

Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies 12: 1
December 2021, 89-104

An Appraisal of Igbo Choral Music in the Light of Akin Euba's Concept of African Traditional Music

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Abstract

Akin Euba identified traditional music as the most widespread and most popular of all the various types of music existing in Africa today. This study attempts an exposition of his idea of traditional music, by highlighting the various elements that identify a piece in this light. This achieved, it proceeds to an analysis of selected Igbo Choral Music excerpts, with the aim of accentuating the prevalent features that mirror the above-stated position. This study employs the following tools: exposition, description and analysis. It makes recourse to archival and library materials. The findings herein reflect a fine balance between change and continuity in the present day Igbo choral music. The study therefore recommends to the modern composers, painstaking studies and rigour, to equip them with the wealth of compositional elements at the African's disposal, which can be adequately harnessed to produce works that can stand the test of time.

Keywords: Igbo, Traditional, Music, Choral, Euba

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Background to the study

The question of authenticity has always arisen in discourses concerning the practice of music in Africa. Some often approached this from the angle of a quest for identity. Even the use of the concept “African music” sometimes raises some form of debate, with some people questioning the need for the qualification in the first place, since it is supposed to be music. And even when and where it is accepted, the next issue becomes that of an identification of what makes a musical piece African. Akin Euba believes that it is not every music practiced in Africa that qualifies to be categorized as African music. In a similar vein, he also observed that, some changes have occurred in many of the types of music that could even be described as indigenous. He described traditional music as that, represented by pre-colonial musical types which have survived to the present day. This music, according to him, is by far the most popular and widespread in Nigerian culture and may be described as the characteristic musical culture of Nigeria.

The preoccupation of this work is to get a clearer understanding of that which truly qualifies to be called African traditional music. This study hopes to do that by clearly outlining its distinguishing characteristics. The study also makes an attempt at exposing Igbo choral music, while looking at its formal features. Against this backdrop, it assesses both Igbo choral music and African traditional music, to establish the idea of change and continuity.

Theoretical Framework

This work makes recourse to the aesthetic theory, Formalism. According to this theory:

to appreciate a work of art, we need to bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from a world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exultation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and

memories are arrested. We are lifted above the stream
of life (Bell in Zeki 2013).

This school of thought believes that he who contemplates a work of art inhabits a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life. In this world the emotions of life find no place. It is a world with emotions of its own (ibid.). Music, in the words of David Carr (2004), is emotionally meaningful (if and when it is) not as the subjective agents of emotionally charged composition, or as the cause of emotional states in the listener, but in and of itself. This suggests that the quest for the meaning of any musical work should be centered within the very work itself and not outside of it. In the words of Agawu (2011),

the high value placed on African traditional music by ethnographers often overlooks the fact that its potentialities are best revealed not by gathering and confining samples of the music to sound archives and museums, but by probing the music compositionally, engaging it through creative violation.

The Igbo believe that what gives the flower a sweet fragrance is found within the flower itself. With this in mind, we hope to center our search for the elements that make a musical piece African within the form of the music. Hence, the analysis of the Igbo choral music pieces chosen for this study is centered on the formal elements of the pieces, which include the melody, harmony, rhythm and so on.

African Traditional Music

Ibekwe (2013), while quoting Agawu, noted that the apparently simple statement that African music is music made by Africans is not so simple after all. However, traditional music, according to Euba (1973), may be defined as the music, which has been practiced in Africa from pre-colonial times. He described it as the oldest type of music in Africa, which remains by far, the most widespread and the most popular of all the various types of music existing in Africa today.

This type of music is believed to be bound up with African traditional social life. Most traditional African music is believed to be participatory and functional, with no audience per se; music-making usually accompanies work, ceremonies and rituals. Meaning, in African traditional music therefore, seems to be bound with the functions music is seen to serve in the society. Hence, there is a generalization regarding its utilitarian functions (Euba, 1973). With the above-mentioned facts in mind, it might be pertinent to ask; does African traditional music retain its meaning when extricated from social contexts?

One of the outstanding peculiarities of music-making in Africa lies with its multidisciplinary approach. Much of the pre-colonial traditional music of Africa is practiced in the context of one or more of the other performing arts. There is, for example, the use of music as an integral part of dance, of poetry, and of dramatic expression; sometimes, music, dance, poetry and dramatic expression are all fused together in the same performance context. The nomenclature used for these branches of art in African languages is a clear testimony to this reality. For instance, in Igbo language, one word *egwu* is used for music, dance, and play (drama). Hence, in a performance which comprises many different performing and visual arts, music is viewed in terms of its relationship to the total art complex and not as isolated phenomenon (Euba, 1973).

Musical style in traditional culture, then, is to a large extent defined in terms of the relationship of music to dance, poetry and the dramatic arts as well as its function within the social context. Consequently, the evaluation of this music necessarily takes account of the non-musical elements which customarily accompany a musical presentation. Ekwueme corroborated this when he observed that, the African traditional performing arts may be truly summarized as an integration of the plastic, kinetic and audio-visual arts for all the senses (Ekwueme, 1975). In this same light, Von Hornbostel has also been quoted to have made the following observation:

In the life of the African Negroes, music and dance have a quite different and incomparably greater significance than with us (Europeans). They serve neither as mere pastimes nor recreations. They are not meant to edify the mind aesthetically; nor can they be regarded as brilliant decoration on festive occasions, or as a means of effectively staging ceremonies (...) Music is neither reproduction (of a 'piece of music' as an existing object) nor production (of a new object); it is the life of a living spirit working within those who dance and sing.

(Hornbostel in Ekwueme, 1975)

In line with the functional role of music, among the Igbo, music plays very pertinent roles at the following stages of human life and development: the birth of a child, circumcision, naming ceremonies, in child nursing and in children's games. Music is employed in folk stories, in education, at initiation, at work, at play, at festivities, marriages and the like. Music is used for healing, it is the mainstay of religious activities and it features prominently in death and funeral rites. Music is a recorder of history and may be employed for social control (Ekwueme, 1975).

African traditional music is believed by many to be threatened by current social change in African societies, possibly because the practice of such music has been so largely associated with social events, although, African culture and African music have survived despite the social forces that may have acted upon it. Euba believes African music has survived previous eras of social change because it has and had enough creative vitality to adapt itself to changing circumstances; hence, there is no reason to suppose that it will not continue to do so (Euba, 1974).

African music has not only been ethnically based but typified by a restraint as regards novelty and experimentation for their own sake. As African societies become more and more technological, African traditional music may become less utilitarian and increasingly contemplative. It is also likely, however, that, the new music will not

necessarily replace the music we now regard as traditional, and that both forms will co-exist (Euba, 1973).

Characteristic features of African Traditional Music

- i. It is transmitted orally.
- ii. It is learnt by rote.
- iii. The student makes physical contact with the originator(s).
- iv. It is largely performed from memory.
- v. Musical instruments are used to reproduce human speech and convey signals.
- vi. Musical occasions – an integration of voices and instruments.
- vii. Music is always integrated with other arts.
- viii. Music is often situated within a social context.

Discussion of Findings

Igbo Choral Music

Among the Igbo, singing has been identified as the most common and most important method of music-making. It only takes an ability to make use of the voice to sing, since humming is also some form of singing. So whoever is old enough to make use of the voice is old enough to sing. And when instruments are used in music making alongside the voice, they are meant to accompany and not lead. The primacy of song in Igbo music was exhaustively demonstrated by Ekwueme in his PhD dissertation which was on Igbo choral music. Group singing according to him, accounts for the lion's share of Igbo musical output (Ekwueme, 1975).

The central role of religion cannot be downplayed in the promotion of music and singing in history. Most of the breakthroughs that have been made in the history of music have the fingerprints of religion boldly reflected all over them, ranging from the documentation of music (the Gregorian chant), to one of the most prominent instances of organized choral singing in a choir (the monks). Religion as a human necessity is therefore an area where choral music comes to bear, not only amongst the Igbo, but Africa and beyond.

One of the most prominent features of African traditional music as presented above is that this type of music is believed to be bound up with African traditional social life. Most traditional African music is believed to be participatory and functional, with no audience per se. In the church, these features are seen to be ever relevant. Singing in the church is primarily meant to bear a functional character – praise and worship of God. He who sings well, according to St. Augustine, prays twice (*qui bene cantat, bis orat*). This strongly suggests that, singing within religion is meant to aid prayer and worship. On the other hand, the communitarian nature of singing in African tradition equally obtains in the Church (for instance the Catholic Church). In the Church, nobody is supposed to be a spectator; hence, the second Vatican council recommends “fruitful and active participation” in both the prayers and singing.

The communitarian nature of singing plays a very significant and important role in the life of the people – that of unification. It is also for this same role that the communitarian nature of singing is highly promoted in the Church. The unity of the voices is meant to achieve a unity of minds. And these following features of African traditional songs make communitarian singing easily realized. They are: the “call and response”, the “ostinatos”, the “litany” and “antiphonal nature”. Hence, Igbo choral music, especially in the area of the liturgy (Church worship) largely employs those tools to aid an active participation. Group singing is, therefore, the commonest musical output of the Igbo since it is not only used within the community but also in the church.

Choral music here should be understood as music written for a choir or a group of singers, with a known composer or at least an arranger. It is important to emphasize the word “written”. This is meant to categorically differentiate it from the pre-colonial traditional music under discussion. Below are some excerpts of Igbo choral pieces that are represented on the Western staff notation, with a simple tonal harmony in the SATB fashion.

Music Example 1

The musical score is written for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are in Igbo. The score is divided into three systems, with measure numbers 5, 10, and 15 indicated at the beginning of each system.

System 1 (Measures 1-4):

- Soprano:** A - nyi g'e - je n'i-hu Chi-ne ke ny'e Y'e ke - ne
- Alto:** n'i-hu Chi-ne-ke ke - le - e Ya
- Tenor:** (Silent)
- Bass:** (Silent)

System 2 (Measures 5-8):

- Soprano:** O-ny'o bio-me nke Ya n'e nwe-nwe-ghiu be _____ A-nyi g'e - ji
- Alto:** O-ny'o-bio-ma Ya O-ny'o-bio-ma Ya e-nwe gh'u-be
- Tenor:** (Silent)
- Bass:** (Silent)

System 3 (Measures 9-15):

- Soprano:** nnu-kwu a ja nke mi-ssa to-o Ya wee rio-kwa Ya mgba-gha-ra njo
- Alto:** A - nyi g'e - ji a-ja nke mi - ssa to nu Ya wee rio kwa Ya mgba-gha-ra njo
- Tenor:** (Silent)
- Bass:** (Silent)

Music Example 2

Musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, measures 1-7. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 2/4. The Soprano part has lyrics: "A ja di nso a-ja dio-k'o -nu k'u-mu Chi-ne-ke n'a-chu-ru-Chu-kwu". The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts have rests in measures 1 and 2, then enter in measure 3.

Musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, measures 8-11. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 2/4. The Soprano part has lyrics: "A - jaa - nyi n'a - chu - ru Chu - kwu buo - nwe anyi a - ru n'a mkpu - ro bi". The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts have rests in measure 8, then enter in measure 9.

n'a - chu - ru Chu - kwu b'o - nwea - nyi a - ru n'a mkpu - ro - bi

Music Example 3

SOPRANO

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

To - be - nu Chi - ne - ke O - ti - to di - ri Ya so Ya bu E - ze O n'a

8

8

chi n'u - wa ni - le Nu - ria - nuo - nu O - ti - to di - ri

Formal analyses of the excerpts

I. Rhythm

There is the general belief that sophisticated rhythmic organization is a striking element of African traditional music. This is likely because of the fact that music is rarely unaccompanied with dance. Even in religious ceremonies, music is often accompanied with not only heavy drumming and other percussive instruments, but also with hand-clapping. This shows the extent of the rhythmic nature of music among the Africans (Euba, 2001). Akin Euba however believes that, this importance is often exaggerated as the tonal structure of the music is of equal importance.

Euba identified what he called the two broad categories of rhythm in traditional music. They are: free rhythm and strict rhythm. Whereas the latter has a regular metre which enables one to move or dance easily to it, the former has no regular metre and is non-danceable. African traditional music has also been associated with complex rhythmic organizations. This complexity often arises from the use of the principle of polyrhythms (Euba, 2001).

The rhythm of African music is built on three distinguishable structural levels. The background material is a skeleton of the structure which gives us the form of the music often reducible to the antiphonal “call-and-response” or “call-and-refrain” pattern; the middle ground contains rhythm motifs such as the standard patterns and other delimiters on which the music is based. The excerpts shown above are written in simple rhythmic movements. Whereas the first is written in simple triple time, the rest are written in simple duple time. However the “call and response” can be noticed, though not predominant.

II. Tonal Organisation

Akin Euba noted that, if the concept of the scale implies a predetermined order to precisely measured tones, then this concept is probably irrelevant in African music, except perhaps in regard to individual instruments or ensembles with multiple fixed pitches. However, even when it is believed that, there is no standardized pitch or tempered scale system; scales consisting of two to seven notes of

various-sized intervals are employed in both instrumental and vocal music. Chromatic scales are also used. African melodies are often characterized by rather sharp initial ascents followed by slow descents (Euba, 2001). In the pieces shown above, the heptatonic, simple diatonic scales are prevalent.

III. Melody

Traditional African melodies are defined by their shape, i.e., they are not pitch content precise. Thus, one may hear the same tune sung differently by the same performer on any given day. This may be due to the rote learning process caused by lack of a music notation system. A more likely explanation, however, is found in the African approach to melody as contour; “it is the controlled use of selected interval sequences that forms the basis of (African) melodic structure.” Since most African languages are pitched, many melodies conform to the contour of the speech tones of their texts. Translation of Western hymns into those languages can prove disastrous when set with their familiar tunes (Kazarow, 1993).

Primarily, it is observed in the music examples shown above that there is conformity between the melody and the contour of the speech tones of the texts in most cases. The following are equally evident: the melodies are within the range of a 10th, the melodic movements are predominantly downward and conjunct, with just a few leaps.

IV. Harmony

Traditional African music is marked by the simultaneous sounding of two or more pitches. This occurs in several ways: 1) in heterophony 2) in polyphony; 3) in the use of melodic ostinato 4) in polyphony created by hocket, 5) in the overtones of instruments 6) in the singing of parallel thirds, fourths and fifths (Kazarow, 1993). It is evident in the excerpts shown above that all are four-part pieces, written in SATB. Also evident is a combination of both the heterophonic and contrapuntal techniques. There is an occasional appearance of polyphony and a frequent use of parallel thirds.

V. Form

The basic style of African traditional music is characterized by a careful balance between repetition and variation. This principle is applicable not only in vocal, but also in instrumental music. It is equally observed in the vocal music technique commonly identified as “call and response”. This technique is often executed in the form of an alternation between a soloist and a chorus, in which the chorus part consists of a short phase, which is repeated over and over with little or no change, while the soloist’s part changes (Euba, 2001).

In the choral pieces shown above, there is a combination of call and response, antiphonal, rondo-like and verse-chorus patterns. A particular piece is seen to have a little of two or more forms within the music.

Summary and Evaluation

Euba (1975) aptly observed that, in addition to the pre-colonial idioms of music, which continue to be the principal basis of African musical taste, many new types of music are practiced today in Africa. These new types include attempts to create modern idioms of art music, belonging in at least three categories, namely: neo-traditional art music, Western art music, and African-European art music (a more balanced synthesis of African and Western styles). Here, we choose to call these (especially the first and the third) the different evolutionary forms of African traditional music.

In the new forms of art music, a subject which is specially ascribed to Euba, the emphasis has shifted; for now; the principal function of the music is aesthetic. The composers of the new music 'intend their works for performance' by experts-before an audience which is 'not encouraged to participate in the performance but is required to devote its whole attention-to listening while the performance is going on. This in a way constitutes a radical change in the African approach to music.- It is true that some of the new art music, continues to maintain some kind of link with a social context. Here, church (liturgical) music, which comes in the form of choral music, analyzed above, perfectly fits into what Euba describes as the new forms of music. This music fulfils the kind of utilitarian function

for Christian worship that the old traditional sacred music fulfils for indigenous religious worship. The only difference is that it is not intended for performance, hence there is no audience; instead, active participation is encouraged.

It would be wrong to think of Nigerian traditional music as simply a reproduction of existing pieces. Within the strict confines of traditional contextual usage, the musician has ample room for creativity and to add something new. Some of the elements of the music which Nigerians accept today as their traditional heritage have not always been part of this heritage and have been freshly introduced at various points in history. Nigerian traditional music in its most "classical" form contains identifiable foreign elements, and from other African cultures. The point which should be inferred from all this is that preservation does not necessarily mean keeping music intact and insulated from outside influences. The customary agencies that have been responsible for the preservation of Nigerian traditional music through history until the present time have always maintained a fine balance between continuity and change. (Euba, 1976).

The components of the new musical art will be essentially those which constitute traditional music as we know it, but recombined in a new way and accordingly an extension of traditional culture. For example, repetition, although retained, will probably be subdued or camouflaged. An instrument which hitherto repeated the same pattern continuously may now share the pattern with other instruments – repetition certainly but with shifting timbres. This development would be both logical and desirable (Euba, 1975). The importance of art (particularly music) as a means of social unification as evidenced in traditional African communities as well as the Church remains indisputable.

Conclusion

In searching for new directions, it is important keep the areas of focus that give African music its identity clearly in view. To destroy this in the course of searching for wider perspectives, in the words of Nketia, would be like annihilating the foundations of one's musical culture and the basis of shared experience (Nketia, 1982). An African composer

must, therefore, master the fundamentals of African melody and rhythm so that he can create typical African tunes based on different varieties of scales and other musical elements used in African societies. It must be reiterated that the watchwords must be openness and standard, while embarking on any compositional project as an African. Music in its role of unification breaks boundaries, and this must always be borne in mind; hence, the need to be as versatile as possible while remaining authentic to the African heritage and identity.

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