



The Language of African Musical Instruments: Issues in Composition, Performance and Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This study discussed the methods and approaches used in realizing music with African musical instruments as influenced or determined by the various languages of the various African peoples. The methods and approaches of composing music that suit the techniques of playing African musical instruments were also discussed. Moreover, the performance practices of African musical instruments that will enhance the derivation of the aesthetical quality and value of the African music was examined. Furthermore, the impact of the culture of the people on the instrumental musical performance was also examined. The methodology used for this study included the participating-observation method, whereby the author participated in some African musical ensembles and also observed the composers, singers, dancers as well as the instrumentalists, and examined their roles as well as their contributions to the efficacy of the various musical ensembles. The author also observed the responses of the various audiences toward the various performances and music types as displayed by the various musical ensembles. Questioning method was also employed, whereby some of the performers were interviewed and their responses used for the purpose of this study. The paper disclosed that there is need for the composer of the African (art and/or traditional) music to realize and utilize the African musical ingredients in the African (art and/or traditional) music composition for the purpose of African musical identity. And there is need for the composers of the African (art and/or traditional) music to have the knowledge of the language of the people from which the musical ingredients are drawn for such music composition.

INTRODUCTION

The wooden drums are popular among the *Igbo* of Eastern Nigeria, and the *Annang*, *Ibibio*, *Efik* and the *Itsekiri* of Southern Nigeria. Playing African musical instruments and singing African indigenous (folk and traditional) music is highly demanding. This demanding nature of the African musical

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rendition as in playing of the African musical instruments, singing and dancing, and the demanding nature of the African musical rendition as in composing for voice and/or African musical instruments, and the pedagogical discussions, and the approaches to the playing of African musical instruments requires in-depth study because of the peculiarities of the various African musical instruments.

In some communities in Africa, and typical of *Annang* of Nigeria, instruments are designated to be played by a particular family or by certain families at a particular time, as the case may be. In such cases, only members of such selected family or families are allowed to play such instrument(s). Also in dances where masking is involved, certain masks are set aside for a particular family or some particular families. This work attempts to provide answers to questions like: Do African musical instruments talk? Which language do the African musical instruments speak? How significant is the talking of the African musical instruments to the African community?

Pedagogical Philosophy of the Playing of African Musical Instruments

Historically, school education is not synonymous with the playing of African musical instruments. This was obvious by strict observation of the categories of several instrumentalists from Africa. During the research, it was discovered that some of the best players of the various African musical instruments in the various African musical ensembles interviewed said that they have not had any formal educational training. Some of the African instrumentalists indicated no interest in the 'formal' education. Majority of the African instrumentalists interviewed for the purpose of this study said that studying of African musical instruments and/or playing of African instruments were not dependent on the 'formal' school education. As such, the techniques used in the teaching of other musical instruments from other culture areas outside Africa may not be efficient in the teaching/learning of African musical instruments. Rather, the trainees imitate their masters in learning to achieve proficiency in playing the African musical instruments in which they (the trainees) are studying. This rote learning is largely according to the tutoring and performance techniques of the master instrumentalists. The young player is expected to exhibit his individual talent in the process of learning to master the performance techniques of the African musical instrument(s) studied at any given time.

In the various African musical ensembles, and in the various African communities, there are always master instrumentalists that teach the amateur instrumentalists and the instrumentalists on training the patterns of playing in the various ensembles or communities as the case may be. The instrumentalists interviewed went on to say that playing and mastering of the African musical instruments was not dependent on the formal school education. That is to say that ability to read and write or the inability to read and write did not have any correlation with the ability to play the African musical instruments.

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The status of the African folk and or traditional instrumentalist may be ascribed and/or achieved. It is ascribed when the instrumentalist derives his major playing techniques from either his father or any member(s) of the family without necessarily going outside the family for training. This could be described as trait related learning, i.e. the instrumentalist as in this case derives his status as regards his playing techniques by birth. It therefore, can be said, like father like son. This may be the reason it does not take a young drummer of whom the father is a drummer for example, a long time to grasp the techniques of drumming.

Achieved status, is that which the instrumentalist gains his major playing techniques outside the home. Here, the learner instrumentalist goes outside the home, and stays with his trainer for a period of time. The learner instrumentalist can equally learn from the trainer instrumentalist during practices, rehearsals and performances without necessary going out to stay with the trainer. What the instrumentalist, on training does is to learn from his master by rote. Acquiring the achieved status by the learner instrumentalist, the influence of the master instrumentalist appears to be paramount.

Whether ascribed or achieved status, understanding the techniques of realizing the required and acceptable melodies, beats, metres, tempo, rhythms and the harmonies from the various African musical instruments in the various musical ensembles is always necessary. This discovery agrees with Carl Orff's recognition in Mark (1986) that 'many children with learning problems are able to analyze rhythm and understand the relationship between beat, meter, and tempo after developing kinesthetic in response to music'. Furthermore, that melody, timbre, and dynamics are often most successfully presented in conjunction with, or in response to rhythm.

Pedagogical Methodology of Playing African Musical Instruments

'Struck (Beaten)' musical instrument in Africa include the instruments under idiophone and membranophone groups. Examples of idiophones are gong, wooden block and wooden drum. The instrumentalist can play the wooden drum with two drum-sticks (beaters) with his two hands. He does the playing with his two hands simultaneously and interchangeably. The beating of the drum with two hands simultaneously helps to sound two notes at a time. These two notes are in most cases harmonic notes. It is rare to produce two identical sounds at the same time of the beating of the drum. The harmonic notes produced can be in the distance of a minor 2nd like C to D^b, D to E^b or F to G^b etc; it can be in a distance of major 3rd like C to E, G to B etc; it can be in a distance of a perfect 5th like C to G or G to D etc; it can be in a distance of major 6th like C to A or D to B etc; and it can be in a distance of minor 7th e.g. C to B^b. Sound production on this instrument depends on which part of the drum the drummer beats. For the wooden drum for example, deep sounds (notes) are produced close to the hollow of the drum, while high sounds (notes) are produced on the part of the drum away from the hollow. The more

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distanced the part of the drum beaten by the drummer from the hollow of the drum, the higher pitched the sound produced. When the drummer beats the drum with his two hands interchangeably, melodic notes are derived. Polyphonic rendition and heterophonic rendition may also be realized when the drummer beats the drum with both hands interchangeably.

In some communities, the gong is played with the hollow part of the instrument raised up. There are communities that play the gong with the hollow part of the instrument placed on the ground or foam or floor depending on the arena where the performance is done. When the player carries the gong away from the ground, he (the player) does the playing by striking different parts of the instrument to produce different tones. In this case, the deep and loud-pitched sounds are produced on the parts close to the hollow. The closer the part of the beaten is on the hollow, the deeper and broader the sounds produced. The sounds produced on the gong can be melodic, and if several of the instruments are struck harmony may result. When a particular part of the instrument is struck, monotones can be created. The player does the playing with right hand while the left hand holds the stick used in playing the gong.

The woodblock is struck by the help of a short stick. This stick is always harder than the stick used in playing the wooden drum. Single notes are produced at each time. The notes may be monotones or melodic depending on the selection of the places of the body of the instrument struck. The player does the playing with one hand while he uses the other hand to the instrument. In some cases, through in rare instances, the woodblock may be fastened to a stand. In any case, only one stick (beater) is used in playing the woodblock. 'Shaken' musical instruments include the instruments under idiophone group. Examples of these instruments are the rattles and maracas. What the player of any of these instruments does is simply shaking the instruments he is playing to produce the required and acceptable sounds (tones). He (the player) does the shaking either with his both hands or one hand. He may shake the instrument with his both hands simultaneously or interchangeably and or with one hand independently. In any case, sounds produced with the shaken idiophone are always in monotone. And the pitch of sound in monotone can either be high or low as the case may be. This could result at parallel monotones as the performance progresses at any given time.

Examples of membranophones are skin drums. The skin drums can be performed with one hand or both hands. When one hand is used in playing (either by beating the drum(s) with the palm or with the stick). The skin drum produces one tone at a time if one hand was used in the beating it produce the sound. But two notes can be produced if two hands were used in beating the drum(s). The instrument(s) can be struck with both hands either simultaneously or interchangeably. When the drum is struck with two hands simultaneously, two harmonic notes (sound) are produced. But the drum is struck with both hands interchangeably, two notes are produced either within the same pitch or difference pitches. When notes of different pitches are produced, one of the notes is deeper than the other.

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'Plucked' musical instruments include instruments under chordophone group. The plucked musical instrument is performed with the help of a string or strings. A usual shaped to size stick is used to fiddle the string for sound production. While the finding is done, the player can, as in some cases insert an area of the string into his mouth to help produce sound(s) at any given time. In this case, the mouth serves as a resonator. For some of the plucked musical instruments like the bow, a resonator is attached to the end of the string strung to the curved end of the stick used for its (the instrument's) sound production. Melodic sounds can be produced on the instrument(s).

Examples of struck membranophones are skin drums. Examples of the struck idiophones are gong and wooden block and wooden drum. The skin drums are performed with both hands. The instrument(s) can be struck with both hands either simultaneously or interchangeably. Simultaneous striking of the drum is done to produce two harmonic notes (sounds) as in the case of the beaten idiophone (like wooden drum) earlier discussed. For the skin drum, it is the centre of the drum that produces deep-pitched sounds, while high-pitched sounds are produced at the edges of the drum.

The 'Blown' African musical instruments include the instruments under the aerophone group. Examples of these instruments are animal horn and African flute. Air is blown into these instruments to sounds. The sounds from these instruments are singles notes, which can be melodic. With the combination of the sounds produced from these instruments in an ensemble, harmony can be realized. To play these instruments, the player must be trained on effective use of his and tongue in tonguing sounds into the instrument(s) to produce the required tone(s).

In African musical ensemble, some instruments may be regarded as being indispensable while the gong does not have much significance in the ensemble. In Okafor's *Ezeagu Atilogwu* – a legendary *Igbo* troupe for example Okafor (1998) examine that the chordophone is not featured. In *Atilogwu*, the percussion predominates hence the instruments are mainly idiophones and membranophones (Okafor, 1998). In the *Atilogwu*, there is the presence of one aeroplane *Oja* (Nwzewi, 1971 and 1974).

Peculiar Playing Techniques of African Musical Instruments

Sachs and Hornbostel (1933) have classified African musical instruments into four broad groups. According to Sach's classification of African musical instruments, the African musical instruments are found to belong to the following groups: *Idiophone, Membranophone, Aerophone and Chordophone*.

The groups into which the instruments belong and the shapes of the instruments determine the playing techniques for the African musical instruments. The leading roles of a musical instrument or the leading of musical instruments as the case may be, in an African ensemble(s) depend on the size, shape and the musicality (musical capability) of that instrument. The leading role of a musical instrument or the leading role the musical

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instruments as the case may be, in an African ensemble also depends on the concept of the functionality of that instrument in that ensemble. However, the playing techniques in African ensemble are highly influenced by the function(s) attached to or designated for any instrument in any ensemble. Generally, the techniques of playing African musical instruments include: *beating, shaking, plucking, striking and blowing*.

Beating and shaking are the techniques usually used in playing the African instruments in the idiophone family. The wooden drum and woodblock are the examples of the idiophone instruments played by being beaten, while the bell and rattles are the examples of the idiophone instruments played by being shaken.

The *membranophone* are the African musical instruments made of membrane or animal skin. The Yoruba *dundun* and the popular 'skin drum' (ibit, as called by the *Annang* of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria) are examples of the membranophone instruments, which are played by being struck.

The *Aerophone* is the African musical instruments played by air being blown into e.g. the animal horn. Therefore, the technique of playing such instrument is by air being blown into it (the instrument) to produce sound. The clay pot is an aerophone instrument, which the player does his/her playing by using a piece of foam cut to size to beat the opening, forcing air into it (the clay pot) to produce sound.

A *chordophone* instrument produces sound with the help of the string(s). The bow is an example of the chordophones. Plucking is the technique popularly used in playing the African instruments in the chordophone family.

The Performance Practice of African Musical Instruments

In vocal music, there are messages. In the instrumental music there are messages too. The instrumentalist is transmitting the message from the instrument to the audience in the form of musical language through the manipulation of the instrument. The efficacy of the instrumentalist or the mastery of the instrument by the instrumentalist, determines the efficiency of the production of the musical language of the instrument(s) at any given time. That is, whatever message the instrument is able to transmit to the audience is dependent on the skillfulness of the instrumentalist. This is why the *Igbo, Annang, Ibibio, Efik, Itsekiri*, the *Yoruba* and other culture areas in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general prefer skilled instrumentalist(s) during any performance(s). The *Akan* people of Ghana for example and other culture area in Africa also prefer the skilled (master) player during performances.

Moreover, the language(s) and other aspect of the culture of the people influence the efficacy of the musical instrument(s) in African ensembles to a great extent. As such, the usage(s) of a particular musical instrument among the people of the various culture areas in Africa, as the case may be, depend on the various groups of the people in the various African communities respectively. At this juncture, it is worthy to note that the languages of the various African musical instruments from the various culture areas in Africa

derive meaning from the various languages of the people from where the various African musical instruments are drawn, and within which cultures the various musical instruments are performed. This is why the usages, styles and/or techniques of playing a particular instrument defer from one culture area to the other. So, in case where two, three or more culture areas make use of a particular instrument, the musical language of that instrument was found differ from one culture area to the other since the utilization of such African musical instrument was based on the different approaches to the realization of that language and the usages of that language. The language of the people therefore, is what influences that language of any musical instrument of any people. This coincides with Akpabot (1986), reflected in his *Foundation of Nigerian Traditional Music*, that ritual poets do not compose their own materials. According to him, what they (the ritual poets) do is bring their individual expertise to bear on an established traditional format.

It is observed that from time to time, the instrumentalist enriches the performance by shortening a sentence here, lengthening a phrase there. Akpabot (1986) delved into this practice as he said that the shortening of a sentence and lengthening of a phrase here and there as the case may be, by the cantor (lead singer) in a musical ensemble, introduces ululation and sometimes re-introduces the opening declamation with variation bearing the stamp of his (the Cantor's) personality and his unparalleled knowledge of major happenings in the community to which he belongs. In non-ritual oral poetry, which is basically a commentary on the state of being of the community, Akpabot (1986) said that the ingenuity of the poet is more evident. Here, according to Akpabot (ibid), the non-ritual oral poet does not need definite equipment. However, he agrees that certain musical instruments are symbolic. Akpabot (ibid) went on to say that the non-ritual oral poet must be armed with all relevant information about the person or occasion he is commenting on, and set out to express himself in a way that will be intelligible to a given society. In ritual poetry, the message of the poet can only be understood by the members and associates of a secret society. In non-ritual poetry, the performer reaches a wide audience, and his poetry must, for effect, be couched in such a way as to have an impact on the societal behaviour of his audience. For the purpose of clarity, the non-ritual music is simply the folk music of the people since it addresses the folks (people) of the community.

The ritual music is completely traditional since it addresses only a particular group of people in any community. It is worthy to note that some traditional music that is performed by a particular society (cult or social group), whether secret or not, in a particular community. Some non-ritual music are not folk so to say, since there are some non-ritual music that are used purposely by non-ritual society. In a nut-shell, one can say that folk music are the music of the entire folk (people) of the community, while traditional music could be referred to as music that are used by the various societies whether secret or not, in any community.

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In any case i.e. whether folk or traditional music, in Africa, the ideality of the cultural continuum of the community must be considered. 'The difference between a good non-ritual poet and a bad one lies in the ability to communicate' (Akpabot, 1986). So, in Africa, it is good performance, good music. Akpabot (ibid) noted that non-ritual poetry is spiced with humor, proverbs and even at times nonsense words, which excite, educate and amuse the audience. The instrumentalist attempts to depict the concept and believe of the people in the performance at all times.

Musical Elements to be Considered by the Performance of African Musical Instruments and the Composer of African (Arts and/or Traditional) Music

In Africa, the musical elements include the following: melody, harmony, rhythm, and tone quality. A melody can be described as the element in music that appeals to the emotion. Olaniyan (2000) agrees that it is not only the western music that the melody appeals to the emotion. Olaniyan (ibid) says that this fact is not limited to Western music alone as melodies in African culture can also affect the emotion. The sympathetic nature of the melodies of the dirges can be identified, while the romantic feeling of the melodies in the entertainment music can be perceived.

Harmony in music exhibits the importance of communal work (Olaniyan, 2000). Here, according to him, the sense of leadership is shown, while the spirit of cooperation is inculcated. In societies such as Africa and parts of the Orient, Olaniyan (ibid) emphasized that community life is still culturally upheld. The complementary roles of the various musical instruments displayed in the various African musical ensembles are evident. Beauty is enhanced by the melody of music. The harmony enhances balance, while rhythm gives life to the music. Tonal quality in music is simply the expression of sonority and coarseness of a particular piece of music. Music as an aspect of the culture of the people traditionality determines and portrays the belief of the people (Olaniyan, 2000).

Aesthetical Qualities to be Considered by the Performer of African Musical Instruments and the Composer of African (Arts and/or Traditional) Music

The aesthetical components of the various musical instruments utilized in the various musical ensembles in Africa are vital. Different African Musical instruments have unique potentials. The instrumentalist performing the African musical instrument considers the aesthetical value of the instrument before he commences his performance. The approach to the playing of the various musical instruments is therefore, determined by what is required of that instrument at any time and at any event in any musical ensemble. The functionality of an instrument therefore, include what the people of a particular community or particular society belief about the instrument, and

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what they (the people) want to realize by utilizing such instrument at a given time in a particular event, and in a particular ensemble.

Idolor (2002:2) agrees that the concept of music as a phenomenon varies from one society to another depending on the role it plays, the people's degree of exposure to what continues its practice and level of its integration with the socio cultural activities of the people that own it Idolor (2002). 'Event is the factor that determines the type of music to be performed at a particular time' (Udofia, 2002:85).

In African community, some instruments are melodic while some are rhythmic. African musical instruments produce melody if struck with both hands interchangeably or with one hand within intervals. Some of the instruments that produce melodies were found produce harmony if struck both hands simultaneously. Therefore, musical instruments that produce two or more note simultaneously may be classified as harmonic instruments. Rhythmic musical instruments mainly play the rhythmic aspects of the music. When instrumentalists are performing on African musical instruments, they take into consideration the aesthetical potentials of the instruments. It will be awkward for one to play a rhythmic instrument and yet attempt to make harmony with it alone. The melodic instruments are predominantly given the leading role in any ensemble. As a particular instrument does the leading role, other instruments in the ensemble to do complimentary, harmonic, rhythmic and embellishment functions as may be designated to the various African musical instruments in that ensemble at that given time.

Training of the Composer and Performer of African Music

The composer of African music is the person that composes African Music. He does the composition of African music by using African musical ingredients to compose African traditional music and/or African Art music. This type of composition is individualistic. Furthermore, a group of individuals can be found compose African Music as in folk music. The performers of African music are the performers that sing African songs, play African musical instrument, and/or dance to African music. Therefore, the aspects of African music performance include singing, instrumentation and dance. The aspect of African music composition and African music performance appear to be interwoven. In Africa, a singer or an instrumentalist or a dancer is found composed as he or she performing on stage without previously writing down the composition on paper before performing it.

Teaching the would-be composers or performers to compose or perform African music respectively is by rote. The would-be composer or performers learn by rote. The trainer-singer, or trainer-instrumentalist, or the trainer-dancer, or the trainer-composer sing the songs, play the instrument or dance to the music or compose the African music for the trainee-singer, or trainee-instrumentalist, or the trainee-dancer or the trainee-composer to observe, imitate and learn by rote respectively.

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During the period of training, the trainee goes out and lives with the trainer and learns from the trainer and participates during practices, rehearsals and performances, and learns through observation and imitation until the trainee specializes in the composition of African music or any of the aspects of the performances learned.

The trainee takes the responsibility of participating in all performances aimed at facilitating the learning i.e. the art of singing or instrumentation or dancing or composing as the case may be. As the trainee achieves the required skills or roles in the musical ensemble, he or she is allowed to compliment the singing or playing the musical instrument(s) and/or dance or compose as the case may be during performances. At the time the trainer is convinced that the trainee has successfully learned, and is capable of leading or participating independently in an ensemble, the trainer then recommends the trainee to lead or participates in the singing or playing of musical instrument(s) or dance during performances or compose for the ensemble(s).

It is worthy to note that male trainer usually train the female trainee, while female trainee usually train the female trainee. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, it is uncommon practice for male trainee to train female trainee. And it is also uncommon practice for female trainer to train male trainee. The trainee in some instances may not require going to stay with the trainer. The trainee simply participates in the musical practices, rehearsals and other performances, and learns from his or her trainer by rote.

The period of time the trainer is required to be under training depends on several factors. First, the trainee has to prove by practical work that he or she has mastered the art of singing, playing of musical instruments, or dance or composing African music. Since performances are mainly done in public, the society gradually follows the progress of the apprentice and is able to judge on matters of cultural conformity, correctness and continuity. Then, the trainer will certify that the trainee has shown competence of performing independently. The independent performance ability by the trainee is what qualifies him or her for the future leading or participating role. The proof of mastering the instrument(s) portrays the testimony of the trainer. The trainee's talents also contributes to a quick mastery of the art of singing, playing of musical instrument, dancing or composing African music, which may also determine the length of time to spend on training. Note that it is not in all cases that the trainee stays with the trainer. The trainee may simply participate fully in practices, rehearsals and performances, and acquires the required skills by imitating the trainer by rote.

CONCLUSION

Performance of African musical instruments is contextual. Understanding the culture of the people, from which the African musical instruments are drawn for any performance within the culture of the people, is a pre-requisite for

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effective communication of the functional instrumental is a pre-requisite for effective communication of the functional instrumental language to the audience and or the people performing the music at any given time.

When an instrument is associated with a particular genre, understanding the musical practice of the ensemble becomes necessary. Having knowledge of the practice associated with an ensemble enables the instrumentalist to understand the kind of musical rendition required of him at a particular time and event to meet the norms and belief of the people of that particular ensemble and of that particular group of people in the community in which the music is derived. The African musical instrumentalist acquires their mastery through constant practices, rehearsals and performances. The amateur African musical instrumentalist and those on training learn by rote.

The composer of African (art and traditional) music considers the roles and musicality of the various African musical instruments in composing the music. To realize the authenticity of the African art and or the traditional music, the composer attempt to compose the (art and or traditional) music to depict the culture of the people of the community from which the musical ingredients were drawn.

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