# Demystifying the Compositional and Performance Elements of Nigerian Vocal Art Music

Sunday Ofuani

Department of Music, Delta State University, Abraka.

### **Abstract**

The need to replicate Nigerian musical elements in art music composition is always emphasized in contemporary discourse of 'Nigeria and issue of compositional identity'. But it appears that the aspect of demystifying its application concepts to up-coming composers or beginners is neglected. Thus, whether the elements are clearly understood in applied-composition sense or not is ignored. Possibly, this could be the basic impediment that limits its wide application among Nigerian vocal art music composers. Hence it is necessary and fundamental to expose, discuss and explain the workability of Nigerian compositional elements employed in vocal art music. In essence, the elements are revealed in order to guide the upcoming Nigerian composers towards adapting them in their compositions. These are demonstrated through analytical methods which are confirmed, proven and elucidated with relevant musical passages from Nigerian vocal art music scores. This paper is significant in provoking and unleashing the creative instincts of young Nigerian composers who may wish to be Nigerian in their vocal art music compositions.

**Keywords:** composition, vocal, art music, Nigeria, compositional element

### Introduction

Music is an important facet of any Nigerian society. Thus, in the traditional contexts music plays a more functional role; however its contemplative and entertainment roles are not totally ruled-out. It is usually transmitted from one generation to the other through oral tradition.

The presence of the Europeans in Nigeria (in respect to colonialism, Christian missionary activities, formal education etc.) facilitated the introduction, assimilation and influence of foreign concepts and approaches of music-making (composition), which lay emphasis on written music tradition via staff and/or sol-fa notation and usually in Western music styles/idioms. As a result, the Nigerian pioneer composers – that is, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to late 1970's composers – became enthusiastic in applying the prevailing characteristics of Western music in their compositions. Later on, (from the late 1970's) Nigerian composers sought for musical idioms, forms, elements, styles and genres etc. that could replicate the musical traditions of its immediate societies (see, Ogisi: 2008 and Onyeji, 2011: 9).

Thus, the initiative led to diverse compositional experiments that subsequently brought about the emergence and acceptance of diverse art music such as: Native-Air, Folk-Opera, African-Vocalism, African-Pianism and Drummistic Piano etc. The application of the elements is nationalism of Nigerian art music. Certainly, there is no way one could compose an effective musical work of African background without coining traditional music elements that those of Western cannot effectively express. This relates to Achebe's view in Osakwe (2011:58), that "...it will have to be a new English [music]...altered to suit its new African surrounding [audience]." In pursuing the same objective, some strayed Nigerian composers who later became conscious of the musical norms and values of its immediate societies and audience took a U-turn by employing Nigerian musical elements with or without the Western elements. The nationalistic movement is what gave rise to Nigerian vocal art music. Ogisi (2008: 156) acknowledges it, thus:

Nigerian composers took a U turn and wrote music that is for contemplative listening but based on the musical features of Nigeria. Composers, who were also scholars, responded to the prevailing mood and applied findings from researches in African music in their creative activities leading to remarkable change in compositional style or idioms. The composers became engaged in a philosophy that sought to create works that are African in every respect.

Stirred by these, Idamonyibo (2005: 67) advises that:

For a composer and his works to be relevant to the society in which he lives, he must have come in contact with the ensemble of his musical culture and must have learnt...the rhythmic structure and formation of this ensemble that serves as guide to an African literate composer. Nketia's works are relevant to his people because they have some resemblance with the traditional music of his culture and so are the works of Euba, Nzewi, Olaniyan, Uzoigwe etc. When a musical composition becomes too abstract, it becomes too difficult for the people to understand and appreciate. Music scholars should begin to practice what they have learnt by being more realistic in their works.

### The Compositional Elements of Nigerian Vocal Art Music

Apart from solo, duet and trio vocal works, the Western four-part (Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass) vocal format is most popularly favoured or utilised among Nigerian composers. However, the above voice-part format is at times varied to suit/carry an individual composer's intension in a composition. Voice-part format cannot portray the cultural background/identity of a musical piece; rather it is the musical elements embedded in them.

# Rhythm

Rhythm is the forward movement of music. A temporal pattern produced by the grouping and balancing of varying tone lengths in relation to an underlying steady and persisting succession of beats, which prevail in such elements as meter, time and tempo. The quintessence of rhythm in African music was long ago noted by Senghor in Chernoff (1979: 56) who confirms that, "Rhythm is the basis of all African art", and Jones (1959: 40) who points out that "Rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans." Roger (2002: 391) corroborates the assertions, as he certifies that:

Rhythm and percussion are highly emphasised in African music, reflecting the close link between

music and dance. African music tends to feature complex polyrhythm; in which, several different rhythmic patterns are played simultaneously and repeated over and over, and each instrument (voice) goes its own rhythmic way.

Polyrhythm: is an element and technique of African music composition in which several different contrasting linear rhythmic patterns are employed simultaneously. Rhythmic complexity or polyrhythm is never applied in African music un-orderly or haphazardly; rather each line of rhythm usually takes cue/link from others or even balances each other. So, African polyrhythm technique is a complex-whole phenomenon. In Idolor's (EI070) Glory, Hallelujah to His Name, polyrhythm dominates the entire work, especially bars 34 to 57 where some characteristic African instruments rhythms (e.g. the metal bell) and onamatpoeic sound syllables are simulated and projected through the vocal parts in polyrhythmic manner, thus:

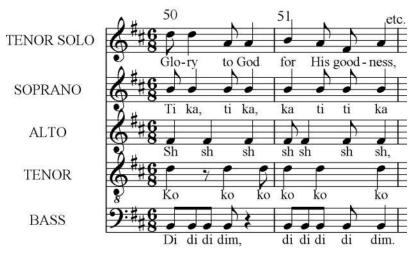


Fig. 1. Polyrhythmic texture and onamatpoeic sound syllables

Hemiola is rhythmic alternation technique that involves application of two-equal-beats against three-regular-pulses, or of three-equal-beats against two-regular-pulses. Hemiola rhythm patterns are well entrenched in the rhythmic norms of Nigerian music. Rhythmic swaggers and metric alternations are made possible with this technique. For instance, the Western metric concepts strictly see time 6/8 as 'compound-duple-time' but that of African disguises or

complicate the same time-frame by making it suggest the 'simple-triple-time' (time 3/4). This is achieved by having three-crotchet-notes juxtaposed into the two-pulse bar (two-dotted-crotchets). Vis-à-vis, time 3/4 can accommodate the method by employing two-dotted-crotchet-notes in a bar. Application of the technique in Nigerian art music is important since the rhythmic structures are prevalent in Nigerian songs of these time frames.

Hemiola enhances rhythmic intricacy. It is the hemiola concept and its resultant dilemma of rhythmic complicacy that subjects some Nigerian composers into adapting *dual-time-signature* (metric alternation) technique, which often is characteristic of music compositions in the time frame of: 3/4 and 6/8 etc. Thus, *dual-time-signature* method enables the performer to approach such composition with any of the prevailing time signatures. Whichever option, it is observed that the resultant rhythmic output usually remains the same.

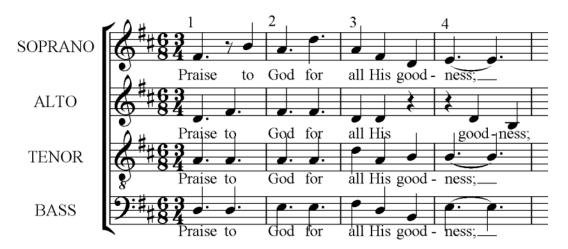


Fig. 2. Hemiola and the resultant dual-time-signature

Consider the 'fig. 2' passage from the *Glory, Hallelujah to His Name* which features *dual-time-signature* thus, any of the prevailing time-signatures can accurately project the rhythmic intention of the composer. Observe that when time 6/8 is in application, the entire bar 3 and the Alto part of bar 4 become hemiola. Vis-à-vis, if time 3/4 becomes the operating time, the entire bars 1, 2 and the Soprano, Tenor and Bass parts of bar 4 become the hemiola. All these translate to rhythmic and time frame alternations.

Below is another musical passage from the *Glory, allelujah to His name*, observe that the hemiola rhythm of the Tenor part counterpoints the regular beats of the Soprano, Bass and (the divisive rhythms of) the Alto part. Of which its resultant texture is polyrhythmic or rhythmic-intricacy.

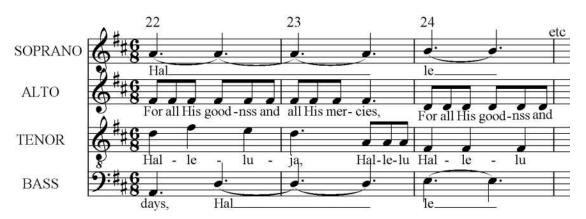


Fig. 3. *Rhythmic complexity* 

Below are the hemiola rhythmic schemes in time 6/8 and 3/4 respectively:



Fig. 4. Rhythmic patterns of hemiola in diverse time-signatures

In 'fig. 4a', the *three-crotchets* that counterpoint againt the two-dotted-crotchets is the hemiola rhythm. In 'fig. 4b', the *two-dotted-crotchets* that counterpoint against the three-crotchets is the hemiola rhythm. Nevertheless, the above demonstration of hemiola rhythmic technique does not attempt to accept the *two* time-frames as theoretically the same. No! While time 3/4 is a common-tripple-time, 6/8 is compound-duple.

Rhythmic theme/subject: This is the characteristic rhythm(s) of any musical composition. In African musical practices, rhythmic theme is often more notable than tonal theme. Rhythm can stand as the main subject and the creative nucleus of any Nigerian composition. Rhythmic theme/subject enables repetitions of a rhythmic pattern either in succession or at intervals. For example, the 'fig. 5' is the rhythmic theme of the Glory, Hallelujah to His Name. It keeps

recurring in real and false-sequences in the various voice-parts, melodies and harmonies of the piece.



Fig. 5. Rhythmic theme of the 'Glory, Hallelujah to His Name'

# Melody, Phraseology and Harmony

Although there are distributions of Nigerian musical instruments that can enhance melodic tones, the voice remains the major source of exploring melodic tones in its compositions.

According to Ekwueme (2004: 227) "The area of melody is obviously one where the determination is fixed by linguistic demands." Fundamentally, Nigerian vocal tunes are logogenic<sup>1</sup> in conception. But it has been argued that the characteristic tonal inflections of African languages are not enough reason why logogenic (linguistic) melody considerations should take dominance over the melogenic approach. Thus, according to Onyeji (2005:32):

While it is fairly common that sound choices for most Sub-Saharan African vocal music take into account the tonal inflections of the native languages, there is strong conviction/evidence that this is occasionally ignored for artistic and aesthetic needs of a composition. In Abigbo songs of Mbaise Igbo, for instance, there is a balance between musical interest and textual tones. While correlation between speech tones of text and melodic leaps occur, the expediency of aesthetics warrants deviations. Instances of tonal-inflection violations for musical interest without obscuring the linguistic meanings of the texts have been observed.

Yet, it is also true that apart from composing by adhering to word's tonal inflections in order to ensure that the vocal music communicates the intended messages, the same (logogenic) is what enables melodic identity of Nigerian vocal music. This is because varieties of rhythmic and tonal intricacies derivable from the rhythm-tone of diverse words of the multi-lingua attributes of Nigeria enhance: tribal rhythmic

characteristics, varied conjunct or flexible melodic movements and rare disjunct/wide movements, diverse melodic motifs and irregular phrasing patterns. Even if two, three and four bar melodic phrases are prevalent in Nigerian vocal art music, the irregular phrase patterns as a result of logogenic influence and grammatical structure words are unavoidable. Thus,

The internal divisions that mark off the musical phrases within a song tend to correspond closely to grammatical units of structure. That is, a musical phrase may be coterminous with a sentence, a clause, a phrase, or even a word that functions as a complete utterance. Such grammatical units of structure do not have to be of the same length; however where a song is in strict rhythm, a number of adjustments are made in the length of the verbal units to achieve symmetry and balance. (Nketia, 1975:179)

Harmony in contemporary Nigerian vocal art music is undoubtedly predominated by the harmonic idioms prevalent in its traditional music norms fused to those of the Western. So it is not impracticable or awkward to have the harmony of any Nigerian art music in fusion of: parallel movements of parts in thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths; duplications of parts in octaves; inherent harmony at the points of overlapping (between two different parts or call and response) with the Western harmonic idioms and principles. A typical example of such practice is the Idolor's (EI 067) *Eghele akpo oben eruo*, where parallel fourths harmony prevails between Soprano–Alto and between Tenor–Bass. This took place in bar 20-41, whereas bar 11-9 and 42-77 utilize synthesis of parallel harmony and the Western harmonic idioms or conventional voice-leading principles. Figure 6 demonstrates parallel fourths harmony as applied in the *Eghele akpo oben eruo*.



Fig. 6. Parallel fourths harmony

In the above musical passage, the Soprano and Alto harmonize in a homophonic parallel fourths, while the Tenor and Bass also move in the same pattern. Considering the two sets of parallel fourths hamony (Soprano-Alto and Tenor-Bass) in vertical sense, it is evident that polytexture techniques are resultant in the rhythmic and harmonic organizations. This is achieved by creating different entrance (fugal) points for the two harmonic sets, which provided the harmony an impression of harmonized canon style.

# **Language and Text**

To a certain extent, that words/texts of a vocal music composition prevail in English language cannot rob it the entire musical elements of Africa. After all, the Glory, Hallelujah to His Name was successfully composed in English language but in Nigerian music idioms. However, the use of local language is most preferable because it optimizes African compositional creativity and identity – since most African songs are conceived in logogenic sense. Local language also helps in adapting/exploring indigenous aphorism, proverbs, adages, riddles etc. in art music composition. Although there is nothing wrong in translating the said indigenous literal forms/device to English language, but it is observed that the texts, aphorisms and proverbs etc. tend to lose parts of their grammatical and functional meanings, tonal aesthetics, even their speech-rhythms and syllable distributions are hampered when translated. Therefore, Nigerian composers mostly favour the use of its local languages in their compositions not only for the sake of linguistic-nationalism but also to activate and enable all the linguistic elements that could contribute to optimizing realization of Nigerian vocal art music composition in every respect.

# Pattern, Form/Structure

Nigerian vocal art music compositions prevail in diverse vocal and/or instrumental accompaniment patterns/capacities. There are: pure solo, duets, trios, quartets, chorus (e.g. the S.A.T.B.), that may be accompanied by any or set(s) of Nigerian musical instruments in more of ostinato form. The keyboard instrument is at times adapted to strengthen both the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic quests of the vocal music and supplies introduction and interlude to the music.

Structural forms in Nigerian vocal art music are mainly those prevalent in its traditional songs. Agu (1999:15) notes that: solos, the call and response, the call and refrain, the solo and chorused refrain and the mixed structural forms prevail in traditional songs. The mixed structural form that combines all the forms to enhance larger structure is mostly applied in contemporary Nigerian vocal art music. The regular and irregular strophic forms are not left out. However, it is not devoid of the conventional (Binary, Ternary, and Rondo etc.) structural forms.

Repetition is a very essential technique in the structural feature of Nigerian vocal art music. It appears in variable forms, while some compositions exhibit repetition of a whole song or section; some repeats just a musical phrase, motif or sentence. Whichever way, it is uncommon to have a Nigerian vocal art music that did not pay homage to repetition of any type because of its advantages, which Agu (1999:50) identifies, thus:

- a) The repeated texts not only emphasize the words, but make them register properly in the minds of the listener;
- b) It helps to create variety in performances, and thereby arouses more interest;
- c) It helps to lengthen the short songs, thereby avoiding very brief performances and undesired endings;
- d) It offers enough ties for those who wish to express their inner feelings through dancing; and
- e) It offers the soloist sufficient tie to improvise and extemporize, while the composer is also offered enough opportunity for melodic variation in his composition.

Figure 7 is a repetitive passage from Idolor (EI020) *Nigeria, otore Ose owan*. In the musical score the passage is repeated consecutively for four (4) times before the coda. But in performance the passage could be repeated for more than four times. This enables extensive application of body-movement technique, thereby spicing-up the African music performance aesthetics.

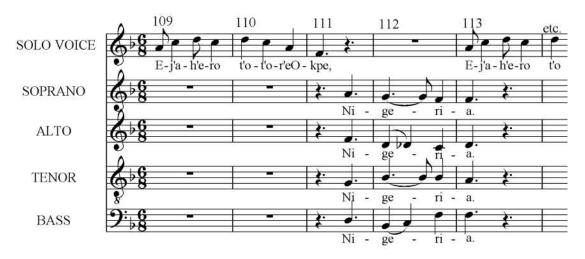


Fig. 7. Repetative fragment

### **African Vocalism**

Nigerian vocal art music composers simulate musical elements of its various traditional sound structures and effects like: sound imitation, yodelling, shout, crying, stamping, whistling, ululation, glissando and etc. In contemporary Nigerian vocal art music compositions, the elements are expected to be glaring or evident. Figure 1 demonstrates some vocal sound effects simulated/derived from the characteristic rhythmic-tone and the relative onomatopoeic-sound syllables of diverse Nigerian musical instruments. For example, Onyeji (2008) employed *African-vocalism* technique extensively. In fact, it is the basis of his works. The passage below (Fig. 8.) is from Onyeji (2008) '*Agada Giri*'. It demonstrates some vocal sound effects as applied in the composition.



Fig. 8. Some African vocalism techniques

# **Instrumental Accompaniment**

Traditional musical instruments are mostly employed as accompaniment to Nigerian vocal art music composition. But apart from few Nigerian vocal art music scores (like: Agu's *N'ihi na taa n'obodo Devid; Aga ekpughekwa ebube Jehova* etc. Akinwomi's *E korin iyin si Olorun* etc. Ofuani's *N'anurinu onu; Le k'osi di nma* etc. and few other Nigerian compositions) that the composers worked-out

the instrumental score, it is an unhealthy tradition that accompaniment score of traditional musical instrument is rarely included in most Nigerian vocal art music composition – even when it is intended to be accompanied with it. Although, it is also true that most performers in their own initiative create accompaniment to these works during performance; it is very essential for composers to include the full accompaniment score or at least a proposed representative ostinato score for the traditional musical instrument(s) expected to accompany any vocal art music. In Akinwomi's *E korin iyin si Olorun*, a two-bar ostinato rhythmic accompaniment for the Yoruba talking-drums is attached by the composer as appendix. The two-bar ostinato rhythmic pattern is a very good guidance to accompanists who may possibly develop or contrast it in performance. It is represented in the score thus:



(Fig. 9. Representative instrumental ostinato rhythmic pattern)

# **Tonality**

In traditional Nigerian vocal music-making, tonality is not conceptualized by name (say -KeyA) nor fixed to any song. But the importance of key exists in its performance through the technique of shifting tonality (see, Agu, 1999: 40). However, given the acceptance of written music traditions in Africa, Nigerian vocal art music composers/arrangers employ the 'conceptualized and fixed tonality' system, which in their scores prevail in diatonic major and/or minor key, modal tonality, some others are in pentatonic or hexatonic tonality. For example, the *Glory, Hallelujah to His Name* is in D-major *real pentatonic* tonality (see, Ofuani: 2013).

Modulation is often rare. However, a few Nigerian vocal art music features pivotal modulation to relative major or minor key. For

instance, the Sam Ojukwu's *Ma ekele diri Chineke* in key-F modulates to its subdominant key (Bb); but the home key was restored subsequently. Chromatic-alterations rarely occur. When it is employed, it is usually for embellishment purpose. As such very few Nigerian vocal pieces employ chromatic-alteration that induces modulation. Chromatic-embellishments are employed by lowering of the *leading note* (ta) and/or raising of the *tonic note* (de), *subdominant note* (fe), and the *dominant note* (se). Lowering of the *submediant note* (la), *mediant note* (ma) and raising of the *supertonic note* (re) are very rare.

## **Essential Features in Performance of Nigerian Vocal Art Music**

Nigerian vocal art music aesthetics do not depend solely on the composition and instrumentation, rather some traditional performance features are required to project a composition as typical Nigerian vocal music.

### **Expression**

Body-movements, Dance, Choreography: Even though Nigerian vocal art music performers have adapted the Western stage system, they blend the traditional performance sentiments/features (like body-movements, choreography and sometimes pure dance) to it. This is essential because traditionally, dance is integral in vocal music performance aesthetics and as a matter of fact the both are inseparable in traditional music-making. Consequently, it is a rare occurrence to have Nigerian performer(s) renders its piece by just standing in the stage. Neither does it require only facial expressions, rather the entire body feels and shows it in form of body-movements, dance and/or choreography. To this veracity, Nketia (1975: 206) observes that "For the African, the musical experience is by and large an emotional one: sounds, however beautiful, are meaningless if they do not offer this experience or contribute to the expressive quality of a performance."

Further Imitative Sound and Vocalism Effects: Most Nigerian composers rarely indicate or notate imitative sounds or vocal effects like yodelling, shout, stamping, ululation, etc. in their composition score; but experienced Nigerian performers skilfully apply them during performances. Even when a composer indicates some in the

score, it is observed that advanced performers do create some more during performance.

Costume: Is a visual facet of cultural manifestation, it helps to tell atsight the cultural background of the music, context or setting of performance. So, performing a Nigerian piece in a Western fabric could in large extent weaken, contradict and jeopardize all other efforts made to project Nigerian musical elements.

### **Conclusion**

Many cultures of the world have originated/established their distinct vocal art music type that derives from replication of its traditional musical elements. No music culture is unique to the other. The truth is that a people's musical norms and culture determines their musical taste/preference and that is what Nigerian vocal art music composers and performers should know and compose/perform vocal art music that portrays Nigerian music characteristics. In so doing, Nigerian composers can originate diverse nationalistic vocal art music styles and genres out of its multi-musical cultures.

# **Suggestion**

Composers/performers who have been involved in composing/performing in Western techniques should re-examine themselves and take a U-turn. While those who are already in-tune with replicating Nigerian musical elements and norms should strive further to simulate and develop more elements that could project Nigerian compositional techniques, identity and vocal art music genres to the global scene.

Globalization is the hub of the contemporary world, so it is important for Nigerian (African) composers to affix the English translation of any composition that prevails in any Nigerian local languages. The literal translation could be attached at the end of the composition as appendix. But where it is possible, it is more appropriate to align the English texts accordingly under their specific note(s) in the score.

It is also evident that in most Nigerian vocal art music scores the required accompaniment for the traditional instruments are rarely included. It is often left open for the performers' technical ability. This is not favourable in global scene. For instance, a non-African performer may desire to perform such piece. He will definitely find it difficult to employ the instrumentation. If this persists, how can non-African strive to appreciate, buy or learn Nigerian musical instruments? Which other way do we intend to globalize Nigerian instruments that will be more effective than reflecting them in our musical scores? Therefore, it is ideal that full score or at least a representative score of instrumental accompaniment to Nigerian vocal art music should be attached as part of a vocal music composition by its composer.

In respect to arguments on linguistic considerations of Nigerian vocal melody, composers/arrangers could strictly obey the tonal inflection patterns of any word(s)/text(s) at the opening sections or upon first occurrence of any word. After the initial enactments which may have enabled the listener(s) to digest the actual texts/messages of the music, the: logogenic, melogenic and pathogenic melodic approaches can then be widely applied in combination according to the composer's melodic skills and desires. In this, the exact message transfer of the texts and the composer's melodic creativity/adventures will not be forfeited, enslaved, hindered or limited.

#### **Notes**

1. Logogenic refers to a melody or music conceived base on the pattern or behaviour of the inflections/accents of words. While *melogenic* is a melody or music conceived out of musical reasoning/skill. *Pathogenic* melodies are those conceived out of emotion for example, mournful and joyful situations.

### References

- Agu, D. C. C. (1999). Form and Analysis of African Music. Enugu: New Generation Books.
- Chernoff, J. M. (1979). African rhythm and African sensibility, aesthetics, and social action In African musician idioms. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ekwueme, L.E.N. (1974). Linguistic Determinants of some Igbo Musical Properties. *Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3: pp. 335-353.

- Ekwueme, L.E.N. (2004). Essays on the Theory of African Music. Lagos: Lenaus Publishing.
- Idamoyibo, A.A. (2005). Art Music and National Identity: the Foundation for National Orientation and Development. *Abraka Humanities Review*. Vol. 1, No. 1: pp. 65-72.
- Jones, A. M. (1959). *Studies in African music* (Vol. 2). London: Oxford University Press.
- Nketia, J. H. K. (1975). *The Music of Africa*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Ofuani, S. (2013). Theory on Idolor's Technique of Pentatonic Vertical Harmony. *Awka Journal of Research in Music and the Arts*. Vol. 9, pp 45-54.
- Ogisi, A.A. (2008). The Development of Nigerian Art Music, 1920-2000. *Journal of the Association of Nigerian Musicologists*. Special edition: pp. 151-163.
- Onyeji, C. (2005). Composing Art Song Based on Igbo Traditional Music: Concept and Process in Contemporary Times. *Nigerian Music Review, No. 6.* Department of Music, University of Ife. Pp. 27-46
- Onyeji, C. (2011). Some Thoughts on Meki Philosophy of African Art Music Composition. In Onyiuke, Y. S., Idamonyibo, I. O. and Agu, D. C. (Eds.) *Mekism and Knowledge sharing of the Musical Arts* Nzewi's *of Africa*. Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick Ltd. Pp. 8-22
- Osakwe, M.I. (2005). Growing English and National Growth: The Nigerian Experience. *Abraka Humanities Review*. Vol. 1, No. 1: pp. 13-25.
- Roger, R. (2002). *Music: an Appreciation*. America: McGraw-Hill Companies.

### **Music Books in Reference:**

- Idolor, E. (2008). *African Choral Series*. Vol. 1, Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.
- Onyeji, C. (2008). Nka Emume. South Africa: Plantinum Press.