

## THE 'FOLK-CHORAL CONCEPT' OF THE MUSIC OF OKECHUKWU NDUBUISI

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### Abstract

*Okechukwu Ndubuisi is a distinguished composer and arranger of vocal music in Nigeria. Even though he was an accomplished pianist, his major contribution in the field of Nigerian art music was in the choral medium. This work therefore examines the composer and his works in order to establish the contributions he has made towards the development of art music in Nigeria. The study also discusses the circumstances of Ndubuisi's life and the beliefs which shaped his composing career and his compositional style. It further examines the elements of style in his works and the stylistic features which constantly recurs in his works. This provides an appropriate context for understanding and appreciating the stylistic features of his choral arrangements.*

**Keywords:** Folksongs, Stylistic features, Choral arrangement, Interculturation

### Introduction

Okechukwu Ndubuisi is undoubtedly one of the most acclaimed twentieth-century composers of vocal music in Nigeria. Popularly known as O'Ndu, his unique position in the composition of both solo and choral performances is without doubt. A salient feature of his works remains the arrangement of folksongs in several Nigerian dialects. This is borne from the fact that Okechukwu Ndubuisi believed that the only way Nigerian Art Music can be better appreciated beyond the frontiers of our nation is through artistic infusion of Western elements with African traditional musical concept into a unique creation that can compete favourably with Western composition. His use of elaborate western chords in harmonizing both the choral and instrumental accompaniments for his works illustrate his fascination for incorporating musical materials from different cultures into his composition.

The composer has enjoyed a lot of scholarly inquisition in both biographical and historical terms. However, this paper attempts a musical

analysis of Okechukwu Ndubuisi as an arranger and composer, highlighting his contributions to the development of art music in Nigeria. It will further examine the composer's songs borne from the burning desire to promote the cultural heritage of Nigeria through his compositions and folkloric arrangements from several ethnic groups in the country thereby reinforcing a sense of common identity among the diverse ethnic regions.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the theory of inter-culturation. This is a concept where elements from two or more cultures are integrated (Kimberlin and Euba, 1992) According to them, the composer or performer of this music usually belongs to one of the cultures from which the elements are derived. For musicians in his period, the world is a borderless cultural space within which there are numerous possibilities for intercultural compositional and performance activities (Omójolà, 2006). The use of Nigerian folksongs, treated to European-derived harmonic procedures, is a recurring feature of Ndubuisi's inter-cultural style. This approach is illustrated in his numerous vocal arrangements. The focus of this paper is on the wider stylistic perspectives from which he derived his approach to the setting of folksongs.

There have been several debates on the issue of identity in our folkloric arrangements. While some scholars like Nathaniel Dett and William Grant believe that our folksongs should be treated to European-derived harmonic and formal techniques and transformed into extended compositions (Burleigh,1916) others believe that the beauty and subliminal charm of vernacular forms should be left as they are (Zora Neale Hurston (folklorist and novelist) and Langston Hughes (poet)) However, Ndubuisi maintained a middleman approach in his folkloric arrangement in that he retained the important stylistic elements associated with the folksongs and also embellished the songs with European-derived harmonic and formal procedures in a manner that did not undermine the identity of the folksongs.

### **Art Music in Nigeria**

The introduction of Christian missionary activity and the British colonial administration of Nigeria in the middle of the nineteenth century led to some of the most significant musical changes in the country (Omójolà, 1994). According to Sador (2007) the roots of the new idiomatic expressions could be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of American and European missionaries and the centenary reign of the colonial administration. These two imperial forces were responsible for the introduction of Western classical music to Nigerian indigenes. Through the churches, mission and colonial schools established during this era, Nigerians were exposed to Western musical instruments such as the piano, harmonium and organ. They were also taught how to read and notate music. In addition, indigenous budding composer-performers received private lessons in music theory, piano and organ at the homes of European musicians and from the organists and choirmasters at their local churches.

All these efforts eventually led to the emergence of 'neo-African school of music' that ultimately produced some of the finest modern Nigerian composers. Prominent Nigerian composers of international repute include Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, Akin Euba Joshua Uzoigwe and Okechukwu Ndubuisi (Sador, 2007).

Over the years there have been efforts to adapt African music to Western classical instrumentation and forms. One of the countries where this has been most successful is Nigeria, where this genre is called Art Music. Nigeria is currently one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world to popular music practice in Africa and its cultural diversity is reflected in the numerous music typologies that exist in the streams of popular music (Idolor, 2001). New idioms of musical practice which have evolved as a result of this historical process include a new tradition of religious, Christian, music, urban syncretic popular styles, new operatic forms and European-derived art/classical music. According to Omójolà (2006), the emergence of art music had the most far reaching conceptuality similar to European classical music. Over the years, the study of art music has witnessed a steady development of, and an increase in the composers of the genre. Apart from the works of pioneers of the genre in the 60's several composers have evolved with varying degrees of impute into the stylistic dimension of the music from all mediums (choral and instrumental). The growth and development of art music in Nigeria has come a long way with the great number of composers trained in the Nigerian universities and conservatories both at home and aboard writing works which are conceived as along the lines of western music but which often employ considerable degree of African musical elements.

### **Folksongs as Oral Tradition in Nigeria**

Folktale tradition is an old and important aspect of the indigenous African culture (Okunade, 2004). It is an integral part of the African culture 'inherited' or passed on from generation to generation through oral transmission. It is the continual performance of the people that make it possible for the present generation to have a glimpse into the past of their ancestors (Ajuwon, 1985). According to Daaku (1973) oral traction is the main method of teaching the history of many Africans and it is by studying them that the African's view of themselves and their relation with their neighbours may be understood and appreciated. In other words, oral traditions not only teach the history of the people. It also helps to meet the cultural needs of the people (Okunade, 2004). However; events in years gone by have seen this unique cultural heritage facing severe risk of extinction as a result of western civilization. This is further influenced with the technological advancement that has made it quite impossible for the folkloric traditions maintain its roots in the African child. It is also sad to note that so many children grow within this process without a single recollection of the folksongs of their fatherland. That is why it is gratifying to see the likes of Okechukwu Ndubuisi attempting in his unique way to arrange these songs in such a manner as to foster its spread among the populace and also preserve it for posterity.

The features that are associated with folksongs include call-and-response patterns, polyrhythm, embellishing wordless phrases known as vocables, grunts, parallel intervals, and repetitive rhythmic patterns. Ndubuisi's arrangements of folksongs are distinguished by the use of virtually all of these features. Significantly, these elements also appear prominently in Ndubuisi's musical compositions that are specifically designed to evoke indigenous African musical practices. The use of the same features in the two categories underlines the similarity between understanding of the relationship between Africa and western music. According to Sowande (1965), we are not prepared to submit to the doctrine of apartheid in art, by which a Nigerian musician is expected to work only within the limits of his traditional music. He therefore warned against the dangers inherent in uncontrolled nationalism, whereby the nationals of any one country forget that, in the final analysis, they are members of one human family" (Sowande, 1966). But while adapting to modern influences and incorporating foreign elements, Sowande stressed that modern African compositions must continue to retain important traditional features. He stressed further:

Practitioners of traditional African music as well as modernists must work together towards ensuring that twentieth century African music, in its various ramifications, retains its vital distinguishing values while adapting to modern challenges.

In the remaining sections of this article, I explore how Okechukwu Ondubuisi's vocal arrangement expresses these issues.

### **Ndubuisi and his Early Years of Artistic Development**

Okechukwu Ndubuisi was born on the 29th September 1932 in Item, Abia state of Eastern Nigeria. At the age of six, he left Item with his uncle in Ora, a town in the Northern part of Edo state Nigeria. It was in this town that he received his primary and secondary education. His first contact with European music was as a chorister in Ora Methodist church, where he took music lessons in piano and organ from Mr. Odutola, the organist and choirmaster of the church. At this age, Ndubuisi had his first opportunity to develop his voice as a singer after his secondary school education at the age of 17, he went to Enugu in Eastern Nigeria where he met a British Engineer who was also a musician. Impressed by Okechukwu's potentials as a singer and pianist, he gave Okechukwu further lessons in singing and piano free of charge. This was a big boost to his initial foundation in music.

Two important developments took place in Okechukwu's musical career. The first one was his fraternity with jazz bands across the nooks and crannies of Enugu. It was in these bands that he had the basic knowledge of the principles of jazz harmony and improvisation, a development that would impart significantly on his compositions years later. Secondly, he joined The Operatic society in Enugu in 1959 and his involvement with this society sharpened his vocal skills in no small measure.

In 1960, Okechukwu Ndubuisi left the shores of Nigeria to London where he studied music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. At the school, he took courses in piano, singing, acting and composition. In an interview with Omójolà (1995) Ndubuisi recalled the immense benefits he had with one of his professors in composition:

ō one of my composition teachers, the late Professor Peter Wishart, particularly understood enough to allow me incorporate African elements in my compositions. (72)

On his return to Nigeria in 1966, he joined the staff of the Department of Music at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. At the University of Nigeria where he worked for a long time before his death in 1997, had the opportunity of meeting with students from different ethnic and cultural background in Nigeria. Through this medium, he harvested a lot of folksongs which he later arranged in both solo and choral medium. Some of his works include *O se va* (Edo), *Nwa Mgboho Delu Uli* (Ibo) *Nyarinya* (Hausa) and *Oba ni K'a ma Lo Oko* (Yoruba). Apart from solo works and songs for mixed voices, Ndubuisi also wrote two operas. These are *Dr Feeeles* (1968) and *The vengeance of the Lizards* (1966). Ndubuisi's diverse musical activities in Nigeria must thus be understood as an important part of the work of musicians/artistes of his time in promoting black culture and affirm the dignity of black people. He believed very strongly that the projection of the Nigerian cultural heritage must be the primary focus of any Nigerian composer.

### **Folkloric arrangements of Okechukwu Ndubuisi**

The foundation of Nigerian art music is based on folksongs, folklores and folk musical practices. The significance of Folksongs in Ndubuisi's works is revealed in the fact that they account for a larger percentage of his compositional output. The use of African folk songs and the incorporation of African-derived features receive their most effective illustration in O'Ndu's works like *Anora no kuru* and *Deluyo*. The two songs are based on Nigerian folklores. They are also typified by the use of western-derived harmonic, tonal, and formal procedures. The texts are either taken from folk tunes or traditional songs. Furthermore they are replete with teachings and philosophical sayings in which stories and allegories are surreptitiously cast in songs that are arranged according to western ideals. They are also categorized under themes relating to love, hope, patriotism, didactic and aggression. He also adopted elements of construction such as ostinato patterns, embellishing phrases, improvisatory-like polyrhythmic textures, and harmonic procedures that integrate African and European procedures. The African identity of these themes is often acknowledged through the use of features like ostinati polyrhythm and the use of constant repetition in the sections of the works. The two songs are hereby analyzed below.

### **ANORO, A NOKWURU**

This song is philosophical in nature. The musical composition is a story told about life's struggles and its uncertainties. The music gives the image of a child properly brought up amongst the difficulties of life and in return remembers to take good care of his parents. Then moves to discuss the rewards a good child receives from his parents, such as blessings, praise etc. The composition further portrays a man or woman who sees the importance of children and prays for good things to come their way. It is a song that gets a child to ponder on the uncertainty of life, the fear and activities of the evil doers.

Symbolism as used in the music is noticed in the 2nd section of the composition from bars 23 through the first beat of bar 27. Example;

Ihe oma gbaakwa mu n'ukwu

Good things come to my leg (way)

Ukwu in Igbo means ~~leg~~ the leg has a cultural symbolism in the African setting. To some part of African, the leg symbolizes destiny, while to another future of good luck depending on the context it is used.

The music consists of three sections; section A, B and the restatement of section A. The main melody of this song is introduced in measures 1-8. Like all other arrangements of O'Ndu, this song is flagged off with the introduction of the theme of the song by the soprano and the alto in unison. It is further strengthened with the coming in of the tenor part in measure 5 to create a harmonic stretch among soprano, alto and tenor parts moving in the same motion till it ends with a perfect cadence in bar 12.

4

- o-nyem'u chi-beya? E - le-be-chi, - e - le-be-nwa, a-rio-ba-chi, o-ge-ri

o-nyem'u chi-be ya E - le-be- chi - e - le-be- nwa, - a-rio-ba-chi, o-ge-ri

E - le-be-chi - e - le-be-nwa a-rio-ba-chi o-ge-ri

Section B starts from bar 13 through bar 28 with the whole parts playing unique roles and several entry points. However, there is a new twist to the vocal arrangement with the robust movements of the Soprano and Altos in similar motion with tenors and bass moving in similar motion independent of the sopranos and altos in a polyrhythmic setting till it eclipsed with a minor chord in bar 28.

14

fu - ru - ka no, e - wo, a - no r'a - no - kwu - ru o - di na nwo - ke, o - di na nwa - nyi,  
 fu - ru - ka no, A - no - r'a - no kwu - ru o - di na nwo - ke, o - di na nwa - nyi,  
 N - ne'n - wa A - no - r'a - no kwu - ru o - di na nwo - ke, o - di na nwa - nyi,  
 N - ne'n - wa A - no - r'a - no kwu - ru o - di na nwo - ke, o - di na nwa - nyi,

17

chi - ne - ke g'e - do be gi'n - ka, e - zi - gbo nwa, e - zi - gbo nwa  
 chi - ne - ke g'e - do be gi'n - ka, e - zi - gbo nwa, e - zi - gbo nwa  
 chi - ne - ke g'e - do be gi'n - ka, e - zi - gbo nwa N - no! e - zi - gbo nwa e - ke - le  
 chi - ne - ke g'e - do be gi'n - ka, e - zi - gbo nwa - - e - zi - gbo nwa

However, the change of mood in this section is reflected in the application of the secondary dominant chords which transits into a relative minor key in-between units of phrases in bar 29 to 30 among the soprano and alto parts (from E flat to C minor). The music returns to its theme in bar 33 to 36 with sporadic appearances of embellishing phrases with a small coda at the end in a perfect cadence.

27

nw'a - no-ra - no-kwu ru o-nye m'u-wa nwa mo  
 nw'a - no-ra - no-kwu ru o-nye m'u wa nwa mo A - no ra no-kwu-ru ma  
 nw'a - no-ra - no-kwu ru o-nye m'u wa nwa mo  
 nw'a no-ra - no-kwu ru o-nye m'u wa nwa mo

30

nwa, o-nye ge nye o-ge-ri a - no ra no kwu-ru ma nwa o-nye ge nye o-ge-ri,  
 a - no ra no kwu-ru ma nwa o-nye ge nye o-ge-ri,

33

O - nye nwa n'e - me - zi o - nye nwa ne - le - ko - ta, a - no - r'a - no - kwu - ru  
 O - nye nwa n'e - me - zi o - nye nwa ne - le - ko - ta a - no - r'a - no - kwu - ru  
 O - nye nwa n'e - me - zi o - nye nwa ne - lo - ko - ta a - no - r'a - no - kwu - ru  
 o - nye nwa ne - lo - ko - ta a - no - r'a - no - kwu - ru

36

o - nye m'u - wa nwa - mo  
 o - nye m'u - wa nwa - mo

The story line behind this musical composition is more of a dialogue between a man and a woman who are possibly in a love relationship. The man is seen telling the woman (called Ify) to stay cool and be good

Deluyo, deluyo, deluyo

Deluyo, deluyo, deluyo

Ojolima, Ogoli je ne be?

Gosi ya o ga diy'on'y'oma

Ify nwa mama

Deluyo, deluyo, deluyo

The arrangement of Deluyo is cast in an extended ternary structure. The song starts with the soprano and alto echoing the consistent call while the response is grafted by the tenor and other parts in a repetitive manner. Sounds are replicated by the soprano and bass voices an octave apart in bars 3 and 4 with the doubling of parts in some instance. There is also the progression of the bass part giving a florid background to the choir with the repetitions of nonsensical vocables (Hm!) which functions as embellishment to the main melody in the solo part.

*Moderate with gentle feeling*

SOPRANO  
De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, de - lu - yo O - go - li - fy nwa ma - ma,

ALTO  
De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, O - go - li - fy nwa ma - ma,

TENOR  
O - go - li - fy nwa ma - ma,

BASS

3

De - lu - yo, de - lu,

De - lu - yo, de - lu,

De - lu - yo, de - lu -

De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, Hm! de - lu - yo, Hm! de - lu - yo, Hm! de - lu -

The middle section breaks into a heterophony arrangement in which an ostinato pattern is reiterated by the altos, tenors, and basses to accompany the melody of the soprano part. The sounds we hear in one part are always implied in another in sequences as seen in bar 22 to 25 below:

20

De-lu- yo, de-lu- yo, de-lu- yo, de-lu- yo. N-nwa di'n - ma. Nwa di'n - ma

De-lu- yo, de-lu- yo, de-lu- yo, de-lu- yo. N-nwa di'n - ma. Nwa di'n - ma, nwa di'n - ma

Do, de-lu- yo, de-lu- yo, N-nwa di'n - ma

mo! Do, de-lu- yo, de-lu- yo. N-nwadi'n - ma

23

E! I - fy nwa ma - ma, De - lu - yo, \_\_\_\_\_

E! I - fy nwa ma - ma, De - lu - yo, \_\_\_\_\_

Nwa di'n - ma E! I - fy nwa ma - ma, De - lu - yo, \_\_\_\_\_

Nwa di'n - ma E! I - fy nwa ma - ma, De - lu - yo, \_\_\_\_\_

of particular note is his use of a progressively denser polyrhythmic texture to generate a sense of movement with excessive application of passing notes and variations which incorporate elements of call and response which are typical of African music styles. Beginning in measure 20, for example, different variants of the melodic material are juxtaposed. While the main melody appears in the solo tenor part, the remaining parts supply fragmentary phrases as accompaniment. These different parts, with their unequal lengths and different rhythms, evoke a process of spontaneous and collective improvisation toward the end of the song, the arrangement becomes predominantly cheerful and pompous while the movement of the four parts is rendered antiphonally with considerable chromaticism till the end of the piece.

39

I - fy nwa ma - ma, I - fy nwa ma - ma,  
 I - fy nwa ma - ma, I - fy nwa ma - ma,  
 Hm! I - fy nwa ma - ma, Hm! I - fy nwa ma - ma,  
 Hm! I - fy nwa ma - ma, Hm! I - fy nwa ma - ma,

41

De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, de - lu - yo.  
 De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, de - lu - yo.  
 De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, de - lu - yo.  
 De - lu - yo, de - lu - yo, de - lu - yo.

## Conclusion

The encounter between African and western derived musical elements found in the works of Okechukwu Ndubuisi mirrors a wider intercultural approach to musical composition, defined by a synthesis of European and African music. His arrangements of folksongs represented the most significant aspects of his engagement with art music in Nigeria. Features like ostinato, polyrhythm, the pentatonic scale, call-and-response patterns, and the simulation of improvisation in his arrangements are all features found in our folksongs. This is in line with Onyeji's (2005) argument that modern Nigerian composers must embark on research compositions in order to enhance a substantial Nigerian identity in their works. In all his arrangements, O'Ndu kept the full favour of the melody's native origin while making it completely accessible to Western ears. The marriage of African and western musical elements, which typified many of the works also resonated vibrantly with the theme of cultural revival that was critical to the civil rights movement of the time.

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