

## Music to the Contemporary African

Emurobome Idolor

*Department of Music, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria*  
*Cellphone: +2348035747208, E-mail: geidordelsu@yahoo.co.uk*

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**ABSTRACT** Music is a phenomenon which accomplishes purposes in the lives of individuals or group of individuals. Africa has had remarkable pressures from foreign administrative invasions, social interactions, mass media, new curricular in formal education, alien religions, new job opportunities, and emerging technologies leading to some changes in the lives of individuals and indeed the entire society. The rate of change in music is directly proportional to the amount of pressure, level of resistance and the similarity of ideas being proposed. Since musical taste is individualistic, it is difficult to have everybody in the society to accept new ideas at the same rate. Besides this, sometimes, new music types in the society are additions to existing repertoires and not replacements; leading to pluralist existence of concepts, utility and types/typologies of music in contemporary Africa. Music as a living corporate part of the society, cannot, but adapt to some of these changes so as to retain its usefulness in the scheme of human priorities. While conservatism does not encourage speedy propagation of African musical heritage to the wider world, issues of adaptation should be carefully visited in order to retain African identities in contemporary situations.

### INTRODUCTION

The topic, “*Music to the Contemporary African*”, suggests the relationship between music and humanity, particularly, the present day African. *Humanity* denotes mankind and the characteristics that evolve in the interaction of human beings. As a study in the performing, creative and liberal arts, it is directed at people and their cultural activities. While *music* on the other hand is generally defined as an organized sound, its concept varies from one society to another; hence it is necessary to understand what sounds and what kinds of behaviour different societies regard as musical. Sociologically, the concept of music is defined by the society and it is concerned with the organised ways in which people behave towards one another when they listen, produce, and reproduce those sounds which they perceive as *Music* (Jagger, 1974).

Thus, it is important to reiterate the essence of music to the African, its dynamism in conformity with societal change and the implications of these changes on his total life pattern in contemporary context.

### WHAT MUSIC IS TO THE AFRICAN

Different societies have various traditions of music origin, which can be broadly classified into *Divine* and *Human* sources. These sources may have been philosophized from the various functions and uses (religious and social) into which

music has been subjected by man. Some schools of thought hold that the art of music was in existence before the emergence of man, like the music of the spheres; while others say it was divinely inspired, like the *Igbegbe Akamaghwe* of Okpeland. Some others also opine that it is out of man's ingenious creativity to express his feelings to his fellow man and the supernatural. What is important in all these positions of origin of music is how man has used it to his advantage in different contextual situations. This suggests that the idea, as well as its goal is humanity or community-oriented. Blacking (1976) holds that music is a product of the behaviour of human groups hence, the sound properties and non-sound elements organized from the human group behaviours, are governed by the convention peculiar to the society. Nzewi (1985) remarks that “it is a society that ascribes meaning to ... music” in terms of its sound implications and non-musical essence. Omojola (1999) contributes that an understanding of the conception of music among the communities in (Africa) would have to derive from a combination of factors such as the words used by the people to describe music, the contexts of musical performances, the organized procedures associated with music, the nature of musical expression itself and the meaning intended in a musical performance.

The practice of music has been associated with humanity from primordial time. Edith Ihekweazu gave various purposes for which music is made:

To enable him understand his past, and contribute to the shaping of the present and future, he expresses and documents himself - his feelings, hopes, disappointments, sufferings and joy, through the various media of the arts, such as music (Ihekweazu, 1985).

No phenomenon void of utility survives in a society; an indication that the presence of music in almost every African society has a formidable role to fulfil. In his study of the Basongye in Ruanda, Merriam (1964) observes a catalogue of thirty music types associated with various human activities. Complementing this in the Nigerian situation, Nzewi (1997) observes thirty-six music types among the Ngwa (Igbo) community with a population of only 16,000 people. These music types (variously or collectively) have the capability of emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validating social institutions and religious rituals, contributing to the continuity and stability of culture, and integrating the society. While some of these types feature incidentally in human activities, others are strung to ceremonies such as child-birth, incision/circumcision, age-grade initiation, marriage, installation, coronation, war, farming, funeral, festivals and core music events.

Of the numerous utility to which man subjects music, the religious, cultural identity, didactic, entertainment and integrative essence will be given some emphasis.

### **Quintessence of Music in African Religion**

Religion is a universal phenomenon found in every human settlement. It is human beings' spontaneous awareness of a living power, wholly and infinitely greater than oneself, mysterious, unseen yet a present and acceptable reality. In any of the various categories of religions such as Animism, Fetishism, Polytheism and Monotheism, music is a functional element.

This common feature in religious worship, music, is found in instrumental, vocal, dance or a combination of two, or all three forms. It is meant to praise the deity for good things such as provision, protection and redemption. At other times, it invokes the deity into the worship atmosphere, takes control of the sequence in the procedure of worship, blesses and possibly facilitates the possession of the worshippers. The

latter is achieved with the aid of some music specifics, by which the psychés of the devotees are stimulated to facilitate the readiness of their body for divine habitation of the deity. These functional processes, through the use of music, explain the strong desire of a traditional African society to involve the deities directly in the material, moral and spiritual life of the community (Modum, 1982).

Music is used to petition the deity for individual and collective needs in much the same way, confession of misdemeanours committed by devotees are expressed through songs for forgiveness. Through a combination with other arts such as psycho-cosmic drama and dance, the evils and misfortunes of a passing year are collectively expunged from community in traditional African society (Nzewi, 1985). Religious processions, be they ritualistic or proclamative, are accompanied by suitable kinds of music. In the initiation of new members, not only do music repertoires function as parcels of rules and regulations of the cult, they are scrolls, which embody the ideals and practices associated with the deity.

In the whole process of praise, requisition, supplication, confession, admonition, initiation and proclamation, the music content and practice in terms of structure, idioms, text, dynamics, tempo, performance gestures and mood, synchronize with the theme of the activity in order to yield the social and spiritual expectations of the devotees. The musical instruments, costume and other non-musical paraphernalia, combine to effectuate symbolic relevance of religious practices to man.

Through music, many of the mysteries of life are given explanations. Some of these mysteries include the cosmology, the purpose of man's existence, fortunes and misfortunes in man's endeavours and life after death. Arising from these explanations, souls are consoled, doubts are cleared and hopes are raised.

### **Music in African Identity**

Peculiar patterns of odds and ends which may be permanent or persistent and which realize themselves in fuller measure as life goes on, explicitly or implicitly characterize any person(s) or society(ies). Classes/groups of people in societies unite by the possession of these characteristic qualities, which are sensed and guarded jealously.

In this vein, every kind of music possesses matrixes, which identify with a culture and represent a people with a common culture. Using sound matrix, it is therefore possible to discern the nativity of a piece of music even where the lyrics are drawn from a different linguistic region. Structurally, the cultural elements can be identified in the tonality of the music and how the tones within the scale are manipulated. The compositional techniques such as statement of themes and their developments with sequences, repetitions, tonal shifts, orchestration, dynamic shadings, part singing, text, texture, rhythm and cadential formulae are all representative of a culture. In support of this view, Hugo De Jager states:

Music which sociologically consists of ideas and about certain kinds of sounds, does not exist in isolation. These musical ideas are intertwined with non-musical ideas and beliefs with regard to other spheres of life such as religion, work, leisure, ... morality, human dignity, and utility. Music is part of a style of life, of a so-called cultural pattern (Jager, 1974).

Technologically, the construction of some instruments produces either sounds of birds, animals or even deities. The significance and meaning of tone quality, which is produced from various musical instruments, are inferred from the speech patterns of the owners who code and decode messages in and from instrumental music performances within their culture-context. The engravements on the instruments can be those of animals, human figures, deities, ornaments, words and signs symbolic of the environment, that, at the sight of the internal and external structures of the instruments and the organisation of such musical instruments in an ensemble, the total life ways of the people associated with it, are called to focus.

Above all, when all these are integrated in a performance situation, the costumes, dance types, movements, oral delivery, drum patterns, dramatic props and the total scenery reflect a source of cultural trait.

Some people are identified with typical music kinds like Jazz, Blues, Reggae, *Swange*, *Ikwokirikwo* and *Ìkpèbà*. In an extensive measure, some affluent African personalities have *Oriki* (Yoruba) or *Waka* (Hausa) with which they and their lineage are known. Different vocations are also identified with their kinds of music contextually performed to enact the art and skills peculiar to such vocations. Examples of such

types of music in Nigeria include the *Ohwátà* (of the Ókpè) and the *Ijala* (of the Yoruba) both associated with hunters' guild.

### The Didactic Essence of Music to the African

According to Afolabi Olabimtan Traditional oral poetry was performing the same role as the press and the radio, not only to inform, educate and entertain but also to express public opinion (Olabimtan, 1981).

From the view of Olabimtan and what obtains in many African societies, music is one of the effective means of socializing and educating young and old members of the society. People whose lives are devoted to music because of their social function, as in the case of the court of the kings in the Republic of Benin (Nkatia, 1974), musicians are the chroniclers of events in societies which have no written traditions. Their role on every important occasion is to recreate the history and culture of their people, by means of long, declamatory recitations, which are either intoned or sung. The purpose of this documentation is to facilitate easy retrieval of facts on monarchs, chieftains and families for the enlightenment of contemporary and future generations. Such information also educates new monarchs on the activities of their predecessors; their degree of achievement and failure, humane and tyranny, valour and cowardice, honour and repudiation.

Children are taught the norms and values of the society through music, to foster self-usefulness and facilitate the performance of expected roles in the wider society. Children's music repertory teaches varieties of norms, values and skills. Using children's play songs of the Ókpè people in Nigeria as an example:

*Wè ne erhùmù rě ... èjo*

teaches vigilance.

*Ekpákpá, kpáyè hìon* improves memory.

*Úvì phe* ..... teaches breath control.

*Àgo, àgo, àgo jèrèrèn* teaches counting.

Other song types, which teach children and adults, include lullabies, sanitary songs, age-graded play songs, vocational songs, circumcision songs, satirical songs, tale songs and funeral songs.

The didactic function of music is effected through logical organization of lyrics and performance practice. Some lyrics are presented in direct or indirect satire through such speech figures as simile, metaphor, alliteration, allusions and even short anecdote to convey an observation or/and

opinion to a witness-audience. In other situations, other activities in performance, teach both viewers and participants the coded lesson(s).

### **Music in the Entertainment Life of the African**

Man's need for entertainment through music is achieved when the content is meaningful. Musical meaning starts with making musical sense and ends with effective or affective communication. Thus, Musical sense is how the quality of the features of music conform with prevalent models of texture, structure and form in any culture (Nzewi, 1993).

Music provides entertainment in all societies, even if it may be combined with other functions in a specific activity. Man uses music in annual communal music performance, house warming and marriage ceremonies, and reception during visit or arrival of a renown personality. In events of ritual activities, such as initiation, coronation and burial, multiple music performances feature prominently which perform entertainment function for some spectators. Sometimes, an entertainment-based music is performed simultaneously with other non-music activity. In other situations where there is sequence of activities, like in religious festivals, entertainment music is performed at the appropriate time.

Entertainment music provides the listener (individual or audience) the opportunity to experience visual and/or aural variety other than what the person is/was doing. It also acts as fill-up episode in the period of in-activity, especially during night vigils in funeral ceremonies. Organizers of events see music as an integral gesture of hospitality for their guests; and in response, the guests show satisfaction for the all-round reception through active participation in dance and passive body movements - an approval of the aesthetic import.

### **Music in African Social Cohesion**

As people desire to live together as a group, so does music keep and ensure their lasting relationship. Psychologically, the sound of music stimulates people of similar experiences and converges them even without any formal invitation. The members of the audience may be of mixed statuses, and in some cases, from different ethnic backgrounds.

The joy in collective participation is revived through communal music making. Not only do

communities own ensembles of musical instruments, the members converge regularly in village squares, central points, town leaders' or music motivators' compounds to practise or rehearse music of common interest, irrespective of individual differences. In these community ensembles, there exists various roles such as instrument playing, singing, dancing and even audience participation which encourage collective responsibility to achieve common goals. When rehearsals have been completed and a level of perfection has been attained, a day for grand performance is fixed. Relatives, friends and well-wishers from far and near are invited to grace the occasion – an opportunity to re-unite extended families, community neighbourhood and the resolution of disputes and controversies.

### **Music Dynamism in Contemporary Africa**

Change in the African society, is an expected phenomenon in the existence of beings. This is in response to man's desire for better conditions, or at least, variety in life (Idolor 1998/1999). Due to interactions with external factors and the will to effect internal changes, the African society is not static. Factors such as religion (precisely Islam and Christianity), formal education, mass media, improved technology, urbanization and new job opportunities have, affected the society that what obtains in contemporary Africa is a plurality of music types and typologies. Consequently, while the core indigenous practice continues, the synthetic and the entirely foreign forms also exist simultaneously to satisfy the diverse musical tastes of the pluralist society. In Islamic and Christian activities, there exist synthetic music types alongside orthodox and indigenous ones, for different religious purposes. For instance hymns, canticles, chants, anthems, airs, gospel pops and native tunes in both foreign and indigenous musical idioms are now common in churches in Africa.

Some ensembles, bands and orchestras in contemporary Africa are heterogeneously composed, fusing European or neighbour nation's kinds of instruments with indigenous types, in order to achieve desired tastes and wider (possibly international) acceptability. Educationally, especially through formal schooling systems and the electronic media, music has become multicultural. There are studies on nationalities, African music and music of other cultures of the world, including those in the Diaspora. Addition-



ally, African folksongs have been transcribed, scored, arranged with western notation and idioms, and electronically recorded for various purposes. These are all new trends in society where there was, earlier, no extensive written tradition.

Exposure therefrom, has affected musical tastes that some Africans either identify with foreign or indigenous music or both; and in some cases, become patrons and promoters of their musical tastes. The trustees of the Music Society of Nigeria (MUSON) is an example of an association that encourages every form of art music.

As the society moves from the agrarian to an advanced technological class, the demand for music to satisfy leisure and entertainment needs is on the increase. This has given rise to the emergence of discotheques, music societies, recording industries, music broadcasting, nightclubs, hotels, and the consequent vocationalisation of musical practices, thus promoting social integration and cultural tolerance.

According to Allan P. Merriam (in Olaniyan, 1999), musical sound is the result of human behavioural processes that are shaped by the values, attitudes and beliefs of the people who comprise a particular culture. Since these values change, music, an integral part of the social system, cannot, but be in tune with the trend of events in the ever-changing African society. This is to enable it to maintain its relevance to mankind in the scheme of their priorities. This can only be achieved through careful but creative adaptation of music to contemporary situations in Africa.

### IMPLICATIONS

There is no doubt that the society is fast changing, not so much out of her intentions, but due to external socio-cultural pressures. Communication in music in the world currently has gone beyond only performance to include the realm of academic discourse and art compositions. In so doing D. – R. Lerma advises:

We must take man as he is, and his artifacts as they exist, and know that a work of art has an obligation only to serve the people for which it was created... We must therefore be careful not to apply standards of a different culture as a means of condemning a whole group of people... There is no room in culture or the humanities for racism, but there is all the latitude in the world to admit the validity of more than one culture and to be sensitive to its uniqueness (Lerman, 1974).

While it is not the position of this paper to

condemn everything foreign, it suggests that only those aspects, which can project African musical peculiarities, should be adapted. Composers, arrangers, researchers, broadcasters and performers, should be conscious of this identity and protect it accordingly. They should utilise their privileged positions as flag-bearers of their professions and culture to ensure a solid foundation good enough for future generations to confidently build on.

Education planners should realize that, the majority of the products of the system are meant to serve in the African society; an implication that demands African music content as the basis of the curriculum. However, the fact that the scholar now lives within a multi-ethnic community and is able, in other aspects of social life to communicate successfully with the various members of his community, makes it desirable to be knowledgeable also in musical practices outside his/her own ethnic group.

Euba (1969) observes that the programme output and time given to African traditional music in Nigerian Broadcasting Television stations are grossly inadequate. If the essence of the mass media is to inform, educate and entertain, the bulk of the items in the music programmes should be from the locality so that listeners and viewers can pride in their heritage.

Many forceful social factors have emerged on African soil since the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Some of these forces include European administration, Western Education, alien religion and global migration and interaction. Consequently, Meki Nzewi observes that:

Modern Africa has recklessly abandoned its human essence and cultural values while gobbling up the modern-publicity-hoisted glamorous allures of Western thoughts and life styles ... Africa cannot afford to continue thinking and acting as the West thinks and acts; or wants it to think and act;? The people of the world need mental and material co-operation not relationship of subservience (Nzewi, 1997).

If the above observation is taken seriously with practical solutions for the future, the concept, practice and transmission of African music must be vigorously pursued with all amount of zeal to ensure the African identity in global activities.

### CONCLUSION

Music is a concept, design and product of and for mankind. Its presence in African societies

is an indicator of its valuable roles and functions in their total life patterns. If music must serve the purpose of mankind particularly in an ever-changing situation, music practitioners must understand the trend of new thoughts, activities, tastes and institutions in contemporary society and suitably adapt their practice without losing the peculiarities of African musical identity.

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