

Contemporary Nigeria Church Music: A Search for True Identity and Cultural Relevance

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Abstract

Nigeria Church music has over the years since independence, been misrepresented following the actions and inactions of some trained art musicians in Nigeria who still are under the great influences of Western musical idioms. This paper, however, tries to advocate for a concerted effort in building a defined identity for church music in Nigeria, more so, as there have been laid down principles and practical examples by founding fathers of Nigerian art/ church music in the past. The study is descriptive, making use of historical method of analysis whereby the development of the musical genre (both from the Western and Nigeria scenarios) is traced. The primary datum 'Church music' emanated from a reported outcome of a musical concert organised by RSCM (Royal School of Church Music) Nigeria in 2015, while the secondary data were sourced from existing literatures. In the final analysis, different personalities and musical contributions of art/ church musicians in Nigeria, from past to present, were succinctly presented in this paper. The requisite musical components or contents that best describes the age long Nigerian Church music were equally posited pragmatically for the purposes of cultural relevance, international recognition and globalisation.

Keywords: Church music, Identity, Cultural relevance, Choral music, sacred music.

Introduction

Nigeria as a country is largely populated by people of different religious affiliations and there has always been concerted effort by believers to advance the tenets and values of their religious institutions. One of the major ways in which religious intuitions advance their cause is the use of music as a tool to propagate the personality or symbol that represents the centre or core of their faith and belief system.

A church, which is known to be a place or house of worship or religious services, is occupied by people who profess to love God and Jesus Christ, His only Son. The Christendom all over the world propagates the personality of God, who is perceived as the Almighty and His son, Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Saviour of the world. Every Christian denomination, be it Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Methodists, Presbyterians, Protestant and so on, employ musical elements in every aspect of their corporate worship. The music genre under which different musical media are employed for Christian worship is called 'Church or Sacred music'. In Christian churches, the concept of church music (or, in a broader sense, music in church) covers a unique wealth of activities and tasks (Klößner, 2011). The writing of the paper was borne out of strong desire to re-define and put in proper perspective the concept of 'Nigeria Church music. Ekwueme, in trying to address this particular problem of musical identity posits that: there is a great yearning and demand by African audiences for choral music by African composers... an African composer therefore owes a duty to his society to produce and provide good quality choral works to meet the needs of these groups. (2001, p.22).

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Hitherto, within the contemporary times, Nigerian Art music has been modelled erroneously towards Western music culture as inherited from the colonial masters. Contemporary musical institutions in Nigeria such as, Music Society of Nigeria (MUSON) and Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) Nigeria – an affiliate of Royal School of Church Music London - use their platforms to advance the Western musical idioms through their various trainings and vocations. By implication, they super-impose these foreign idioms on our own musical heritage as have been laid down by our founding fathers in Art music and ethnomusicology.

A visit to a grand finale concert organized by Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) Nigeria, after completing their annual International Music Course and Conference in 2015, ignited the drive for writing this paper. Wonderful renditions of various English hymns, chants, anthems (from mostly Western composers) by the RSCM choir; and superlative Organ recitals (Mendelssohn and Bach) by an invited English organist, were the musical performances for the concert. These performances were all enjoyed by church music enthusiasts, choristers from various denominations, RSCM trainees, and church musicians in attendance. A member of the RSCM Nigeria Board of Trustees in his closing remark pleaded that the apparent musical renditions/ performances displayed in the concert should be encouraged, supported and retained as it represents the Church music tradition in Nigeria. This comment however, generated the following salient questions which were also posited in this paper to ignite in-depth and introspective reasoning as Africans and patriotic Nigerians: what is Nigerian Church music? Is our Church music defined majorly by western music idioms/elements? Is our local and indigenous musical content not enough to make up for our Church music? Are there possible feeling of inferiority complex in the expression of our kind of music? Are organ recitals and singing of western hymn tunes/ anthems seen as superior to our own local derivatives? Is our local and indigenous church music not an exportable genre which can be appreciated globally? These questions as they beg for answers still remain the basic fulcrum and focal point of this paper.

Method

Like earlier stated, this paper was borne out of the fallout from a musical concert that was attended by the researcher and keenly observed too. The primary datum 'church music' is hitherto conceived from the activities of the musical concert earlier mentioned. The secondary data is sourced from comments and other literary works. The paper is descriptively presented through historical analysis of the primary datum, both from Western and Nigerian perspectives respectively.

The theoretical framework of this paper which is approached from a qualitative perspective is hinged on "**Musical Appropriation**" as defined and applied by Chapman. In his description, appropriation can be used as a neutral umbrella term to describe all of the events that involve the adoption of musical elements across cultures (Chapman 2007). Though thoroughly criticized and labelled by few scholars as 'robbery' (Dawes 1997), 'syncreticism' (Rice 2005), and 'Hybridization' (Guilbault 1997), this concept actually has valuable cultural sensibility and aesthetic influence on the creative process of an African artist/musicians (Hall 1997).

Church music, as a genre expressed and used within the classical music of the Western origin is however appropriated effectively into the Nigerian church music context through its various vocal forms and by extension, instrumentation. This paper postulates possible ways in which the musical contents of Nigerian church music will be locally sourced and generated within existing music repertoires and libraries of our past and present art musicians in Nigeria. The musical contributions of our founding fathers in art music, those who fought to retain our cultural music heritage are highlighted greatly in this paper. Other sacred compositions and arrangements of existed contemporary art musicians in Nigeria are equally presented.

Discussion

Evolution of Western Church Music

Church music as practiced by European countries like, England, Germany, Italy, France, Poland and the rest, incorporates the use of voices and musical instruments for expression of worship, praise and thanksgiving. Various composers of Western/ European background have written all kinds of musical compositions (vocal and instrumental) for churches. This can be traced through the history of western classical music as stated below:

The medieval period(500-1400): where plain chants are predominantly used in the worship by monks, nuns and clerics of Roman Catholic background. The plainchants were equally known as 'Gregorian chants' as they were believed to have been composed by Pope St. Gregory the Great. E.g. *Alleluia Pascha Nostrum* (before 800). The use of Organum style of composition by exponents such as Perotin and Leonin respectively was the major characteristics of the period. Renaissance period(1400-1600), the use of motets for sacred music by composers such as Guillaume Dufay (1400-1474), his work *Nuperrosarumflores*(1436); the polyphonic settings of the Ordinary of the mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei) by Josquin des Pres (1440-1521), his work *Gloria* (1510).

Baroque period(1600-1750), the tradition of religious polyphonic vocal music continued in this era with following composers as pioneers: Martin Luther, he collected hundreds of tunes to serve as devotional hymns for his new Protestant Church; Johann Sebastian Bach (German,1685-1750), composed various cantatas that elaborated on Luther's hymns and other instrumental work; George Friedrich Handel (England,1685-1759) composed sacred oratorio works like the Messiah, Judas Maccabaeus, Esther, and the rest; Johann Pachelbel (German,1653-1706); Antonio Vivaldi (Italy,1669-1741); and other composers who had great inputs in sacred or liturgical music. Classical period(1760-1820), the influence of opera on church music was very strong in the period and most composers applied such. Prominent composers of sacred music were, Karl Heinrich (Graun's Der TodJesu); Karl Philip Emmanuel Bach (1714-1788); Franz Joseph Hadyn (1732-1806); Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791); Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827); Johann Adolph Hasse (103 church compositions); Nicola Zingarelli, and others.

Romantic Classical Music(1820-1915), the era was not one of the great periods in church music, but there were few composers who composed sacred choral music concentrating on texts rather than form and style. The composers are, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827); John Stainer (1840-1901); Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868); Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847); Johannes Brahms (1833-1897); Hector Berlioz (1803-1869); Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901); Charles Gounod (1818-1893); Cesar Franck (1822-1890); Gabriel Faure (1845-1924); DimitriBortniansky (1751-1825), composed religious choral works for the Greek Orthodox Church. Twentieth Century Music(1900-2000), the era witnessed massive increase in modern musical styles and the sacred music received more of choral compositions from composers such as, Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971); Threni (n.y); Honegger (n.y); Walton (n.y); Carl Orff (1895-); Walter Piston (1894-); Howard Hanson (1896-); Luigi Dallapiccola (1904-); Poulenc (n.y); Benjamin Britten (1913-); Antorn Webern (1883-1945);

Nigerian Church Music: Historical Perspective

Nigerian church music, going by different literary accounts emanated from the activities of the early European missionaries who brought Christianity to West African regions around 19th century (Vidal 2012; Ekwueme 1973-74; Akpabot 1986; Oikelome 2001).

Colonialism in its wake brought about building of Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in urban and rural areas in Nigeria (Akpabot 1986). The Anglican Communion came to Nigeria in 1842 through one of its societies – Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Methodists in 1845 and the Baptist in 1850 (Adegbite 2011; 78). In his own account Vidal states:

In 1841, the Wesleyan missionaries visited Badagry and reached Abeokuta in 1846. In 1843, Rev. H. Townsend of Church Missionaries Society (CMS) landed in Badagry and reached Abeokuta. On January 5, 1843, the first divine service was held in Abeokuta town. The first CMS baptism was held on February 5, 1848 while the first confirmation service was held by Bishop Vidal on November 19, 1854 (2012; 85-89).

From the foregoing, massive incursions and influences were made on the religious, social and political activities of the Nigerian people and this inadvertently affected our traditional musical heritage. At this point, new musical form was introduced by the European missionaries as an appendage to their newly introduced religion – Christianity. Nigerian traditional music practice was jettisoned by these foreign usurpers and in its stead they introduced what is known as ‘Church music’. The process of acculturation and transculturation transcended beyond the religious environment but also into the socio-cultural lives of the Nigerian people. The traditional use of open space for music performances by both performing musicians and the participating audience was countered by the use of concert hall with its proscenium stage as appropriate setting for musical performances (Vidal 2012). Western hymns were translated into various local languages using the same metre of the original Western verses and sung to tunes from the same source. These hymn tunes became popular household melodies in Christian homes.

New converts were trained on how to interpret and appreciate the new western musical culture through established mission schools across the country (Adegbite 2001; 78). The foremost Nigerian converts to receive musical training abroad especially from the western part of the country were, R.A Coker, studied music in Germany; T.K.E. Phillips, attended Trinity College of Music London (Adegbite 2001; Oikelome 2001). Lagos and its environs, including Abeokuta and Badagry were known as the citadel of Christianity in Nigeria due to greater influence of European influences in these coastal areas than in any other part of the country. ‘As a result, the nature and pattern of the development of modern Nigerian music have largely been influenced by the nineteenth century cosmopolitan setting of Lagos and its environs (Omojola 1995).

Indigenization of Church Music in Nigeria; Past Efforts

There have been series of efforts by Nigerian Art musicians (especially the older generation) in trying to advance the rich cultural musical heritage/ practices of the African society like Nigeria. During the colonial administration, few western trained musicians worked tirelessly in creating repertoire for our secular and sacred music on the platform of art music. Art music, according to Euba and as quoted in Oikelome (2001) can be described from four (4) different categories:

1. Music based on western styles and which makes no conscious use of African styles or idioms
2. Music in which melodies, rhythms or concepts derived from African culture are deliberately used in musical works that carry western idioms and instrumentation.
3. Music in which African and western elements are more or less co-dominant, often through the combination of western and African instruments or by use of African texts.
4. Music based entirely on African traditional models.

The most ideal compositional styles relevant to the main objective of this paper are those of categories 2 and 4 respectively. Recent accounts by various literary works on the advocacy for the indigenization of church music in Nigeria showed art musicians adopt the aforementioned compositional techniques in creating the requisite local musical contents meant for corporate worships (Omojola 1995; Adegbite 2001; Olaniyan 2001; Okielome 2001; Vidal 2012). Selected musical compositions/ contributions by foremost Nigerian art musicians/ Clergymen to the realization of the indigenization of church music in Nigeria are presented underneath.

Table Showing different Nigerian Church musicians and their musical contributions

| S/Nos | Composers/ Arrangers | Musical works/ Compositions | Remarks |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| First Generation: | | | |
| 1. | Revd A.T. Olude | <i>Mayo-kun</i> | |
| 2. | Ola OluOmideyi | Sets of Chants and anthems | |
| 3. | Emmanuel FelaSowande | <i>Oyigiyigi; Obangiji, etc</i> | |
| 4. | Canon J.J. Ransome-Kuti | <i>Orin mimoni Ede atiOhunilewa</i> | Father of FelaKuti |
| 5. | T.K.E Phillips | <i>Emi o gbeju mi wo ni</i> | |
| 6. | W.W.C. Echezona | Vesicle & Responses in Igbo | |
| 7. | Chief E.A. Lufadeju | <i>Orin mimo l'ohun Yoruba, Imole Okan</i> | |
| 8. | Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte | <i>Onyenmehiekambu; Atulaegwu, etc</i> | |
| 9. | David Okongwu | Church anthems, psalms, carols | |
| 10. | DayoDedeke | Sets of Church anthems | |
| Second Generation: | | | |
| 11. | Felix Nwuba | Church anthems, psalms, carols | |
| 12. | Ayo Bankole | <i>Baba se waniomore; Requiem, etc</i> | |
| 13. | Laz E.N. Ekwueme | Numerous sacred works | |
| 14. | Sam Ojukwu | Numerous Igbo Sacred anthems (Anglican & Catholic churches) | Known as 'Nigerian G.F. Handel' |
| 15. | NwokolobiaAgu | <i>'Eye Onwug'enwemeli' (Easter Anthem)</i> | |
| 16. | Dan C.C. Agu | Sets of Sacred anthems (Igbo) | |

However, the list is inexhaustible as there are thousands of Church musicians in Nigeria whose compositions did not go beyond the geographical locations where the composers lived and operated from (mostly from the rural areas). It is also worthy to note that within the contemporary times, new generation of art musicians - trained in various higher institutions of learning in the field of musicology, ethno-musicology and other allied fields in music – have emerged and contributed in no small measure to the development of both art and church music in Nigeria. Few notable names include: **Ayo Oluranti (formerly Ogunranti), Christian Onyeji, Ayo Bankole (Jnr), Anthony Mereni, David Aina, Olusoji Stephen, Albert Oikelome, Sunday Olawuwo, EmekaNwokedi, ChineduOsinigwe, SegunFadeyi, KayodeIbiayo, etc.**

Contemporary Church Music in Nigeria: True Identity

In Nigeria, the Christian religion is grouped into two major categories, 'Orthodox' and 'un-orthodox' churches. Orthodox churches are known to hold on to established ordinances and sacred tradition as passed down from the apostles of Jesus Christ, they include: the Roman Catholic, Anglican Communion, Baptist, Methodist, and ECWA.

Unorthodox churches are unconventional churches established by individuals who act as 'Spiritual' heads or 'Overseers' of such institutions. However, the focus of this paper is on musical styles (usually sung) that emanate from the orthodox churches and they are: hymns, plain chants, canticles, psalms, vesicles & responses, oratorios, cantata, anthems, introits, etc. These musical styles usually adopt Western-European forms, as aftermath of years of indoctrination and colonisation by imperialists from Europe.

For any musical style or genre to be culturally relevant, and meet with the global standards, especially within these contemporary times, there is the need to re-invent or reevaluate certain musical elements inherent in it. The basic elements within church music are found within its form (vocal/ instrumental), structure (melody, harmony, and rhythm), and lyrical contents (language). It has been established already in this paper that the models for compositional styles relevant in the present contemporary church music are: (a) the use of melodies, rhythms or concepts derived from cultural elements with western idioms and instrumentation; and (b) music based entirely on African traditional models/ idioms. Therefore, from this backdrop, we can further discuss possible ways Nigeria Church music can be re-invented in order to fall in line with the much desired identity that truly depicts or represents our common socio-cultural heritage as Africans, and as Nigerians.

1. The efforts of our past church musicians in the areas of translating Western English hymns and bibles into various local dialects in Nigeria are seen as major contribution towards achieving this feat. Compilations of different hymn books in local languages (*Iwe Orin Mimo, Ekperena Abu, Littafin Wakoki*, etc) are also considered as novel and hitherto helped in building the current repertoire of Nigerian Hymnody. It is however recommended that western tunes that are used for these hymns be gradually replaced by indigenous tunes composed to meet with the tonal requirements of each local dialect in Nigeria.
2. The paper posits further, that Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) is adopted as common language (lingua franca) to be used as lyrical contents in choral compositions (anthems, cantata, oratorios) by composers for easy understanding of the music. It is an undeniable fact that Nigeria is made up of vast number of ethnic entities with numerous languages and dialects without any unifying language except English.
3. Composition of 'oratorios' (musical composition using religious themes) in three major languages in Nigeria (Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba) should be priorities to church musicians of this dispensation, and such works should be highly patronised and performed within and outside the shores of Nigeria. The proposed instrument for accompaniment should be the xylophone which is usually constructed in form of a conventional keyboard instrument. The inclusion of other percussive instruments (drums, shakers, timeline, etc) can never be ruled out, as African music is usually associated with dance and drama.
4. The musical themes or motifs, as the case may be, to be employed for composition in contemporary church music may be drawn from 'popular culture' that is, popular music themes, in-order to facilitate massive participation from the listening audience. Unknown themes most times disconnect the listening audience from the music performed and make them passive and unresponsive.
5. Lastly, terms used in giving performance instructions in musical compositions as regards the tempo, dynamics, and speed should be translated into various ethnic languages and NPE by composers for easy direction to performers. Nigeria church music should represent the socio-cultural elements in which it hitherto emanates from. Everything about the musical language and performance should be dictated by the prevailing cultural indices within the societal structure.

Conclusion

From the discourse so far, it is abundantly clear that our musical content as far as Nigerian church music is concerned can be re-invented to remain robust, creatively dynamic and poised for global exchange, which is the main thrust of this paper. It is highly recommended that this re-invented musical genre is consistently propagated by church musicians of this modern era, and pay less emphasis on Western classical themes that hitherto had submerged our church music. The only sure way to see to the full manifestation of this feat is to maintain an effective online musical archive, where compositions of Nigerian church musicians are kept for easy access. Since we claim to be an independent nation, it should be seen that we are really independent from every colonial sentiments in whatever sphere of our socio-cultural lives, especially our church music.

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