electronic keyboard or a combination of Western and indigenous instruments, depending on the choice of the performers. These works are often used for music festivals/competitions organized by various dioceses in the Province of the Niger, either as set pieces or choice pieces. The contemporary composers include David Okongwu, Sam Ojukwu, Felix Nwuba, Dan Agu, Humphrey Nwafor, Ugo Onwuka, Chuma Chukwuka, Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara, Chudi Ezeokoli, Chidi Obijiaku, Ifeanyi Okafor.

Province of the Niger

The Province of the Niger is one of the Provinces that make up the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion. It comprises nine Dioceses within Anambra State, namely: Diocese on the Niger, Diocese of Awka, Diocese of Nnewi, Diocese of Aguata, Diocese of Ogbaru, Diocese of Ihiala, Diocese of Niger West, Diocese of Mbamili and Diocese of Amichi.

The Province of the Niger, Anglican Communion, was created in 2002. It was within Province Two of the Church of Nigeria, which was created in 1997 when the Church of Nigeria was divided into three Provinces. Province Two covered the whole South-eastern region of the country before it was split. It is pertinent to note that the various Dioceses that made up Province two and Niger-Delta Province were a spin-off of the old Niger Diocese. The old Niger Diocese was created in 1920 from the Eastern part of the Diocese of Equatorial West Africa.

Acceptability of Choral Art Songs in the Province of the Niger

The acceptance or rejection of a piece of music depends on the response of the audience to the performance of that piece. Performance in the African context involves the audience's participation. The people that constitute the audience may smile, applaud or nod their heads to the rhythm of the music to express their feeling of excitement if they accept the musical performance; they may as well hiss or frown as the performance goes on to express their dissatisfaction/rejection of the music being performed. Blacking in Agu (2002) observes that "music stands or falls by the virtue of what is heard and how people respond to what they hear" (p. 86). From the observation of the researcher, art song is fully accepted in the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, Nigeria. The kind of ovation given to the choir by the church leaders and congregation after art songs are rendered in worship, usually after the sermon, attests to their acceptance of contemporary art songs. It is also observed that some of the members of the congregation, at times, take part in the performance of contemporary art songs, especially where there is an ostinato section in the music being performed.

Furthermore, the evidence of the acceptance of this genre of music is found in the demand for its composition by churches or individuals for special occasions such as Synod Service, Inauguration of a new Diocese, Archdeaconry and Parish; dedication of new church building, parsonage or individual's building; harvest and special thanksgiving services, birthday or even funeral services. Composers are commissioned to set to music the history of a church, biography of a deceased or living individual, compose special songs based on the theme of some occasions like Diocesan synod, Diocesan Women Conference and so on. Sometimes special choirs are invited to give special renditions so as to grace the occasion.

The reason for the acceptance of Igbo art music in the Anglican Church could be found in the forms and structural features of the music genre which are really expressive of the Igbo musical taste and seem more socio-culturally relevant to the Igbo audience. Agu (2002) asserts thus:

The Igbo literary choral music, which possessed the Igbo traditional music qualities, naturally appealed to the contemporary Igbo audience right from the onset. This is because of what the new genre meant to the audience in

terms of its socio-cultural qualities which touches each individual's feeling...gives credence to the full acceptance of the literary choral music by the Igbo audience. (p. 86)

The composers of art music carefully blend Western and Igbo music idioms but use heavier doses of Igbo musical idioms. They also employ antiphonal form in their compositions, use rhythmic polyphony, ensure adherence of their melodies to the tonal inflexion of the Igbo texts (which ensures intelligibility of the words), use short melodic motifs or phrases (which are either repeated or imitated at different pitches), use traditional musical instruments and (or) Western instruments for accompaniment and Western harmonic technique.

Impact of Choral Art Music in the Province of the Niger

As an active participant in the practice of Igbo Choral art music in the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, both in performance and composition, the author has through careful observation as well as a structured and unstructured interview with some composers, priests, choristers and music enthusiasts noted the strong influence of art songs on the Niger Province. The impacts of art songs are considered on the following: quality of worship, parents, youths and composers.

Impact on Quality of Worship

The impact of art music in the Anglican Churches in Igboland and precisely the Province of the Niger cannot be over-emphasized. It has contributed immensely in promoting the quality of Anglican worship, as well as in raising the standard of the musical performance of church choirs. This improvement in the style of composition and quality of singing has attracted many, both old and young, to join church choirs. Some experienced choir members who showed greater interest, talent and leadership qualities were trained as choirmasters, organists and the more talented ones became composers.

The messages of the art songs are effectively communicated to the congregation because many of the art composers do not just write to entertain but to interpret the mood of the texts they have chosen for their compositions. This they achieve through the use of sounds, materials from Igbo traditional musical idioms, which the Igbo audience understand and, then, ensuring the adherence of melody lines to the tonal inflexions of the Igbo texts. The priests, choir and the congregation feel much more at home with music written in the Igbo language than in the Western classical idiom.

Consequently, the rapid developments in the style of composition and the raised standard of choir performances in Anglican churches, where good choirs are seated, have aroused the interest of priests to have good choirs in the churches where they preside. The churches that do not have good choirs engage a visiting choirmaster to build their church choirs, to have good music in their worship. Good music has been instrumental to church expansion because it has attracted non-Anglicans, those that do not go to church at all and even backslidden members back to the Anglican Church. An informant narrated that one man, who used to be a member of the Anglican Church but later joined another movement, attended an Ordination Service on invitation by a friend of his, who was to be ordained at the All Saints Cathedral, Onitsha. After the service, the man confessed that he regretted quitting the Anglican Church; that during the choir's rendition, he had goosebumps, and that was how he came back to his previous denomination.

Impact on Parents

The level at which art music compositions and performances have gone in the Province of the

Niger has made many parents join the choir, some take their children along with them, and some others send their children to join church choirs. Some music enthusiasts even take the responsibility of patronizing composers to write for their church choir.

Parents and guardians have now, as well, begun to see music as a course worth studying in the university, unlike the previous times when they thought that spending money to train a musician in the university is a mere waste of resources. They would want their children to study courses like medicine, pharmacy, law, engineering, architecture, or even other art courses but not music. Their preference for other disciplines to music could be a result of their wrong notion about the study of music. The limited music to the playing of musical instruments and becoming a church choirmaster or school teacher. Faseun's (2001) findings on the study of public perception of music as a school subject in the contemporary Nigerian schools agree with the above statement, thus:

Respondents will rather want their wards to be medical doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, historians, fine artists, and engineers. It is their expressed view that money invested in music education is a waste of resources that could have been expended on some other disciplines. They believe that the prestige attached to science and even other art subjects is higher than that of music in schools. To them, music appears to be a subject for those who cannot get into other disciplines in Nigerian schools. (p. 60)

Having realized that music is not for dull persons and that it can be studied professionally by bright people, many parents now encourage their children, who are musically talented, to study music in the university. More so, some parents employ music teachers to come and give musical training to their children.

Impact on Youths

The impact of contemporary art music is also evident among Anglican youths. It could be observed these days that the interest of youths in art music is on the increase. In many of the church choirs, especially in the urban areas, youths form a greater part. Some of these youths were not initially members of their various church choirs but developed an interest after they were invited to play various indigenous musical instruments to accompany the art songs during music festival/competition preparations. Many of them have developed to be virtuoso singers, organists/pianists, instrumentalists, standard choirmasters and potential composers. Prof. Alvan-IkokuNwamara, prolific composer of contemporary Arts songs in Niger Province, is one such person. Some of these youths trained themselves in the university with the money they make from music performances. Some also earned scholarships to study any course of their choice up to doctorate level because of their outstanding music performance delivery.

Also, there is increased interest among youths to study music. The population size of the various Departments of Music in South-eastern Nigeria has continued to grow because of the increased interest of youths to study music. Some of the musically talented youths who studied other courses are now regretting they did, and have resorted to enrolling for Postgraduate Diploma programme in Music in order to enhance their musical knowledge and ability.

Impact on Composers

The compositions of the pioneer contemporary composers of choral art music and those that came after them have aroused the interest of many to delve into music composition. The works of great masters of the literary music genre like David Okongwu, Sam Ojukwu, Dan Agu, ChumaChukwuka, Alvan-IkokuNwamara and so forth have been sources of inspiration and

model to the younger generation of art music composers, some talented church choirmasters and the young music graduates who have interest in contemporary choral music composition. In his documentation of David Okongwu's biography, Okafor (2015) informs that some of the notable Igbo composers like Felix Nwuba, Sam Ojukwu and Nwokolobia Agu passed through Okongwu's guidance during their formative years as composers.

A careful study of some of the works of some younger generations reveals the influence of compositional styles of the pioneers and the ones that came after them. While interviewing some of the younger generations, the researcher found that they understudied the great masters, either as students in secondary and tertiary institutions or had exposure to their works in various church choirs which they attended as choristers or taught as choirmasters; thereby consciously or unconsciously adopting their masters' concepts to their compositions. The other group of composers who are not academically trained, mainly church choirmasters were also influenced by compositions of the pioneers of contemporary art music and succeeding academically-trained composers whose choral works they perform in their various church choirs or by directly understudying them. Most of these non-music graduates cannot properly notate music, except a few who studied the works of the academically-trained composers meticulously.

Conclusion

Choral art music in Igbo land, whose experimentation began in the Anglican Diocese on the Niger around the 1930s has over the years, developed to become of world standard. The establishment of the department of music in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1961 also quickened the rate of its development, as musically talented Anglicans in the Province of the Niger had the opportunity to study music professionally. Conclusively, Igbo choral art music, which is characterized by a blend of both African and Western musical idioms have been fully accepted in the Anglican Communion, Province of the Niger, Nigeria and its positive impact felt both on the quality of worship, parents, youths and composers.

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