
Reminiscences of a Legendary Nigerian Art Music Composer and Scholar, Dan Agu

Oghenemudiakevwe Igbi*

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v24i2.8>

Abstract

Many individuals have made remarkable contributions to the study of music in Nigeria, with their efforts, resulting in the formulation of theories, studies on African music, manpower production, and music compositions. The role of the music scholar is fraught with challenges which include reporting research findings, that can be very tricky without an in-depth knowledge of the subject; and teaching, which can also be misleading to learners without systematically applying suitable methods. In music, combining research with composition/performance further makes it intricate, since the system in Nigeria, makes it difficult to efficiently fuse scholarship with music practice. In most cases, music graduates are left with the option of electing between being a music scholar and music artiste. These concerns notwithstanding, Professor Dan Agu, was able to efficiently combine both areas, as he excelled in African music theory and practice, composition, performance, music education, and university administration. His research findings in these areas coupled with other experiences garnered in the field of music have been of immense benefit to many a people. The paper attempts to examine these contributions with focus on his personality, research, music composition and development of manpower. In eliciting data, the author relied on descriptive method, interviews and personal experiences garnered through observation of Dan Agu. Firstly, as a teacher where the author

had a first-hand experience as an undergraduate student, and later, as a postgraduate candidate. The paper found that Agu's scholarly works are rich in scope and content. It is recommended that his creative and scholarly works be compiled and published in books of different volumes to enable wider circulation in the academic space.s

Introduction

That African music theory, practice and indeed scholarship have been positively impacted by the contributions of a number of scholars is not in doubt. Some academics have over the years dedicated their time, resources and knowledge to African music research and creativity. According to Idolor (2001:142), “personalities that have given professional contributions to African art music in Nigeria are too numerous to mention and they have functioned in various capacities as composers, performers, researchers, educators, broadcasters or a combination of these”. Professor Dan Agu, is one of those names that frequently come to mind when reflecting on the many views that have been expressed over the years in the field of African music by many researchers. His research works have been central to providing invaluable knowledge, correcting various misgivings in

the profession, and reshaping the thoughts of scholars and enabling them keep in touch with current trends in the area. Apart from his qualities in music scholarship and performance, Dan Agu has mentored many music scholars and contributed to society in numerous ways. These qualities make him stand out and place him on a legendary pedestal in the comity of African scholars. This paper attempts a summary of Professor Agu's musical life, and the notable contributions he made to Nigerian music education, through a preliminary study of his scholarly and creative output, and production of manpower for the music industry. The author relied on personal experiences as Dan Agu's student, interviews, and a study of one of his compositions (*I am proud to be a Nigerian*) to collect data. It was observed that Agu's works are a lamp to the feet of budding music scholars and a veritable source of literature to his numerous professional

colleagues as they thread the path of musical creativity and scholarship.

Educational Background and Biographical Sketch of Dan Agu

Professor Dan Chikpezie Christian Agu was born in 1949 and hails from Ugamama, Obosi in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. He attended Central School, Obosi between 1955 and 1960. His secondary education was at Ika Grammar School, Agbor, and beginning from 1961. He attended the Teachers' Training College at Nnewi and later graduated with the Teachers' Grade II Certificate. Dan Agu studied music at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, between 1973 and 1977. In 1982, he embarked on his doctoral studies at Queen's University of Belfast in the United Kingdom and was awarded Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Degree in music in 1984. His doctoral thesis is on *Indigenous Music in African Worship: An Analytical Study of the Youth Songs in the Niger Diocese of Nigeria*. Professor Agu

taught in Nigerian tertiary institutions including Anambra State College of Education, Awka, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Delta State University, Abraka, and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. He specialises in African musicology and composition. He has made notable contributions in these areas, and his works have been published in some of the most reputable journals in Nigeria and abroad.

As a composer, he has written hundreds of creative works including anthems, solos and duets for different mediums, religious pops, and piano pieces. Some of his well-known compositions include: *Chineke Fulu Ayi N' Anya* (2001), *Gozie Ndi Ijikota Dika Di Na Nwunye* (1991), *I am Proud to be a Nigerian* (2012), *Hossana Diri Nwa Devid* (1996), *Ahudiya's Lamentation* (1985) and *Amulu Nye Anyi Onye Nzoputa* (1992). He has composed for local parish choirs, the Nigerian Television

Authority (NTA), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and many Anglican Dioceses in south-eastern Nigeria. As a performer, Agu has been conductor, music director/choirmaster and organist to many choirs. He has performed in many parts of Nigeria where he accompanied choirs on the organ or conducted his own works and those of other composers.

Agu as an Innovative Teacher/Academic Critic: My Abraka Music School Experience

Professor Dan Agu was in the educational system for about forty years as a teacher. He is very inventive in using appropriate teaching methods to enable his students understand the subject being taught. When Dan Agu was an adjunct lecturer at Delta State University, Abraka, between 2004 and 2006, he taught this writer courses like orchestration and general musicianship. Normally, these are among the courses that most students of music have a phobia for. But this writer recalls Professor Agu's

approach made almost all his classmates love the two courses and work hard in order to pass them. While patiently waiting for students to be seated and maintain decorum, Agu will sit beside the piano and play some hymn tunes, often with harmonic variations. He was fond of playing hymns like *Look and Live* and *Christ is our Cornerstone*. Having wowed everybody with his deft touch on the piano, he then uses those hymns to make his musical illustrations. He is very patient with students and is always ready to repeat himself when aspects of the lesson are not understood. Even though some students sometimes took advantage of his simplicity to taunt him in class, he was always calm and took time to repeat himself. His composure and captivating smile during classes, coupled with his profound knowledge of the subject matter attracted some students from other classes to stand by the window in order to catch a glimpse and hear him teach. He also

gave simplified notes on various orchestral instruments, their ranges, the clef signs used in scoring for them, orchestra seating arrangements and the peculiarities of their sounds. All these paid dividends as many students were able to read and understand.

In discharging these duties, the writer could observe the cordial relationship between Agu and other senior staff of the department at the time, including: Emurobome Idolor, Arugha Ogisi, Joseph Ofosu (late), Ovaborhene Idamoyibo (late), Atinuke Idamoyibo, Bruno Ekewenu and other younger lecturers. Many people admire Agu, not only for his scholarly qualities, but because he is fatherly and humane. Also, together with the aforementioned lecturers and Professor Richard Okafor, Agu was one of the pioneer lecturers of the music postgraduate programme in DELSU in the 2005/2006 academic session. The successful kick-off of the programme gave many people particularly those from the south-south who had yearned for higher degrees but were discouraged because of the

distance to University of Ibadan, the opportunity to acquire their degrees without having to make long journeys. Till this day, the programme continues to attract people from other parts of the country like Plateau, Akwa-Ibom, Ekiti, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, etc. Professor Dan Agu, was this writer's external examiner on two occasions: in 2011 and 2017 for the Master of Arts (M.A) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Degrees respectively. On the two occasions, despite being overly impressed with the presentation of this author, the standard of research work, the thorough supervision of the theses and Delta State University, Abraka, in general, he still took out time to criticize and offer new insights that made the work better. He carefully outlined many salient issues on sheets of papers, and suggested possible ways to address them. Professor Agu's deep knowledge of African music and composition were made manifest through his comments. He is

very mindful of the appropriate use of terminologies and strongly advocates embarking on fieldwork as an authentic means of reporting accurate data. He edits works thoroughly such that even typographical errors do not go unnoticed. Dan Agu, is very much abreast with recent scholarly developments, and draws the attention of the candidate to all these. The most recent referencing styles of the American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA), coupled with the general outline of a thesis are well-known to him. During external defences, he asks thought-provoking questions to candidates to sharpen their intelligence, and perhaps to verify that the candidate actually conducted the research. Coupled with all these, he goes about his job as external examiner calmly and creates an atmosphere of friendliness during the oral defence so as not to make the student jittery.

Agu's Compositional Brilliance and Commitment to Nationalism as Demonstrated in *I am Proud to be a Nigerian*

Every composer has a unique approach to creating music. In other words, techniques and creative methods vary from one composer to another. It has been so even from the time of the common practice period. For instance, even though J.S Bach and G. F Handel both lived in the baroque period, their music, although share some general characteristics of the era, is also easily distinguishable in terms of the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic style. Differences between composers may be spotted in areas such as thematic development, melodic crafting, harmonic style, rhythmic organisation, instrumentation, use of counterpoint, and the general structural design of a piece of music. For musical works to be meaningful and communicate efficiently, Vidal (2015:128) asserts that “the composer requires the technical skills

of how he is going to put the contents of his composition, rhythm, tones, melody, harmony and form together, be they verbal or non-verbal and the media by which they will be presented as well as the manner of presentation”. Even though there has been growing interest in utilizing the ethnomusicological procedure in composing African art music, the brilliance and technical efficiency of composers is still made manifest in their works. Also, while some composers are more associated with their choral music output, others are known more for their compositions for various instruments – this was one of the differences between J.S Bach and G.F Handel. The following composers are more renowned in the composition of certain types of works even though they have also composed for several other mediums: Kwabena Nketia, Akin Euba, Joshua Uzoigwe, Christian Onyeji, Atinuke Layade (African pianism), Laz Ekwueme, Okechukwu Ndubuisi, Emurobome Idolor, Ovaborhene Idamoyibo, ‘Mudia

Igbi (choral works), Fela Sowande, Godwin Sadoh (organ works), Charles Aluede, Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara and Sunday Ofuani (voice solos). Agu, has also shown considerable interest in writing for all the above media. However, the author chose to illustrate Agu's superlative compositional skills using *I am Proud to be a Nigerian*, because, he (the writer) has not only had the opportunity of listening to the work performed live on two occasions, but has taught and conducted two choirs at other times. This has enabled the author get first-hand aesthetic appeal of the piece which may have been difficult to realise by only analysis and sheet perusal. Agu (2002) identified a myriad of problems confronting composers of Igbo origin. These according to him, include the failure of early Igbo composers to adhere to the tonal inflection of Igbo texts, and the inability to develop compositions to appreciable lengths. Being mindful of these challenges that

characterised early Igbo art music, Agu, made conscious efforts to address the problems by ensuring his works adhered to the tonal inflection of words. This is partly because, most musical types aside peculiar societal functions, have a common goal – that is, to communicate to listeners. Idolor (2020:55) rightly notes that “contents in African music are designed to communicate issues about the society to audience or listeners. As a medium of documentation of events in the life of a people, its performances owe it a responsibility to replay societal issues through a platform that can best be understood by listeners”. Apart from ensuring that those who listen to his works are communicated to, he also developed the musical themes in most of his compositions to enable them reach considerable lengths, and attempted to create different moods through melodic/harmonic variations and initiation of modulations, whether abrupt or gradual.

Furthermore, Agu has shown through *I am Proud to be a Nigerian* that he is a nationalist that believes in the development and future of his country, Nigeria. Even from the title, a bold statement is made on his pride in being a Nigerian. The work reminds one of the huge potentials and natural deposits in Nigeria. Besides, many Nigerian composers still write works that are not Nigerian. As noted elsewhere, up till today, many composers still write “works with very sturdy European influence [in that] the Nigerian features used in such works are overshadowed by Western music characteristics” (Igbi, 2017:271). But as expected, Agu, has always shown his desire in the area of utilizing more Nigerian musical elements in his compositions. Apart from the text of *I am Proud to be a Nigerian*, the work is Nigerian in every respect, employing considerable indigenous musical elements like call-and-response, syncopation, polyrhythm, counterpoint,

parallel/similar motions and repetition. It is noteworthy that Dan Agu's compositional techniques were also influenced by the Church, as the melodies, although typical of and drawing thematic elements from Igbo traditional music, they (the compositions) also have religious colorations, perhaps as a result of his close association with the Church. It is worthy of note that during the rendition of *I am Proud to be a Nigerian* during the Independence Day Service at the First Baptist Church, Warri, the senior Pastor of the Church, Rev. Dr. J.C Okoroji, Jnr, declared that the song be performed "as often as possible, and not just on Independence Days". This goes to show the profundity of Agu's compositional brilliance. A summarised descriptive analysis of the work is hereby provided in two sub-headings:

Chords and Treatment of Texts

Agu's profound knowledge in the use of and resolution of chords is epitomized in the piece. His expert use and resolution of the supertonic and dominant seventh chords can be found in bars 42, 55, 57, 104, and 108. Some rules of Western harmonic writing may have been broken by the composer in bar 54 where the leading note in the dominant seventh chord fails to rise to the tonic. Agu, however, only uses this deliberate act to once again reiterate that Western models will not always fit into African music practice and creativity. The truism in the relationship between text and tune in African music has long been established in literature. Agu, being very much aware of this African element extends it to the composition of *I am Proud to be a Nigerian*. Although the text is in English Language which is not tonal like African languages, the composer still ensured that the best notes

possible are given to words with two or more syllables. An example is the way he treats the two syllabic words “people”. With the first syllable sounding higher and the second lower, the composer decided to treat it like an African word sounding that same way. He therefore chose to resolve the chord with all the notes falling down by one, two and four steps respectively. Although English language is not like African languages in terms of tonality, some words still sound better when given notes that follow the same rhythm and sound. The composer, in the work, was mindful of this in his melodic crafting. Other examples can be found in the way he treated the words “Nigeria”, “beautiful”, “country”, “mountains”, “population”, and “wonderful”, etc.

The composer was also careful in the way he melodically crafted melismatic passages. Although melisma is found in some African musical cultures, it is more often utilized in Western music. However, the melismatic passages in the work (see bars 92 to 94

and bars 98 to 100) were carefully written to resemble an Igbo traditional melody.

Syncopation and Polyrhythm

Syncopation is one of the most common features associated with African rhythms. It can occur in a number of ways, but generally involves a shift in the strong beats to weaker beats. It is a deliberate displacement of accented beats. Polyrhythm on the other hand, involves the simultaneous use of different beat patterns for different instruments or voice. Despite the contrasting rhythms, all the parts still synchronize to produce an exhilarating rhythmic feel. These two African rhythmic elements characterize *I am Proud to be a Nigerian*. Polyrhythm can also be found in the work from bars 68 to 79.

Agu as a Manpower Producer

Professor Dan Agu's legendary status is not only marked by his academic and creative output, but in the area of manpower development at all levels. Although he worked as a lecturer for many years at the Anambra State College of Education, Awka, and University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he produced many holders of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) and Bachelor of Arts in Music, it is perhaps at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, that he was able to make a remarkable impact on postgraduate studies (especially the doctoral degree) in Nigeria. Hitherto, many people who wished to embark on doctoral studies in music had to go abroad; others in the south-southern and south-eastern part of Nigeria had to endure the stress of travelling for between six and nine hours to University of Ibadan. Others were discouraged by the fact that "the programme offered by the University of Ibadan did not address the diverse needs of potential applicants" (Ogisi, 2015:135) since it was only in

African Studies, with emphasis on Ethnomusicology. There was also the challenge of not graduating on time especially at the doctoral level in most Nigerian tertiary institutions. Thus, those who had not the means of going abroad were constrained to remain in Nigeria and deal with the ugly trend of getting admitted but not knowing when to graduate from the programme. There was also the problem of not having a variety of options to choose from with respect to areas of specialisation. Against the wish of many applicants who sought admission, they had to specialise in ethnomusicology, the only available option. But with the commencement of postgraduate studies at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in '2000' (Ogisi, 2015:135), and spearheaded by Dan Agu, things changed for the better, and at a very fast rate. Before then, never had it been recorded in Nigeria that a doctoral degree in music was completed before three years. Hitherto, those

who achieved this feat were those who went overseas. But through Agu's efforts at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, a tangible number of persons were able to graduate in record time of between two to three years. Such names include: Agatha Onwuekwe, Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara, Ajenifuja Yekini, Emmanuel Umezinwa, Eunice Ibekwe, Ijeoma Forchu, Onuora-Oguno, and many others. It is noteworthy that most of the aforementioned persons and other Agu's supervisees are now professors, readers, and senior lecturers in many universities across Nigeria. The geographical spread of his students is also impressive, as they are currently continuing the good work in their respective institutions in different parts of the country. The supervisees listed above and many others specialized in different areas like African musicology, music education, and theory and composition. The impressive number of postgraduate students completing their programmes yearly from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,

greatly improved the available manpower in the field of music in Nigeria. For example, Professor Agu's postgraduate products can be found in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Delta State University, Abraka, University of Port Harcourt, University of Uyo, University of Delta, Agbor, and other tertiary institutions. Although other universities such as University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Delta State University, Abraka, and the University of Lagos have also produced many postgraduate degree holders in music, the number produced at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in the last one and a half decade is indeed unrivalled. Also, Agu's contributions to the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, have been extended to Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (I.A.U.E), Port Harcourt. Drawing from the Agu model, his former students who are among the pioneers of the postgraduate music programme in I.A.U.E,

have upheld his idea of graduating on record time. It is noteworthy that Professor Dan Agu's inclination to graduate students on time is not at the expense of emphasis on quality researches. He emphasizes quality in research, and the same time, frowns at protracted delays occasioned by administrative bottlenecks.

Agu has served as external examiner to many universities and colleges of education. He has been external assessor in the promotion exercise of many professors and associate professors in Nigeria. He is also a mentor to many young scholars. This writer has personally observed instances where he expertly utilized his vast administrative experience to attend to various issues and create a friendly atmosphere among his younger colleagues. Interviews with some of Agu's supervisees reveal that from time to time, he calls and sends text messages to them to encourage and make them see reasons why they should complete their

programmes in record time. His effort in Awka, helped to unwrap opportunities for the teeming music graduates and lecturers from the south-east who for many years had wallowed in the emotional ache of being unable to acquire various higher degrees. Although the University of Nigeria Nsukka (master degree only at the time) and University of Ibadan brought succour to some Nigerians, the Awka and Abraka postgraduate programmes of which Agu was central to their development are perhaps one of the best events of music postgraduate studies in Nigeria, since the turn of the twenty first century.

Agu's Knowledge of African Music and Style of Writing

Every researcher has a unique way of presenting scholarly ideas and reporting research findings. This is an aspect of research that most scholars find difficult to execute. "The inability to accurately communicate research findings in ways that are comprehensible

by readers, can jeopardize an entire research endeavour” (Igbi, 2017:60). Some scholars present their ideas using very strong grammatical constructions that require some high level of intelligence to comprehend. This style is quite interesting, since it is scholars who mostly read academic publications. Scholars on the other hand are supposed to be intellectuals with very high intelligence quotient. Nigerian scholars who use this style of writing include Fela Sowande, Meki Nzewi and Akin Euba. The next category includes those who construct sentences in ways one would not think is possible. They write stylishly, treat words fashionably, and make the titles of their works very attractive. There is never a boring moment reading through their publications. Those in this category include Laz Ekwueme, Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike, Christian Onyeji, Arugha Ogisi, Onyee Nwankpa, Emurobome Idolor, Austin Emielu, Yemi Akperi, Charles Aluede, etc. The third category comprises those

who present their thoughts in very simple language when reporting their findings from the field. But one striking feature about these scholars is that they present their ideas and research findings in ways that make the reader feel like he/she was physically present during the fieldwork. Those in this category include Richard Okafor, Tunji Vidal, Ademola Adegbite, Femi Adedeji, Ovaborhene Idamoyibo, Atinuke Layade, Adebowale Adeogun, Femi Adedeji, etc.

Having read through a good number of Professor Dan Agu's publications, this author found out that he combines the second and third styles of writing. His works are easy to understand, yet with well-crafted grammar, correct punctuations, and captivating titles. Some of his well-known and most cited works include *Form and Analysis of African Music*, *Igbo Literary Choral Music in Contemporary Nigeria: the Journey so Far*, *Cultural Influence*

in Igbo Contemporary Choral Music, Vocal Music in West Africa: Its Creation and Acceptance as an Art Form Among the Igbo of Nigeria, Foundations of Pragmatics: The Primacy of Language in African Music Theory, Practice and Education, Learning and Practicing African Music in the Global Context: A Survey of Meki Nzewi's Approach, The Vocal Music Composer in a Nigerian Traditional Society and his Compositional Techniques, and many others. All these publications are the results of many years of hard work and research. Agu is one of the greatest music scholars of Igbo origin. Many of his researches focus on different aspects of Igbo traditional music. He also makes constant reference to Igbo music in his discourse of African music.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper highlighted the contributions of Professor Dan Agu to the advancement of formal music studies in Nigeria. Relying on personal experiences and perusal of some scholarly and creative

works of the renowned Professor of ethnomusicology and composition, the paper summarised his immense impact on music scholarship and creativity in Nigeria. His qualities as a composer, critic and producer of manpower especially in the area of postgraduate degree holders in music were made manifest. The paper noted that Agu's efforts were vital to producing an impressive number of doctoral degree holders particularly at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, thereby bequeathing a more affirmative perception on postgraduate music studies in Nigeria, which had hitherto been infamous for protracted and unsolicited delays in graduation. Agu's thoroughness as external examiner in reading students' dissertations and theses were also discussed. His creative skills as epitomized in *I am Proud to be a Nigerian* were shown through a brief analysis of the work. It can be deduced from the paper that Professor Agu is a man of rare virtues, and

one whose footprints in the academic world will eternally remain indelible. However, it is recommended that his mentees compile and publish all his research papers in books of two or three volumes. His books, papers and compositions should also be uploaded online in portable document format (PDF). This will enable a better and instantaneous access to his works through the internet. Through this, more scholars will be availed the opportunity of reading his writings and performing his works. It will further facilitate a more rapid diffusion of research findings on various aspects of African music that hitherto were still shrouded from the larger world.

***Oghenemudiakevwe Igbi, PhD**
Senior Lecturer (Music Composition and Performance),
University of Africa, Toru Orua,
Bayelsa State.
Phone: 08061187242
Email: o.igbi@uat.edu.ng

References

- Agu, D.C.C. 2002. "Igbo Literary Choral Music in Contemporary Nigeria: The Journey so Far". In E. G. Idolor (Ed.), *Music in Africa, Facts and Illusions*: Pp: 82-98. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.
- Idolor, E. G. 2001. "Formal Education and the Development of African Art Music in Nigeria". In M. A. Omibiyi-Obidike (Ed.), *African Art Music in Nigeria*. Pp: 135-149. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.
- Idolor, E. G 2020. "Features of Orality in Okpe Disco Popular Music of the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria". In C. Aluede, A. Oikelome, Y. Akperi, and O. Igbi (Eds.), *Contemporary Dimensions in Nigerian Music*. Pp: 55-74. Lagos: Malthouse
- Igbi, O. 2017. *An Eclectic Approach to Creating African Art Music with Special Reference to the Oratorio*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Delta State University, Abraka.
- Ogisi, A. A. 2015. "Optimizing Postgraduate Music Studies in Nigeria". In A.A Ogisi (Ed.), *Studies in Nigerian Music, Book 1: Music and Society in Nigeria*. Pp: 133-141. Lagos: Amfitop Book Company.

Vidal, A. O. 2015. "Understanding the Art of Music Composition". In A.A Ogisi (Ed.), *Studies in Nigerian Music, Book 1: Music and Society in Nigeria*. Pp: 125-130. Lagos: Amfitop Book Company.