

Compositional Exoticism in Selected Nigerian Literary Vocal Music: Explicating the Figurative-Sound Idioms

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Abstract

Despite the fact that musical idioms are compositionally efficacious in arousing aural imageries and effects, especially in their enhancement of Nigerian literary music identity and nationalism, there is a dearth of scholarly studies on them. This paper, via score reading and sampling of relevant literary nuances, theoretically explicates the compositional utility and rationale of figurative-sounds in the vocal music of some eminent Nigerian composers. It argues that the idioms creatively permeates sonic-imagery, sonic-reference, and sonic-allusion of replicated phenomenon as Nigerian contemporary composers in their search for indigenous sonic materials stylistically indulge in utilizing figurative-sounds in their vocal music.

Keywords: *Figurative-Sound Idioms, Literary Vocal Music, Nigerian Composers*

Introduction

Figurative-sound denotes musical imitation, representation, and replication of typical sound-rhythm motifs that are associated with human beings, animals, events, and objects. Although figurative-sound-motif is purely non-musical in origin, it has survived as a distinct vocal music element. In other words, figurative-sound in music composition refers to the art of mirroring characteristic-sound motifs that are explicit in day-to-day sonic expressions, sonic gestures, sonic actions, and sonic activities of humans and non-humans.

Figurative-sounds are typically symbolic, sonically percussive, melorhythmic and creatively expressed in music as indefinite-pitch. Its efficacy in traditional music is such that the aesthetic, expressive, communicative, symbolic, contextual and ritualistic identities of diverse music are discerned by listeners who are accustomed to the sonic background of the music (Ofuani, 2017:158). While most figurative-sounds are fundamentally mirrored in music as poetic onomatopoeia and imagery, others, especially those sung by a deity priest are in essence metaphysically imbued and religiously symbolic. The potentials and essences of figurative-sound have been creatively adopted in some Nigerian literary vocal music wherein it functions as expressive, interpretative, communicative and aesthetic element towards heightening creative appreciation of the compositions.

Given the compositional benefits and communicative efficacies that are imbued in figurative-sound, it is sought after by Nigerian contemporary music composers who creatively adopt it as a vehicle for advanced musical outpour of sounds and continuum of traditional musical-arts idioms and aesthetics. This has significantly contributed in enhancing compositional creativity, identity and nationalism in Nigerian literary vocal music. Ethnographic inquiry and compositional utility of traditional music materials and norms are thus practiced among Nigerian composers to reflect the socio-cultural and environmental sonic matrixes and identities of the people. Contemporary utility of figurative-sounds in music therefore contributes in accentuating and accomplishing the primary creative objectives of Nigerian composers, which include compositional utility of indigenous music norms and materials. This objective was motivated through “cultural awareness” (Nzewi, 1997:1); “compositional nationalism influences” (Uzoigwe, 1992:12 & Ogisi, 2008:155); “quest for creative relevance and identity” (Onyeji 2011:10) and “continuity and change in indigenous music practices” (Onaiwu, 2005:29). The theories (Uzoigwe, 1992:12; Ogisi, 2008:155; Onyeji 2011:10; Onaiwu, 2005:29) alongside their influences and objectives are currently in vogue among Nigerian composers.

Conceptual Foundation

Literary music composition approach (that is, music composed in written tradition) came to Nigeria alongside early European Christian missionaries and colonial masters (Ofuani, 2014:141). It gained prominence and influence among Nigerian peoples and societies through music-making in the orthodox churches, missionary schools and concert halls (Onyeji, 2011:8). Otherwise before the advent of colonial masters and Christian missionaries in Nigeria, music-making in the societies was purely oral, essentially functional, communal and limited to the musical norms and resources of a given society. According to Onyeji (2011:8), Nigerian pioneer composers eventually emerged with significant influence of European musical styles, norms and elements.

In tracing the history of art music nationalism in Nigeria, Ogisi (2008:156) informs that, it was in the late 1970s that Nigerian composers became aware of the need for literary music with substantial indigenous music idioms, styles and materials incorporated. The composer therefore occupied themselves in compositional experiment and adoption of the wide spectrum of indigenous rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, vocal and instrumental materials as well as figurative-sounds.

The cultural awareness, which calls for new compositional approach demands a composer to study and assimilate indigenous sonic and music idioms and, utilizing them in composition. This new awareness in literary music composition brought about indigenisation of European literary music forms and it has helped in enhancing Nigerian literary music identity. Although fusion of indigenous and European music elements is somewhat unavoidable in Nigerian type of literary music, the compositional art of utilizing indigenous styles and materials is a principal facet that sustains the relevance and acceptance of their works. All these validate and support repositioning, continuity and change of indigenous music practices as dominant concept in Nigerian contemporary literary music.

Sound or sonic is “something that can be heard – something audible” (Microsoft Encarta, 2009), which may be in form of definite-pitch, indefinite-pitch, timbre or combination of them. Sound is said to be characteristic when it is used to image the sonic-rhythm

feature of a phenomenon towards establishing explicit aural perception and recognition of it. Characteristic-sound otherwise denotes sonic-rhythm distinguishing or sonic representative of a particular gesture, expression, scenario or thing. Motif is “[...] the smallest identifiable musical idea. It can consist of a pitch pattern, a rhythmic pattern or both” (Kostka & Payne, 2000:162); “It could be as short as two notes” (Taylor, 2002:187). Characteristic-sounds are often short. Motif in this study similarly denotes precise ordering of characteristic-sound/rhythm in music. Vocal refers to music that is sung using human voice with linguistic implication.

From the defined musical concepts, ‘figurative-sound’ compositionally means a *motivic* representation of characteristic-sound of a phenomenon in vocal music. From the backdrops, it becomes explicit that, figurative-sound is musical imitation and representation of characteristic-sound inspired by various human and non-human sonic expressions, activities, gestures, actions, scenarios and environments. It therefore helps to create explicit sonic-impression, sonic-reference and sonic-allusion of the replicated characteristic-sound.

Imagine composing vocal music that sonically reflects biblical account of Jesus Christ’s birth, which took place in a certain animal-house at Bethlehem (Luke, 2:7). Compositionally, the figurative-sounds of notable domestic animals such as ‘bleating’ of sheep and goat – “mehh” and “moooo” of cattle may be onomatopoeically replicated in the vocal music. In reflecting war scenario, figurative-sound of notable ammunitions such as clanging swords and gunshot may come to mind.

Exoticism in music refers to a piece that is strikingly different or unusual in idiomatic contents, style and approach. Exotic music is usually colourful and exciting or suggesting distant countries and unfamiliar culture. Europeans may in this regard consider Nigerian contemporary literary music composed based on cultural principle of reposition, simulation and continuity of indigenous idioms as exotic. Musical exoticism is therefore imbued as indicator of cultural background of a music composition. Simulation of indigenous musical idioms such as figurative-sound consequently elevates aural perception of a piece towards exoticism.

Discussion of Findings

This study focuses on explication of figurative-sounds in some vocal music by Nigerian composers. Only Nigerian vocal music that features figurative-sound is therefore relevant in the discourse. Since all relevant pieces cannot be cited in a given example, those used are considered as representative. Figurative-sounds are elucidated and analysed in this section vis-à-vis their application in Nigerian contemporary vocal music compositions.

Onomatopoeic Sonic Idiom

Onomatopoeic sonic-rhythm is melorhythmic imitation of a characteristic-sound. This is generally inspired by the orientation or natural sound traits of anything. Onomatopoeic figurative-sound is by far more extensively utilized and emphasised in Nigerian vocal music. Composers, such as Okechukwu Ndubuisi, Christian Mordi, Emurobome Idolor, Christian Onyeji, Sunday Ofuani, etc. explore varieties of it towards appropriating relevant musical imagery in their music. It is also employed in vocal music as poetics, melorhythmic accompaniment, embellishment sound and aesthetic device.

There are several onomatopoeic imitations of orientation sound-rhythm that characterize some indigenous musical instruments. Herein, the composer explores the orientation sound-rhythm of indigenous musical instruments, such as “Agogo” (small clapperless-bell), “Okpokolo” (woodblock), “Egede” (Membrane-drum) etc.:

The image shows a musical score for SATB choir, labeled 'bar 44' and 'Emurobome, Idolor'. The score is in 6/8 time and G major. It features five staves: Tenor Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are: 'Glo-ry to God for His good-ness, Ti ka ti ka ka ti ti ka Ti ka ti ka ka ti ti ka Ti ka ti ka ka ti ti ka Sh Ko Di di di dim, di di di di dim. Di di di dim, di di di di dim. Di di di dim, di di di di dim.' The score includes various rhythmic patterns and dynamics, such as 'dim.' (diminuendo).

Fig. 1: Onomatopoeic Imitation of the Characteristic-Sound/Rhythm of some Indigenous Musical Instruments for Human Voices (SATB)

Observe in Fig. 1 musical fragment (an excerpt from “Glory, Hallelujah to His Name” by Idolor (2008:1-13), characteristic-sounds/rhythms of some indigenous musical instruments are creatively imitated in the vocal parts to poetically function as vocal-instrumental interlude (Bar 33-49) as well as poetic accompaniment to the tenor vocal solo (Bar 50-57). “Agogo” is replicated in soprano part, “Sekere” (Guard-Rattles) in alto part, “Okpokolo” in tenor part and “Egede” in bass part.

Replication of the instruments’ orientation melorhythmic nuances in human voices is such that, the composer simultaneously reflects the totality of indigenous vocal and instrumental forces in a vocal music without featuring an instrument. In performance, singers of the piece would need to image the timbres (sound-quality) of the instruments replicated for their voices. The alluded vocal-instrumental music aesthetically raises affectionate sonic-poetics and arouses exotic psychoacoustic effects that are associated with the indigenous instruments. Aside from the excerpt from Idolor (2008:5-8) illustrated above, the idiom and style are basis of some pieces in Onyeji (1997:45-50; 2008), Ofuani (2016), Agu (1998) and many others. Figuratively, this devise is essentially poetic by its basic features as onomatopoeic idiom.

There is also onomatopoeic imitation of the characteristic-sounds made by animals. In this case, some composers appropriate the characteristic-sound of certain animals in their vocal music. Although this is rarely used, composers explore it when painting sonic pictures of certain relevant scenario or context. Nigerian literary vocal forms such as native-airs, chorales and folk-operas feature it. Observe in Fig. 2 (an excerpt from a Christmas Choral Anthem by Christian Mordi, composed in 1993), the composer creates sonic scenario of Jesus Christ’s birth setting. Figurative-sounds of relevant domestic animals which perhaps surrounded Jesus’ birth setting were mirrored for human voices (alto, tenor and bass parts):

bar 31 Christian, Mordi

A-tu-ru'a n'e_ be: E - wu n'e_ be: E - fi n'e_ be: Nne Ya bu Me - ri ru-na-ta
 A-tu-ru'a n'e_ be:mee e! E - wu n'e_ be: mee e! E - fi n'e_ be: muu u! Nne Ya bu Me - ri ru-na-ta
 E! mee e! mee e! muu u! Nne Ya bu Me - ri ru-na-ta
 E! mee e! mee e! muu u! Nne Ya bu Me - ri ru-na-ta

Fig. 2: Onomatopoeic Imitation of Characteristic-Sounds of Sheep, Goat and Cattle

In Fig. 2 musical passage, characteristic bleating sound of sheep and goat (“mehh”) as well as “mooo” sound of cattle are onomatopoeically imaged in alto, tenor and bass parts using a distorted combination of appoggiatura, glissando and indefinite-pitch techniques. The musical fragment (Fig. 2) is also relevant as scenery or environmental figurative-sound.

Cases abound where figurative-sounds that commonly function as socio-cultural code, signal or telegraph are musically replicated. “Onye n’e me no n’u zo mo?” by Okechukwu Ndubuisi fits the example. In the piece, a popular signal melo-rhythmic pattern that connotes: “open the door for me” or “someone is at your doorstep” is appropriately replicated. The signal melo-rhythmic pattern stands out as theme of the piece. And, it heightens the piece sonically, dramatically and communicatively. Even as the piece was written in Igbo language, none Igbo listeners usually grasp elements of the lyrical messages through the figurative-sound – “kpom kpom kpom” rhythmically expressed as :

Fig. 3: A Chorale Featuring a Sound-Rhythm Pattern that Connotes: ‘Open the Door for Me’

Scenic Sonic Idioms

In “Ndi Okoli” (Gossipers) by Ofuani (2015:191-198), there is a compositional sonic-imagery of local female gossipers’ action at the hit of their gossip expedition. Fit achieved through creative combination of characteristic handclap, impressionistic nonsense syllables, quasi-laughing gesture and glissando techniques. Fig. 4 is an excerpt from the composition, with focus on Bar 42:

Fig. 4: A Compositional Craft of Imagery Sonic that Characterizes Female Gossipers

It should be borne in mind that, Fig. 2 musical excerpt is also relevant as scenic sonic idiom. This is because animal-house scenery is sonically captured in the composition. A listener does not need to understand the language (Igbo) in discerning the scenic setting of the music.

Ironic Sonic Idiom

There is a compositional replication of sounds emitted by the mouth when chewing something, such as palm-fruit. This is creatively captured using figurative-sound technique to ironically depict sexual intercourse sonically. The technique is compositionally explored in “Akwu Cha N’o Po” (Public Fruit) by Ofuani (2015:155-190). Fig. 5 is a passage from the music, with the Bars 26 and 27 as reference points:

The musical score consists of four staves labeled S, A, T, and B. Each staff has a vocal line with lyrics in Igbo and an English translation. The lyrics are:

S: po; O - nye pu - sha'o kpa - li taa." - Cha kwu, cha kwu, cha kwu, cham! Kro kro krom!

fruit; that ev' - ry - one plucks and eat." - Cha kwu, cha kwu, cha kwu, cham! Kro kro krom!

A: po; O - nye pu - sha'o kpa - li taa." - Cha kwum, cha kwum cham! Kro kro krom!

fruit; that ev' - ry - one plucks and eat." - Cha kwum, cha kwum cham! Kro kro krom!

T: po; O - nye pu - sha'o kpa - li taa." - Cha kwum, cha kwum cham! Kro kro krom!

fruit; that ev' - ry - one plucks and eat." - Cha kwum, cha kwum cham! Kro kro krom!

B: po; O - nye pu - sha'o kpa - li taa." - Cha kwu, cha kwu, cha kwu, cham! Kro kro krom!

fruit; that ev' - ry - one plucks and eat." - cha kwu, cha kwu, cha kwu, cham! Kro kro krom!

Fig. 5: A Compositional Craft of Sound-Rhythms that Images Sexual Intercourse

Vulgar and sex related lyrics could be offensive or embarrassing to a civilised audience. A creative composer avoids this by figuratively deploying ironic sonic idiom technique towards poetic shading/masking of vulgar or sexual lyrics with the intended messages well communicated. Ironic sonic is in this sense deployed in Fig. 5. The composer sonically presents a sexual intercourse scenario through the use of ironic sonic. This is made possible through replication of the characteristic-sounds emitted by the mouth when chewing something. The composer ironically used it in creating a clear allusion and imagery of sounds heard from sexual intercourse.

Personification and Allusive Sonic Idioms

Although owl is a nocturnal bird, among some Nigerian communities owls are believed to be disguised witches. Sound of owl in such communities therefore unleashes certain psychological environment of fear and cold emotion. Thus in the composition “Ndi Amusu” (Witches), the characteristic-sound of owl is captured using personification sonic idiom. The composer used the idiom to create a musical environment and sonic allusion of witches. These are captured in the music through replication of owl cooing, using imitative technique. While the impressionistic nonsense syllable pattern “ko ko ko ko koo koo” characterizes the night cooing of owl, “zi gi zi gi zam zam” sonically represents the flapping feathers of a flying owl. The sonic imageries explicitly suggest present of a witch. All of these sonic personifications were used in the music to establish a human character as a witch. Through sonic personification of the singing character as an owl the entire narrative becomes explicit. Fit achieved through creative fusion of impressionistic nonsense syllable patterns, appoggiaturas, sliding, portamenti and glissandi techniques.



Fig. 6: Sonic Personification of Owl Voice towards Illustrating a Witchcraft Narrative

The musical narrative of witchcraft in the piece would not be contextually and musically realistic without the creative replication of relevant sonic attributes of owl. As explicit in Fig. 6, the composer sonically personified the singer as an owl. A singer who sang the solo part of the piece was fondly nicknamed ‘Witch’ by members of the choral and audience. And, this is because the solo singer was creatively personified to sound as an owl. Indeed without the sonic personification of the singer as an owl, the piece (Witches) would not

communicate in-depth and realistic contextual meaning to the listeners.

Wails and Exclamatory Sonic Idioms

This is the most popular figurative-sounds adopted in Nigerian vocal music. Sonic expressions of grief, surprise and jubilation are achieved through adaptation of exclamatory sonic. This is utilized in form of musical wails, shouts, interjection, yells and outcry. Ululation technique that functions as expression of grief or jubilation is also exclamatory sonic. Subtexts such as “ewo” “o” “o ko ko” “m-hm” “hei” “ewehh” and “chei” etc are quite often employed when executing exclamatory sonic idioms in music. Although they are partial texts, they function as sources of musical sound.

Sam Ojukwu, in the theme music of “Things Fall Apart” (Achebe, 1958), entitled “Ikemefune” explores verities of musical wails, exclamations and ululations towards creative expression of anguish, which the biological mother of Ikemefune was passing-through when Okonkwo adopted her only son (Ikemefune) as a sacrificial restitution to Umuofia people. Sam Ojukwu was compositionally empathetic in harnessing the heartbreaking scenario. He creatively deployed relevant sonic idioms in the composition. This in turn elevates the pathetic, emotional and aesthetic appeals of the music. The technique facilitates poetic abstraction and interpretation of the situation as it enables the music to aesthetically and emotionally communicate the sorrowful circumstance. Wails, exclamations and ululations illuminate all the sorrowful textual statements in the piece. Poetic subtexts such as: “o ko ko ko” and “tin nom nom ti no lo lom” (which imply: ‘disaster or tragedy has happen’). Below is a passage from “Ikemefune”. While the extract segments 1, 2 and 3 are galvanised with wails “o ko ko ko”; the extract segment 4 is enhanced with poetic subtexts “tin nom nom ti no lo lom” (which imply: ‘disaster or tragedy is about to happen’):

Extract segment 1: O-ko-ko - ko! ___ I-ke-me - fu-n'e je g'i je o-du-gha-fi kwe sua n'a ni O-ko-ko - ko! ___

Extract segment 2: O ny'a ra -pu'n chi maa nwa-ta n'a kpa'n ku n'o fia ___ O-ko-ko - ko! ___ O-kon-kwo'a kpo-lu I-kem

Extract segment 3: naa n'U muo - fia. Tin nom nom ti no lo lom U-bo-si a naa kpu nye nu; Tin nom nom ti no lo lom

Extract segment 4: (Lyrics are not explicitly written for this segment in the image)

Fig. 7: Extracts of Wails and Exclamatory Sonic from “Ikemefune” by Sam Ojukwu

Emotional state of audience who listened to performance of “Ikemefune” is generally sympathetic and empathetic. After its performance, some members of the audience sympathize with the singer as if she is the actual victim. The literary messages of the piece, the sad scenarios, the sad situation and the grievous predicament of Ikemefune’s mother are creatively divulged in the piece through musical wails and exclamations that garnish each of the grievous texts. Ululation technique in form of screaming and glissando is overwhelmingly used in Onyeji (2008:80) to secure performance showmanship, virtuosity and aesthetics:

Ululation

Scream following the musical contour using any vowel of choice

Fig. 8: A Typical Ululation Technique, from Onyeji (2008:80)

Unlike wails and exclamation which arouse pathetic and grievous scenarios, ululation could be creatively explored to express jubilation, showmanship and aesthetics. However, because ululation largely parallels exclamation in sonic temperament and function, their compositional essences and rationales are interwoven.

Decorative Sonic Idiom

Nigerian composers adorn their music with varieties of decorative sonic idioms, which essentially function as embellishment and accompaniment. Decorative idiom features in music as indefinite-pitch, speech-sonic, musical nonsense syllables, handclap, fast rolling of tongue and lips, whistling, foot stamping, tongue slapping, body-beating and glissando etc. The idioms are used to create musical disparity and contrast. Fig. 9 is an excerpt from Onyeji (2008:88). Observe the decorative sonic devices such as the fast rolling of tongue and lips, ululation, handclap, glissando, indefinite-pitch notes, musical nonsense syllables (“chi chi o”) and foot stamp, which are creatively deployed to adorn the music.

Note: *mbrrrrrru* means fast rolling tongue and lips; √ is foot stamp; ~~~~~ is Ululation; — is handclap; × is indefinite pitch
Fig. 9: Multiple Utilization of Decorative Sonic Idioms in “Hi-yom” by Christian Onyeji

Decorative sonic devices are necessary in virtuoso pieces. They functionally help to secure tonal decoration, abstraction of sounds, advanced creativity and performance showmanship. Comparatively, what embellishment notes such as trill, mordent, appoggiatura and acciaccatura are to European composers is what decorative sonic idioms are to Nigerian composers.

Other Sonic

There are other figurative-sounds derived from human activities which are in essence musically and poetically informative, for example, hissing, mouth-whistling, booing, laughing and chest-beating. All these are appropriated in Nigerian literary vocal music to express and mimic certain human actions. The idioms exhibit some level of implied meaning. It is creatively harnessed towards musical communication of symbolic sonic. It facilitates deeper interpretation of a musical piece. One or a combination of these sonic: indefinite-pitch, glissando, speech-tone, handclapping, foot-stamping, chest-beating, fast-rolling of tongue/lips, yodelling, hissing, exclamation, humming, mouth-whistling, nonsense syllables, boos, hissing and scoffing etc techniques could be used to musically appropriate human and non-human sonic gestures and actions. Appropriation of these and other figurative-sounds in vocal music helps to secure and convey bizarre/mystic aesthetics as well as communicating symbolic information. The identity, aesthetics and cultural relevance of Nigerian literary vocal music are largely domiciled in creative appropriation of figurative-sounds. A skilful composer in this wise is creatively made.

Conclusion

This study has explicated figurative-sounds utilized in Nigerian literary vocal music compositions. It has shown that creative utility of the idioms permeates exotic sonic-representation of characteristic and symbolic sounds that are humanly and non-humanly informed within the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. The Nigerian composers' indigenous sonic materials are therefore unlimited – the characteristic sounds, rhythms and timbres of phenomena around the composers are at their creative disposal. This places the music composers as abstractors, proliferators, and custodians of the characteristic sounds in Nigerian society.

Compositionally, the figurative-sounds permeate creative freedom as they are linguistically not tonally inflated (Ekwueme, 2004: 237 & 294; Ofuani, 2016: viii). Figurative-sounds also help to secure and heighten dramatic connotations in music as well as arousing multidisciplinary aesthetics and general enjoyment of a

vocal music in which it is appropriately utilized. The idioms are sonically and figuratively efficacious in textual coding and masking. Their efficacies in musical creativity, contrast, performance showmanship, and aesthetics are therefore significant.

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