



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A  
ARTS & HUMANITIES - PSYCHOLOGY  
Volume 14 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2014  
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal  
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)  
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

## Appreciating Ghanaian Choral Music: George Mensah Essilfie's *Yɛdze Wo Kɛseyɛ Maw'* (We Ascribe to your Greatness) In Perspective

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**Abstract-** Ghana grew out of formal music education introduced into Ghana's educational system during the colonial period. Western music and its stylistic features of compositional techniques were then espoused and put to use. Conversely, this comprehensive espousal of foreign traditions impeded the very existence of indigenous Ghanaian cultural practices – especially music. The early twentieth century saw the nation's musical icons like Ephraim Amu, Nketia among others, initiating a crusade to resuscitate Ghanaian indigenous musical traditions.

Through a critical analysis of a representative work, 'Yɛdze Wo kɛseyɛ MaW' (We ascribe to your greatness) the authors introduce one "contemporary" Ghanaian composer, George Essilfie Mensah, whose pieces demonstrate bimusicality, a syncretism of traditional Ghanaian and western musical styles which presents his works appreciating to Ghanaian Choral music performers. The paper seeks to serve as model for the study of a blend of traditional and western elements in choral music.

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**GJHSS-A Classification :** FOR Code : 950101, 190407



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# Appreciating Ghanaian Choral Music: George Mensah Essilfie's *Yɛdze Wo Kɛseyɛ MaW'* (We Ascribe to your Greatness) In Perspective

Dr. Joshua Alfred Amuah <sup>α</sup> & Kras Kofi Arthur <sup>σ</sup>

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper covers a momentary history of music education in Ghana and a description of some traditional Ghanaian musical elements to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the musical analysis. The parameters which have been set for the analysis are: melodic construction, scale patterns, harmonic structures among others.

Again, the paper discusses the versatility with which Mensah Essilfie demonstrates bi-musicality by subjecting indigenous African Music to Western Compositional Styles and vice versa in his piece *Yɛdze Wo kɛseyɛ MaW'* (We ascribe to your greatness).

The composer under study is chosen for his distinguished affinity for writing for voices coupled with his masterful sense of textual relationship to the music he composes. There are, of course, hundreds of Ghanaian choral composers down through history, and it is common knowledge that Ghana has produced very

prominent art composers who have contributed immensely towards the tonal tradition.

The other sections of the paper discuss the influence of the church, art composers, music syllabuses for Teacher Training Colleges and a case study of the composer comprising his biography and analysis of the selected piece from his repertoire. Although Mensah has composed a host of choral music, this paper concentrates on his *Yɛdze Wo kɛseyɛ MaW'* (We ascribe to your greatness) which contains adequate use of the analytic parameters set for the study; melodic construction, harmonic structures, scale patterns, chromatic harmonic usages among others.

## II. CHORAL MUSIC IN PERSPECTIVE

Young (1962:15) indicates "the sixteenth century is the first great climax in the development of choral music". He further states that "in this age choral music, for the last time, ranks as superior to instrumental. It is the age in which wealth, learning, feeling and a sense of purpose unite – for a brief period to demand fine music".

Sixteenth century music is largely vocal and was generally conceived as belonging to Cathedral Churches, the composition of which was according to ancient modal principles, based on subtle and varied rhythmic formulae and modest harmonic coloration.

Choral music has its practical value as anybody, even though reluctantly, would agree. In religion, choral music can sometimes aid a point of view. Many people in Ghana sing in choruses than join in any other performing arts — from church choirs to children's/youth choruses. Their repertoire comprises everything from contemporary gospel music, hymns to classical anthems.

Composers from the colonial times to the present day inspire us with their ability to capture emotions in song, whether their music is performed by a professional ensemble, school/college choir, church choir, male or female ensemble, or youth choir. Example of such songs are *Yaanom montie* (Folks, listen) by Nketia, *Yareɛyɛya* (it is painful to get sick) by Koo Nimo, *Asomdwoe mu* (in peace) by Ephraim Amu. Some musical icons like Ephraim Amu, Kwabena-

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Nketia, Nayo among others stand out as composers of distinction for their significant and perpetual contributions to our Ghanaian choral music culture —not only through original compositions, but also by preserving traditional or folk songs in what have become “standard” arrangements.

### III. ART MUSIC COMPOSERS IN GHANA

Amuah et al (2000: 87) contend that art music refers to music which has been notated and performed to be listened to. They explain that this type of music is purely contemplative and since it has been notated, it is to be performed in the same way whenever it is performed. Art music may be explained as music which involves considerably more work by the listener to fully appreciate than it is with popular and traditional music. Art composers are creative, versatile, not afraid to experiment, willing to collaborate and of course, passionate about writing music. Example of such composers are; Ephraim Amu, Nketia, Yankey, Dor, Mereku.

Agordoh (1994: 79) posits that the person who single handedly made the advancement at incorporating indigenous music in church worship in the protestant denomination, especially Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and the E. P. church, Ghana, was Ephraim Amu. According to Agordoh, Amu was the first Ghanaian, and perhaps the first African to build our music by writing in the style of Western type of music.

Omojola (1995: cited from Mereku, 2009: 5) points out that in Ghana, Ephraim Amu, referred to as the “Father of Art Music”, was a prolific composer who wrote vocal music in both Ewe and Twi languages. Indeed, as a pace setter, he is said to have been the first to experiment with complex polyrhythmic and contrapuntal textures in African musical idioms, e.g. *Tiri ne nsa ne 'koma nyinara nsua no pe* (head, hand and heart collaborate in learning).

Nketia is described as the natural successor to Amu as the leading Ghanaian composer. Like Amu, Nketia has written vocal and instrumental works whose compositional procedures were based on traditional African music he devoted much time in studying (Omojola, *ibid*). Examples of his works include (a) Bamboo flute pieces (Quartet No. 1, Quartet No. 2), Violin and piano (Three Ghanaian Airs (1963) and (b) *Yaanom montie* - listen folk (1944) *Nnansa ne nne* (three ago) and *Wo ho te sen?* - how are you (1948).

There are, of course, hundreds of Ghanaian choral composers down through history as emphasized by Mereku in his Sasabonsam's match analysis that Ghana has produced very prominent art composers who have contributed immensely towards the tonal tradition<sup>1</sup>. But then the choice of Mensah Essilfie

represents an important introduction to the richness and diversity of Ghanaian choral music.

### IV. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF GEORGE MENSAH ESSILFIE

George Mensah Essilfie grew out of a family that was blessed with a bunch of musicians including his grandfather who played the harmonium, and his mother Mrs. Isabella Essilfie who was a singer. Besides, his uncles, Dr. George Alex Sam Amuasi and Prof. John Humphery Amuasi were already pianists and organists by the time Essilfie was growing up. Dr. George Amuasi had already been playing the Hammond Organ at the Winneba Methodist Cathedral. It is indeed not surprising seeing Mensah and his two brothers making the Essilfie's home in AgonaSwedru the home of music.

### V. EDUCATION AND MUSICAL TRAINING

Mensah Essilfie is the last of the eight children born to his parents. He began his primary education at the age of four (4) at the Swedru International School. Mensah benefited immensely from KwesiAgyapong's music lessons, their family music teacher who had been engaged to take every child in the house through music lessons.

At nine, Mensah wrote his first song based on the biblical story of the prodigal son and gladly taught it to Hilary Voices, a group formed by his elderly siblings. By age ten (10) Mensah had started his secondary education at the then Winneba Secondary School now Winneba Senior High School. Undoubtedly, Mensah was the school organist where both tutors and students including his parents and siblings were amazed at the manner in which he was displaying his dexterity at the keyboard and in music compositions at that tender age.

All his siblings and parents were convinced that he should be given all the encouragement and resources he needed to continue his education solely in music instead of having it as a second vocation as in the case of his two siblings Rexford and Harvey. This brilliant thought from the family inspired Mensah to take a giant step into the music scene by first enrolling at the erstwhile National Academy of Music to do a general Diploma in Music, and later Bachelor of Education (Music Education) to, as it were, develop his knowledge and skill in music.

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Benjamin Wilson, Charles Emmanuel Graves, Ephraim Amu, George WorlanyoKasiDor, Herbert Sam, James A Yankey, Joseph Henry KwabenaNketia, James Martey T. Dosoo, James Tsemfo-Arthur, KennKafui, KwesiBaiden, Michael KwesiAmisshah, Newlove Annan, Otto Boateng, Philip Gbeho, Robert George KamlaNda, Sam Asare-Bediako, Walter Blege and Yaw Sekyi-Baidoo.

<sup>1</sup> This list includes Alfred Entsua-Mensah, Augustus Adu-Safo, Charles

## VI. CAREER/ACHIEVEMENTS

Mensah commenced his music career as a professional music educator imparting knowledge and skills to both young and old, and the following were some of his achievements:

In Ghana, Essilfie Founded the Famous and the award winning Winneba Youth Choir in 1989. Before then he was serving the Ebenezer Methodist Church, Winneba as the Organist. He also served the Wesley Methodist Koforidua, and Ebenezer Methodist Church Bantama-Kumasi as organist and at the St. Louis College of Education in Kumasi Essilfie taught music.

In Europe, he was the Director of Music of the Osagyefo Theatre Company in Luton – London, and performed at the Verdi Music Festival in Berlin, Germany. He attended the Easter Music School for music educators in the U.K. under the auspices in the British Council Institute.

In the United States of America Essilfie exposed his art competency as he exhibited some of his digitally created West African symbols at the McConnel Arts Centre in Worthington, Ohio, USA in February, 2011 as part of the Black history month. He was also Director of Music for the North American Association of Methodist Church Choirs, comprising the USA and Canada.

## VII. CHORAL WORKS

Mensah Essilfie has made tremendous contribution to the development of choral music in Ghana. Some of his compositions include *Aye a mman nsuro* (be not afraid), *Open me The Gates*, *Christ bits you come*, *Otomfo* (the great one – folksong arr.), *ɔdomankoma Egya* (eternal Father), *Mede asedabe ma Yehowa* (I will render thanks unto Jehovah), *O Zamena*,

*mena* (military Cadence arr.), *Nyimpa nnkotum atse Nyame ase* (God is unpredictable)

As mentioned earlier, although Mensah has composed a host of choral music, this paper concentrates on his *Yedze Wo kесеye MaW'*

*Yedze Wo kесеye MaW'* – is a contemporary sacred African choral work in Duet and SATB. According to the composer, he was inspired by a dream he had about a host of angels and true worshippers on earth ascribing to the Lord his greatness that cannot be compared. It is composed in Fante, an Akan dialect, a language spoken in Ghana, with some Hebrew words incorporated in the song to emphasize the omnipotence of God: EL – SHADDAI (God Almighty or God All Sufficient), ADONAI (Master or Lord), JEHOVAH (The Self-Existent One), and the like.

### Section A

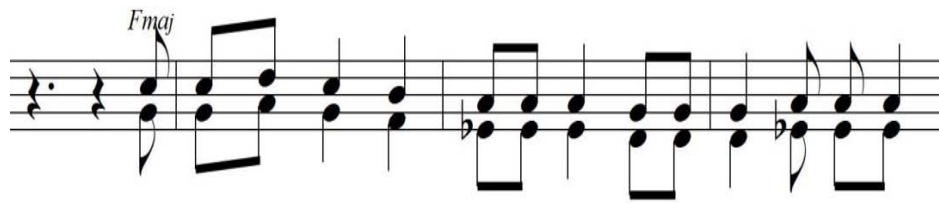
This section comprises the use of the analytic parameters set for the study; melodic construction, harmonic structures, scale patterns, chromatic harmonic usages among others. Speech contour, otherwise known as the tonal inflections of the language – the rise and fall intonations of the language is widespread in this composition.

Measures 1 – 33 introduce the song through sequences, and that the whole section is characterized by several sequences. Each part does its own sequence which weaves into the others yet merging harmonically. There is also close association between text and melody observing the concept of tonal inflections or contour of the language he uses. See how these were used in the opening of the song in figure 1 below:

The musical score for the opening of 'Yedze Wo kесеye MaW' is presented in a grand staff format. The top staff is for the vocal line, and the bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 6/8. The lyrics are written above and below the notes. The lyrics include: 'ye-dze wo ke-se ye, ye-dze wo ke-se ye, ye-dze wo ke-se-ye', 'Daa, daa, daa', 'Daa daa daa', and 'ye-dze Wo ke-se-ye daa daa daa'. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Figure 1

A dint of quartal and quintal harmony is used in measure 23 – 26 see the dissonance between the soprano and alto as shown in Fig. 2 and 3



A-gyen-kwa, hen wræ hi-ra hen, hi-ra hen, hi-ra hen

Figure 2

In figure 3 a modulation is encountered which is approached through the use of pivot chords: the last chord in Measure 75 being tonic in F major becomes

dominant in Bb, and in the ensuing measures the seventh on the dominant is established. See the figure below

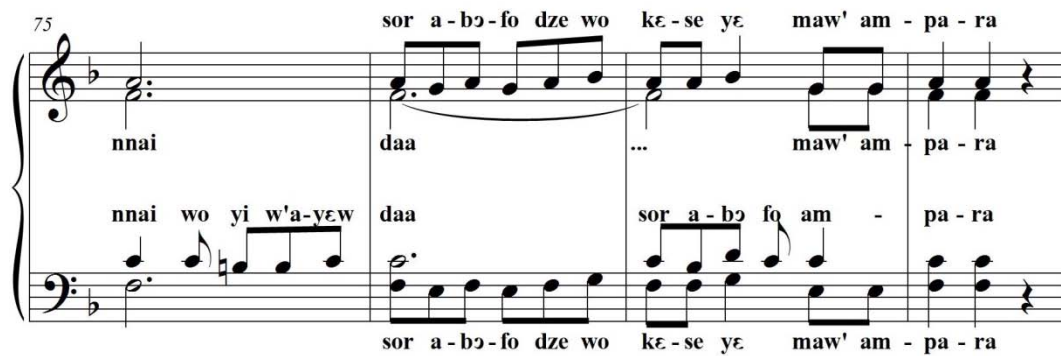


Figure 3

### VIII. CALL AND RESPONSE

Amuah, et al (2002: 32) argue that in most African songs, the singers are divided into two groups. The first group is usually made up of one person known as cantor, while the rest of the singers form the second group, known as the chorus. The cantor leads the singing while the chorus sings after him or her. What the cantor sings is referred to as the call while the part sung by the chorus is known as the response.

Call and response is one of the elements of music widely used in Ghana among the various ethnic

groups. In *Yedze Wo kɛseye MaW'* the composition review we note the versatility with which Mensah Essilfie demonstrates bi-musicality by subjecting this indigenous African Musical style to Western Compositional technique and vice versa.

The following phrases utilize call and response patterns and weaves through some interesting sequences. It is also remarkable to note that two separate voices do the call at different points against the chorus leading on to the C section. See the example below.



Figure 4

*Section B*

Measure 76 – 118: is a Soprano and Alto Duet against SATB Chorus as expressed above. There is a chorus introduction from measure 76 - 81 which

reinforces the new key for a smooth passage for the Soprano at the start of the duet against the chorus.

The chorus accompanying the duet is mostly chordal as exhibited in Fig 5

Figure 5

Measure 97 – 103, there is a duet in 6ths against a chordal progression. See Fig 6

Figure 6

*Section C (Measure 119 – 156 – Fugue)*

The fugue opens with the alto singing the exposition followed by tenors responding in the dominant. Basses come in with the same key as altos followed by sopranos. The harmony from the point of sopranos is treated as a variation. Sopranos sing the subject while ATB sing a different harmony other than the countersubject in measures 143 – 151. Measures 152 – 156 could be adequately described as the codetta to the fugue.

*Section D*

Measure 157 – 187 opens with a brief chromaticism – chromaticism is the use of notes foreign to the diatonic scale upon which a composition is based. Chromatic tones in Western art music are the notes in a composition that are outside the seven-note diatonic (i.e., major and minor) scales.

The following passage is a characteristic of chromatic harmony which is employed in a sequential modulation.

156

nma No .. El-sha - ddai, 'JAH-JE-HO - VAH', El - e - lo - him, A - .. do - .. nmai

nma No .. El-sha - ddai, 'JAH-JE-HO - VAH', El - e - lo - him, A - .. do - .. nmai

course, passionate about writing music, and therefore

nma No .. El-sha - ddai, 'JAH-JE-HO - VAH', El - e - lo - him, A - .. do - .. nmai yi N'a -

nma No .. El-sha - ddai, 'JAH-Je - ho - vah, El - e - lo - him, A - .. do - .. nmai yi N'a -

Figure 7

At the end of measure 160, there is modulation to C major. Soprano and altos help to establish the key by holding on to the dominant of the new key while tenors and basses create a sequence using 3rds.

#### Section E

This section modulates to Ab major in unison from Measure 187 onwards and then followed by an abrupt modulation to a minor 3rd (F major.) below in Measure 192. A phrase is repeated twice each ending on a minor but the last one ends in the major.

This section is very lively and climaxes the entire song. The last few bars make use of the rhythmic motifs 'WONSUOM' and 'YɛDZE WO KɛSEYɛ MAW', interweaving them with the Hebrew words, Elshaddai and Adonnai. The altos & tenors come in with "OSEE AYEE" which is a phrase mostly used in jubilant and victory songs. All these are employed to denote invitation to everyone to join in ascribing greatness to God and also to bring a grand ending to the song.

### IX. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

*Yɛdze Wo kɛseyɛ MaW'* is a 210 measure piece with significantly interesting opening. Alto does the introduction in full measure though with a crotchet beat rest. From measures one to 1 – 11 we find the sopranos and basses doing the same rhythmic progression which runs counter to the inner parts – alto and tenor respectively and momentarily intersect in harmonic rhythm in measure 12 and 13. The composer also shows dexterity in the use of sequence to create tension and releases as evidenced in measures 1 – 33 and many more places in the piece.

Essilfie writes quite comfortable ranges with occasional leaps. The intervallic structures of major and minor seconds/thirds, perfect fourths are some of his traits. Essilfie's music, though not exclusively chromatic,

chromaticism and the developments in his harmonic progressions point to his being predisposed to the works of the classical and romantic periods. His chromatic harmonies are sometimes attained by shifting from the major into minor modes, or vice versa, calculated to provide dramatic coloration. Again he favours the use of the diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chords.

His skills in contrapuntal writings are evident in imitative counterpoint and fugal expositions he displays in measures 199 – 156 of this work. In deed the fugue is treated as a style rather than a fixed structure because there is clear deviation from the laid-down structure.

Another area of particular note is his close association between text and melody where there is strict observance of the concept of tonal inflections or contour of the language he utilizes.

It is undeniably true that within musical modernism is the conviction that music is not a static phenomenon but rather a discipline which is fundamentally historical and developmental. The term "**modernism**" refers generally to the period of change and development in musical language that occurred at or around the turn of the 20th century, a period of diverse reactions in challenging and reinterpreting older categories of music, innovations that lead to new ways of organizing and approaching harmonic, melodic, sonic, and rhythmic aspects of music, and changes in aesthetic worldviews in close relation to the larger identifiable period of modernism in the arts of the time. The operative word most associated with it is "innovation" (Metzer 2009: 3). Essilfie has injected modernism into his music that makes it timeless resulting from the use of chromaticism, though not excessively done so as to redirect its conventional tonal functions. He is simply innovative, creative, versatile, not afraid to experiment, willing to collaborate and of

course, passionate about writing music, and therefore may be classified as a contemporary composer.

Again, his creative abilities saw him creating a perfect blend with African and western compositional techniques. One such area is the call and response device which Essilfie uses to demonstrate bi-musicality, a syncretism of Ghanaian and western musical styles which makes his audience and contemporaries appreciate his works.

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