

COMPOSITION, REHEARSALS, ENGAGEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES AMONG NIGERIAN POPULAR MUSICIANS

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the emergence of popular music in Nigeria in the early 1980s, it has grown to become the most patronized music in Nigeria. It is intriguing that while products of the formal music education sector are yet to impact society, the popular musician lacking in formal education are the leading lights in the Nigerian music scene! It is an incontestable fact that the quality of a musical performance is dependent on the technical proficiency of the performer. Proficiency, on its part, is acquired through prolonged practice over a long period of time; the manner an ensemble rehearses and the methods it employs in delivering its music in performance. It is well established in literature that the output of most Nigerian popular musicians is low and there has not been significant improvement over the years. However, there has been disquieting criticism mostly from musicians with formal education querying the quality of the musicianship and products of the popular musician. Critics have pointed to inadequate training as one of the major constraints hampering their acquisition of high quality musicianship. But quality musicianship is also dependent on composition, rehearsal and performance practices. This paper therefore interrogates how compositional, rehearsal and performance practices impact on the quality of the products of Nigerian popular musicians and concludes that there is therefore need for formalized training in order to improve on the standard of musicianship to enable them meet the challenges of practicing in a society with highly educated, discerning and critical music public.

Keywords: Musical training, Composition, Rehearsal, performance practice, Engagement, Nigerian popular musicians, Musicianship

INTRODUCTION

Musicianship is predicated on the quality and duration of the training a performer receives. Although training may be formal or informal, it often manifests in the music

produced just as the saying goes; “one cannot give what they do not have”. The issues of training of popular musicians have remained unassailable since the early

years of the 20th century when modern popular music began in Nigeria. During the 1960s and until the 1980s, the general level of musicianship was higher, yet there were concerns voiced in some quarters. Since Smith's (1962) decry of the low quality of popular music in Nigeria and attributing it to the short period of apprenticeship that the musicians undergo, the issue has become of such magnitude as to attract the attention of other scholars. (Cf: Elder 1973, Omibiyi 1981, Ekwueme 1983). Smith (Ibid) ascribes it to the short period of apprenticeship while for Ekwueme (Ibid) it is a fall out of their low level of music education. Omibiyi (Ibid) opines that contributes to the poor quality of their music. Elder (Ibid) ascribes it to the lack of solid musicianship. There is consensus that the level of musicianship among popular musicians reflects in the poor quality of their products especially following the emergence of electronic music making in the mid 1980s. It is therefore worthwhile to subject the whole issue of quality to examination in line with Smith's approach of calling attention to the problem and proffering solutions.

It is an established fact that music results from a process beginning with ideation, through conception, creation, practice, rehearsal and delivery in performance. The final outcome of this process is the sum total of the efforts that go into its making. A musician is made through training and the quality of training determines their musical competence. So the low quality that was mentioned earlier is not accidental but a reflection of a two stage process of training and practices. Training is skill acquisition while practice is the process of applying skill to real-life situation(s).

Therefore interrogating the quality of the products of musicians requires a holistic analysis of the entire stages of the production process: training, composition, rehearsal and performance practice so rendition. However, this paper seeks to critically examine composing, rehearsals, engagements and performance practices among popular musicians in Nigeria with a view to accounting for the poor performances that have been observed. It concludes by proffering ways of improving on the quality of Nigerian popular musicians and their products. To realise these objectives the paper is structured as follows: compositional practices, rehearsal practices, engagement practices and conclusion.

COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICES

Musical ideas are fleeting and the composer must devise ways of documenting their ideas. In traditional societies before the development of literacy, musicians cultivated the practice of committing their creative ideas to memory and became adept at the practice. However, in view of the limitations of oral tradition, many of the creation were lost following the inability of the composer to remember their creations. The advent of music literacy was thus a saving grace in this regard. In Nigeria, music literacy is a skill known to and appreciated by a negligible segment of the population. It is so as formal music education is almost non-existent in the Nigerian school system. So most popular musicians cannot read or write music in any format while a few can utilise tonic solfa though peripherally. The manner in which notation has been used in musical

composition in Nigeria has had a chequered history since the introduction of music scripting in the country. The manner musical ideas are treated to an extent, dependent on the educational attainment of the musician. Musically literate musicians tend to notate their works in staff, solfas or both while those that are not conversant with notational systems commit their ideas to memory and operate therefrom. Some scholars have examined the practice among popular musicians. For example Afolabi (1984) while writing about the manner in which Hurbert Ogunde (1916-1990) composes, notes that 'he writes the music in tonic solfa as a reminder'. Even among literate musicians, very few are adept in the use of even tonic solfa notation not to mention staff notation, therefore the vast majority of them memorise their songs, as they are composed. In recent years, some musicians resort to using recording devices because of their inability to retain a melody for a considerable length of time.

During the era of ballroom dancing, (1860-1960), it was required that band musicians be proficient in score reading, but with the emergence of highlife, a largely improvisational music, score reading declined to the extent that playing by ear has become institutionalised and now dominates the field. Despite this trend, a few musicians with formal music education such as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (1938-1997) continued notating their music either in solfa or staff.

On how Nigerian popular musicians compose, Nwajei (1984:66) notes that they create the melody in their head and harmonise it with a harmonic instrument or by the entire band in a try and error fashion. Generally it could be surmised that in attempting to compose a song, a typical popular musician in Nigeria creates a verse of lyrics; sets it to music then; creates the other lyrics of the song to match the melody of the first verse, but lacking the creative skill in poetry and melody the result of the effort indicates improper melody-text grafting and partly responsible for the inartistic product that Ekwueme (1983:330) complains of:

The musical pattern they now set is devoid of any intellectual sophistication. Words sung in English do not show a good knowledge of the language, nor is there any attempt at poetry or versification, not to talk of any rhyme scheme. Words in local languages do not sometimes follow the tonemic inflection of the language.

The Nigerian popular musician is forced to do so because of lack of specialisation in the field.

In societies with a developed music industry, various aspects are handled by person with the requisite expertise. With such an approach, it would be inconceivable to expect quality. Although semi-professional songwriters have appeared in recent times, the fact remains that until all aspects of the music industry like text or poem writing, composing, arranging, performing, choreography, production, promotion, marketing, managing become specialized; the standard of the music will remain low.

It is a proven fact that musical ideas come either through perspiration or inspiration and composers have used both in the course of their careers. However, Nigerian popular musicians seem to depend on inspiration rather than by perspiration in creating their music. The inspirational process is agitated by situation around them. Like the record 'Austerity Measure' was prompted by Ebenezer Obey (?) was prompted by the government's policy by the same name. The theme of the songs contained in the album directly relates to the social conditions and happenings of the time. Not all songs arise from social conditions but experience has shown that songs lacking social relevance have a very slim change of selling in the Nigerian record market. Consequently, popular music in Nigeria is fashioned to appeal to the public, which in turn reflects the spirit of the age.

REHEARSAL PRACTICES

Oral Literature suggests a very loose use of the words 'practice' and 'rehearsal', so it behoves us to ascertain the meaning of the words as used in this paper. In respect of music, to practice suggests learning a piece of music repeatedly until it is mastered or can be executed without mistakes or errors, while to rehearse means to prepare music for performance. So practice is supposed to precede rehearsal. In an ensemble work, members are expected to practice their parts before the group meets to rehearse. So by rehearsal we are discussing the post practice meeting of members of an ensemble.

Rehearsal is strategic to the quality of the output of a musician or music group. It is

during rehearsals that ideated creations are realized. Usually, the idea is presented and the musicians go over them repeatedly, while correcting errors until it attains the level where it can be reproduced effortlessly and flawlessly. This takes considerable efforts and time in practice and rehearsals. Indeed, the secret of a flawless performance by an ensemble hinges on good rehearsals.

In Nigeria rehearsals of part-time bands tend to be sporadic while full-time bands are known for scheduled, purposeful and professional rehearsals. Part-time bands tend to hold infrequent rehearsals in the evenings to allow for their members to attend to other existential issues while full-time bands maintain a more formal approach to rehearsals wherein they have scheduled rehearsals on days when they are not engaged. Apart from group rehearsals, band members spend considerable hours to practice their parts. Generally, rehearsals in part-time bands last between two and four hours and are held between two or three times a week at a venue which may be the hotel where the band is domicile, the band's office or the leader's residence where invariably the instruments and equipment is kept.

Before rehearsal time, the equipment are set up and sound balanced. Rehearsals normally begin with the tuning of melodic instruments to a standard pitch devise. Tuning has always been a problem with most Nigerian bands with the *Ikwokirikwo* and the *Juju* bands notorious in this respect. It is not that these bands set out to mistune their instruments but they are handicapped by their poor aural perception of intervals. Although the use of electronic tuning devices could alleviate this problem, there is still the

issue of poor intonation associated with the melodic instruments such as the trumpet and saxophone where the player must constantly adjust his lip pressure to be in tune. As a significant number of the musicians have a poor aural perception they are unable to keep in tune or attain good intonation.

On tuning, the leader, who invariably is a singer, guitarist or keyboardist takes charge of the agenda for the rehearsal beginning with the band playing the ensemble's signature tune or any well entrenched piece in their repertoire to warm up sequel to attending to the item(s) of the day. Learning of new songs is usually by rote and takes several forms. In some cases, the leader dictates the text then sings the songs although for the band to have an overall gestalt of the song. Then he set to teach the song with him singing a line and the group singing after him. In bands whose membership consist of literate persons, the leader dictates the song for members to write down before teaching, while in few others, the lyrics would have been printed prior to rehearsal and circulated among members and thereby saving precious time. Furthermore some bands have deployed technology to benefit their rehearsals. In such bands the leader sends the song by text message through phone to members of the band for them to listen to and learn the aspects of the song that involves them prior to rehearsal. It has been observed that this method is used in learning songs that are already recorded. However, the method is increasingly becoming widespread and it is expected to increase in the years ahead.

During rehearsal the leader sings the new songs and calls the band to do so *a capella*. When the leader is satisfied with their level of mastery, he calls on the instrumentalists to join in with the leader singing the new songs while providing the accompaniment from the guitar or a keyboard instrument and indicating to the instrumentalists and singers an outline of what is required at certain points in the song in expectation that members will fill-in the other aspects in accordance with the performance conventions, style and idiom of the genre of the piece. This method of learning new material is very effective for a band the membership of which has remained unchanged for upwards of three years, and has bonded and an understanding has developed between the players that each knows from experience and intuition what is required at each moment in a song. After the overview, the song is built up by section until it attains a satisfactory level in tempo, intensity and flow. The song will be rehearsed in subsequence rehearsals until it is considered ready for performance. Several criteria determine this but crucial among them is that each member must master their part and have commit it to memory.

Rehearsal is very important in the quality of offerings of bands. It has been observed that bands with quality renditions take their rehearsals seriously while bands with low quality performance result from poor musicianship and rehearsal practices. This is a fact going by the statement 'practice makes perfect' but it is rather strange that success seems to adversely affect the seriousness with which Nigerian popular musicians take

rehearsals. It has been observed that on achieving success, some Nigerian popular musicians take their personal practice and group rehearsals less seriously. Some even get to the extent of not engaging in practice and instead depend on hackneyed formulae and clichés thereby ignoring the truth in the maxim:

‘If I miss a day of practice, I notice it.
If I miss two days, the critics notice it.
If I miss three days, the audience notices it’
– (Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941) polish virtuoso pianist, composer and politician). Retrieved from <http://izquotes.com/quote/348980> on 20th March, 2014.

Before long, the patronizing public and their clientele realise it and they become weary of the musicians repetitious antics intended to conceal monotony arising principally from their unwillingness to improve upon their musicianship through disciplined practice. Eventually, the public loses interest in them and look elsewhere for musicians and music that can satisfy them. This again contributes to what may be referred to as the ‘*one album star phenomenon*’ in Nigerian popular music. For the Nigerian music public expects a certain level of consistency within stylistic limits in the record of a musician for there lay his identity. When that is not forthcoming they withdraw their interest and patronage and seek other musicians with whom they can identify. The ‘one album star’ characteristic of most solo musicians in Nigeria partly results from this neglect. Going by this experience, it

can be surmised that Nigerians have rejected the concept of the solo musician.

The bandleader, to a great extent, sets the tone with which their band members approach rehearsals. A serious minded band leader elicits same from the band members while a band with a lousy leader will be fraught with rampant incidences of late coming, feign illnesses and absenteeism to rehearsals and even performances. In order to discourage this, some bands enforce a very strict disciplinary regime on the members with fines imposed on those who deliberately do not show up for rehearsals. In cases of habitual lateness or absenteeism, such a member is suspended and in very serious misdemeanours they are expelled from the band. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, reputed for running one of the most disciplined bands in Nigeria, surcharged members who turned up late for rehearsals and performances and even penalise those who made mistakes arising from inadequate practice or lack of mastery. As a result, his band members took their jobs seriously and this in no small measure was responsible for the very high level of musicianship, commitment and productivity of the band.

The advent of solo artistes in the late 1970s resulted in the incidence of ad-hoc bands i.e. bands that are set up for an engagement and disbanded thereafter. This approach to band operation became necessary following the ban on the importation of musical instruments which led to high cost of maintaining full-time bands. Thereafter, full-time bands dwindled and others transformed into part-time bands and ad-hoc bands. Ad-hoc bands found it almost impossible to generate and maintain a consistent sonic

identity as they were assembled for an event and disbanded thereafter. As most solo artistes made use of ad-hoc bands they could not maintain, the sonic identity of their successful albums to which the Nigerian music public were used to and expected of them. Thus they were also unable to follow up a successful record with another.

ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

After rehearsals, the popular musician must take their music to the public. This is done via clients or promoters and in sundry events. Promoters engage bands for fee-paying performances in which they hope to make some encouraging profit. In doing this they often consider the popularity of an artiste in the locality that they are to perform before engaging them. Individuals and social clubs who need live music for their various social events also contact the musicians directly to negotiate engagements. Well managed bands have managers who are responsible for such transactions, but in most cases, it is the band leader who is in charge of such responsibilities. Although there are fixed charges per engagement, charges are also determined by such factors as the duration of the performance, the season of the year, the travel distance, the status of the band, the type of event and the status of the celebrant.

In terms of status, there are four types of bands in Nigeria – the first class, the second class, third class, the fourth class bands which we have referred to here as international bands, national bands, regional bands and area bands. International bands are top-flight bands,

or bands of mega stars, which have made a mark on the international scene and these naturally cost more to engage. Very few bands have attained this status in Nigeria but among the few are: Fela Anikulapo and the Africa 70 (later Egypt 80), Sunny Ade and his Green spot band (later Golden mercury of Africa), Ebenezer Obey and his Inter-reformers band, Sir Victor Uwaifo his Melody maestros, Osita Osadebey and his melody Makes bands, Oliver de coque, Prince Nico Mbarga and his Rockafil Jazz, Sonny Okosun and his Ozzidi among others. National bands are popular within the national music scene and are relatively cheaper to engage. They are usually large with a barrage of instruments and equipment that require two or more trucks to transport. Bands in this category include Bongos Ikwue and the Grooves, Sir Shina Peters and his International stars, Tony Grey and his Ozimba Messengers etc. Regional bands operate in limited parts of the country and rarely get engaged outside their ambit of operation and are yet to make a significant impact on the national music scene. Area bands are the most numerous and operate within a hundred kilometre radius from the urban centres where they and their clientele are invariably domiciled. Most of them are very popular in their area of operation but many have not attempted to record their music since they specialize in playing the hits of other musicians and hardly perform their own songs. In this category are most of the ethnic based percussion bands that arose in response to the economic crunch of the mid 1980s. Nevertheless, it is this category that keeps Nigerian music industry alive. Because

they are relatively cheaper and easy to engage, they are the most patronized of bands in Nigeria and are most of the times fully booked. Their activities involve playing at private events and in few cases in local gigs. They hardly embark on extensive tours as most of their performances take place within their locality.

Apart from a few exceptions, most bands begin as fourth rates and by dint of hard work, proficiency, good management and good fortune, they progress into third-rate bands then into second rates and eventually get to the top as first rate bands. In Nigeria such meteoric ascents are extremely rare because of the multifaceted challenges with which bands are encumbered. Therefore most bands remain fourth rate while a few develop into third-rate bands.

The events to which bands are engaged are as varied as there are social events in Nigeria. However, funerals, marriage and chieftaincy installation or confirmation ceremonies predominate.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

Performance, the most significant the aspect of music, is better left to a manager. Unfortunately, most Nigerian bands, including the successful ones, operate without one and often the band leader is also the manager and this puts them under enormous pressure and contributes to the generally low quality of their output.

There are two discernible patterns of performance practice in respect of popular music: the concerts format and the gig format. Irrespective of the performance

formats, the arena is clearly laid out with a stage for the stage for the band and an area for a seated audience.

The concert type performance is formal and bands playing a concert follow a rigid regime associated with the concert tradition among which is a clear audience participant divide. Such shows usually begin with the master of ceremony introducing members of the band, who might have before then, taken their position on the stage. He then allows the band to play some instrumental preludes without their leader and thereafter does an elaborate and superfluous introduction of the leader at the end of which he invites the leader to the stage amidst fanfare and clatter. The leader goes straight into the performance and takes charge of introducing new materials.

Performing for gigs does not involve elaborate formalities. Prior to the Nigerian civil war (1967-70) when life was relatively safe and towns and cities were peaceful, dances were usually held at night in the comfort of night clubs. Even private events to which bands were invited still held at night. Such dances usually begin with the band playing from about 9 pm without the leader, then between 11pm and 12 midnights, the leader joins the band. Fela is noted for this model and might have been instrumental in promoting the practice across Nigeria. His band usually would start playing from about 8 p.m. for an all night dance until about 11pm when he would join them for about a four-hour non-stop performance till the end of the gig.

On stage the leader is easily identifiable from the other members of

the band by his dress and location. For as Waterman (1990) notes their dress are made from fabrics of superior quality and design. During performance they stand strategically in front of centre stage with their band members clustering around them. This is symbolic. It attests to this authority and leadership. Juju bands often dress in the Yoruba traditional attire, reggae musicians are identifiable with their wooden beret woven in the symbolic colours of yellow, green and red along with their tattered jeans trousers. While foreign popular music genres have been able to stimulate vogues of fashion in Nigeria, it remains to be seen if Nigerian popular music will achieve such a social impact.

Although it is a music-dance event, the entire period is not entirely taken up by music. In fact, it is interspaced with speeches, riddles, jokes, dramatic sketches, competitive events donations to worthy causes, fashion parades, recitations, announcements and any and everything that could further catharsis. They are so well packaged to give an all-round evening entertainment commensurate with the entry fee.

Apart from being paid the engagement fee, musicians often receive cash gifts as they perform via what has become termed 'spraying'ⁱ in the Nigerian palace. Musicians solicit cash gifts through praise singing. *Juju* bands are reputed for their praise singing because it is the tool that they utilize to leverage their clients to do a generous offer. Most *juju* band could, from such gifts make as much as twice their engagement fee. According to Waterman (1982:63) it is 'a traditional sanctioned response to profits of any

given performance through which the rank of individuals may be reinforced or challenged'.

But why do people spend so much money to engage bands and proceed to offer them substantially cash gifts? In a society where status is highly regarded, various means, some fair some foul, are contrived to achieve this. The penchant for honorific titles and cognomen are reflection of this social preoccupation. It is because they receive social acclaim and status for so doing. It is therefore a means of negotiating and enhancing one's standing in society. The presence of a first class band, an overtly generous cash gift consolidates the celebrant's social standing. In this wise the use of a live band in the event and the generous cash gift involved is not propelled by their love for music but in consolidating their standing in society.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the musical practices of Nigerian popular musicians as regard composition, rehearsals, engagements and performances with a view to explaining that how these are approached contributes to the quality of their products. Popular music, as a song art requires the musician to be versed in lyric writing, melody generation, and harmonic conceptualisation which can result from intuition but are sharpened by training, experience and practice. The typical Nigerian popular musician depends on intuition and without formal opportunity to learn the other components, they are unable to consistently write quality songs that can compete favourably on the world

stage. The absence of essential human resource component in the Nigerian music industry is a bane. There are no specialists in some key areas such as song writing, agents, voice coaching etc. So a popular musician in Nigeria has no choice than to be jack of all trades. This is nothing short of a recipe for failure. Surprisingly, they have been able to wade through the adverse tide and meet some musical needs of Nigerians and sustain a potentially prosperous music industry.

Nigerian popular musicians have been operating below their potentials as they are encumbered with several challenges, many of which will disappear as the Nigerian economy and social structure develop, to meet the aspirations of the citizenry. Nigerian popular music like all other music types will continue to reflect the society from which it emanates and draw its presentations and content therefrom.

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ⁱ A term used to describe the placing of currency on the forehead of someone as he/she dances.