
MUSIC IN NIGERIA

by

DR. E. M. EDET

(University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria)

Nigerian musical practice can be divided into three categories for analysis: indigenous or tribal folk music; Western-influenced inter-tribal music; and Western music.

The first group includes all the music that is tribally based, while the second group, by the very nature of its name, denotes music that is Nigerian rather than that rooted in a particular tribe, i.e., High-life, Afro-calypso, Nigerian jazz, the indigenous Church music, and the music written by Nigerian composers based on tribal themes. The third group, Western music, though not indigenous, must nevertheless be examined because of the continuous influence of this music on the other two categories.

Indigenous music in Nigeria is still largely tribally rooted. Consequently, the musical practice, the characteristics of the music and the place of music in society, differ greatly from one tribe to another.

The death rites are an example of this fragmentation. Among the Moslem-influenced tribes in the North, there is no musical performance at funerals. On the other hand, in the South the musical performance at funeral rites may be omitted entirely or occupies a prominent place in a funeral ceremony lasting more than two weeks, depending on the tribe and the position of that particular person in the tribe. For example, among the Binis, a woman who is childless is buried almost immediately without a ceremony. In fact, most of the seven Bini special death songs reflect the importance of having children. In contrast to this, the death of a commoner among the Ekoi is celebrated for three to five days. In part of the songs they mimic what the deceased was doing during his lifetime. On the other hand, the death of a chief among the Boki is kept secret until after the ceremonies and sacrifice to the "Atam" juju.

The celebrations of birth and puberty vary from tribe to tribe. The Bini, Idoma, Boki and Ekoi have birth rites, while most of the other tribes do not. The Idoma, Ekoi, and Ijaw among others still have a puberty festival, whereas this ceremony is now omitted among many other tribes.

There also may be some fragmentation between various sections of a tribe in musical practice: For example, only some of the Boki have puberty rites and only some of the Ibos celebrate birth or the naming ceremony.

Musical ceremonies are performed in connection with other aspects of tribal life, such as calendar festivals, and religious rituals. These performances also show signs of fragmentation. In the North, the calendar rites are on the whole restricted to Moslem festivals. Although there may be some form of a harvest festival, it will not be musically celebrated. In contrast to this, both in the South and the North, the harvest festival is still an important musical event. Fragmentation also shows in the place of music in the society, the place of the musician in the society, and the societal prohibitions which operate both for and against the practice of music.

The tribal music discussed above has only a limited audience because it is rooted in the tribal society. In addition, a good many of the younger generation are not conversant with this music. On the other hand, the Western-influenced inter-tribal music is now the most popular of all of the music categories.

Of this group, high-life appeals to the largest audience. Though some varieties of high-life are still tribally based, most of them require only a knowledge of the Nigerian way of dancing to be performed. There are some exceptions to this rule — the so-called Tiv high-life, the *swange*, which is a circle dance and bears no resemblance to Nigerian

high-life as such. It is typical Tiv music with a five-tone scale, indigenous instruments (the *algaita*, two sets of drums, and a metal gong) and Tiv rhythm. In fact, it would be almost impossible to dance regular high-life steps to the rhythm of Tiv high-life.

The Nigerian calypso is also popular. This form is derived from the West Indian calypso and shows its influence in the content, the rhythm, and the form of the song.

It is interesting to note that calypso, which retains a large percentage of African characteristics, has returned to the West Coast of Africa and has been re-introduced and influenced the musical practice in the area.

There is also a small amount of what could be called pseudo-jazz practised by Nigerian bands. Though there are one or two groups who try to play jazz as it is performed today in America, most of the groups tend to play an inferior imitation of "rock-and-roll" or an inadequate imitation of the South African jazz.

One wonders if it is necessary for Nigerian bands to play this type of music. If it is considered necessary, then it is also important that they begin to familiarize themselves with jazz idioms in the way that popular dance band musicians have done in Europe, in the West Indies, and in South America. It would probably be wiser for these bands to listen to other types of jazz and then evolve a Nigerian jazz based on Nigerian idioms in the way that the South Africans have evolved their South African jazz. It is always better to be original.

Indigenous Church music also appeals to a large group of people.

The adaptation of Western Christianity to Nigerian society poses problems of acculturation. There are two approaches to the subject. The first stresses the need to keep the Western Christian ritual, while the opposing viewpoint stresses the incorporation of Nigerian features into Christian worship.

These two viewpoints are not separated racially. Nigerians as well as Europeans are adherents of both points of view. Some of the bitterest opponents of the introduction of Nigerian music into the church are Nigerians and one of the earliest attempts to introduce this music was made by Anglican missionaries in 1909.

The adherents of the first viewpoint are believers in the unity of Christianity and Western civilization. This is the view that was fostered in the early schools and churches. The others believe that Christianity should not be presented to the Nigerian in foreign garb. The music and the language should be understandable. They argue that when Christianity was first adapted by the Romans, it lost some of its Judaic features. The features retained were changed to fit the new circumstances. For example, the Canticles of the Judaic Church were developed into the plainsong of the Christians. Moreover, when the Protestant Reform began, the congregational hymn was introduced for the first time into worship. In a similar manner, Christianity should be adapted to fit the needs of the Nigerians. This argument is valid. The ideas and beliefs of Christianity can be presented without the trappings of Western civilization.

The acceptance of this idea raises further questions. How much of Nigerian cultural features can be incorporated into worship without losing the essence of Christianity? Two criteria should be considered in making a decision: the incorporated features must not be inimical to Christian worship, and the religious nature of the service must be retained. This could mean that the music could be Nigerian in rhythm, melody and tempo as long as it was religious in ethos and emotion.

All the music produced by the wedding of Christianity to Nigerian idioms is musically interesting. In addition it has the added value of being more meaningful to the indigenous worshipper.

There are relatively few Western musicians as such in Nigeria. The Western popular music as practised, seems to be of a rather inferior quality.

This statement could also be made about the Western Church music and art music performed in this area. Though the singing of hymns in the Church is usually comparable and in some cases superior to that in any other church anywhere in the world,

the practice of introducing oratorios and masses without properly trained voices, especially for the solos, seems to be a bit dubious.

It has resulted in poor tone quality which has itself resulted in poor performance. Since there are relatively few trained musicians in Nigeria, there is correspondingly little Western art music performed. Some folk songs are included in festivals and private programmes, but these performances can also be criticized because of poor tone quality, and interpretation.

This has been an all too brief survey of musical practice in Nigeria today, and if it is over critical, it is because the author believes that for Nigerian musicians to make their contribution to world culture, they must first be *Nigerian* musicians rather than imitators of other types of music and musicians. It would seem more important for a Nigerian musical idiom to evolve, than for the Nigerian musician to try to conquer fields already overcrowded by people who have been exposed to Western music all their lives and are therefore not handicapped from the beginning by their inadequacies.